

Kazakhstan: How the Transition of Power in an Autocratic Regime Can End in Blood

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Transitions of power are never easy in authoritarian, autocratic and corrupt regimes. A single person is the keystone of the entire political system and seems irreplaceable; they fear that any successor not directly from their circle will threaten their *bien mal-acquis* (*ill-gotten assets*); and the enemies of the ruling clique are numerous, having been crushed economically and politically by the unfairness and sometimes the brutality of the regime. The recent events that took place in Kazakhstan, now often called *bloody January* after 227 people died (officially), are a scary illustration of this kind of *natural law*.

This historic January in Kazakhstan started on the 2nd with a peaceful socioeconomic protest against the introduction of a new electronic pricing system for liquefied petroleum gas, which overnight made the price double. But that protest quickly transformed into a movement asking for political reforms (January 3rd and 4th), before it turned violent and deadly on January 5th and 6th in Almaty and, to a lesser extent, in a dozen cities all over the immense republic. Faced with the risk of losing control over Almaty, the President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced on January 5th that he was now the head of the Security Council of Kazakhstan, a body which had been led by the previous president and his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev since March 2019 and which was the very heart of the power in Kazakhstan.

Tokayev's self-appointment to that body became the last day of the three-decades-long Nazarbayev era. This *transition of power* was done momentarily despite the long-term and still unfinished plans laid out by Nazarbayev and his clique. Tokayev, 68, had, at the very least, emancipated himself from his mentor and become the true holder of power in Kazakhstan.

The autocrat Nazarbayev struggled with the decision to *appoint* Tokayev his successor. He first declared Tokayev interim President in March 2019, and his position as President was later confirmed in rigged elections in July of that year.

Nazarbayev saw Tokayev as a good candidate both domestically, because he did not belong to any regional or business groups in Kazakhstan, and internationally, because he is an experienced career diplomat who studied at the famous Russian institute MGIMO (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) and spent years working in China (he speaks Chinese very well) and in the West. He is one of the key architects of the multi-vectorial foreign policy chosen by Nazarbayev. But despite this near-perfect CV and a loyalty that he has always shown to Nazarbayev, Tokayev was not member of the First President of Kazakhstan clique.

Several sources report that Nazarbayev made the decision to appoint Tokayev in 2019 after seeing how the family of the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, lost most of its assets after his death in September 2016. Nazarbayev, born in July 1940, thought that *the transition of power* had to be organized while he was still alive, as his role model Lee Kuan Yew did in Singapore. As was Lee, Nazarbayev was tempted to appoint as successor someone from his family. Nazarbayev placed his elder daughter Dariga as head of the Kazakhstan Senate in March 2019. That approach also has its risks: everyone remembers, for example, that the end of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was precipitated by his publicly airing the idea to appoint his son Gamal as his successor.

Nazarbayev did not have a full transition of power plan in

mind when he proceeded to launch the succession process in 2019, but he was certainly pushed by the *negative* Uzbek scenario to begin sooner rather than later. In March 2019, he left the presidential chair that he had occupied for three decades to the loyalist Tokayev. But in so doing, he deprived the position of most of its former powers, in order to take them with him in his new position as head of a much-more-powerful-than-previously Security Council. Beginning with this move and until the recent January events, Kazakhstan was ruled by an unbalanced dual power, a weak Akorda (the office of the President) and a strong Library (the Library of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan i.e., the Security Council office). According to the Russian political scientist Tatiana Stanovaya, Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin asked Nazarbayev not to make this move, for a State ruled by two heads, even when one is seemingly weak, inevitably leads to instability. (It should be reminded that Putin experimented with the same thing in 2008 when he made Medvedev the president and he himself took the position of the prime minister, albeit he returned to the presidency after four years.)

The instability though came from elsewhere. First, it came from the intrinsic weaknesses of the Kazakh authoritarian system, which was unable to understand the demands of the people for a share in the wealth of the nation, despite the Zhanaozen months-long strikes in 2011 that demanded just that and ended in blood. This year, it was again rallies in Zhanaozen that struck off country-wide protests, after the overnight jump of the price of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (GPL) from 60 tenge (\$0.14) to 120 tenge (\$0.28) per liter. The Kazakh people saw the doubling of the GPL price as the result of the corruption of the ruling group.

The demonstrators that marched from January 2nd on soon began to shout together “Shal ket!” (“Go away, old man!”), a slogan directed at Nazarbayev. Almost none of the protests targeted

Tokayev. Protesters accused Nazarbayev and his clique in manipulating inflation, in hoarding the country's wealth at the expense of 18.75 million Kazakhstanis, and in having made the country a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Union (which ultimately proved to hurt ordinary Kazakhstanis due to customs duties, in particular).

But the instability, and even the chaos (on January 5th and 6th), came largely from inside the ruling family and Nazarbayev's clique. On January 7th, information began to emerge about the role of some Nazarbayev clique members in the bloody events that were taking place in Almaty and in another ten regions of the country. The website *Fergana.ru* published an article entitled *Terrorist transit*, which asserted that some members of the Nazarbayev's clique, under the aegis of his nephew Kairat Satybaldy, organized the chaos in Almaty. Satybaldy is a wealthy businessman in the banking and telecom sectors among others, but is also influential in law-enforcement bodies of Kazakhstan, as well as in conservative, if not radical, Muslim circles, and in the Central Asian criminal community.

According to *Fergana.ru* but also to several of our sources in Kazakhstan, Satybaldy, with his brother Samat Abish, who was then the deputy head of the KNB, the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan, tried to sow chaos in the country, starting from their Almaty fiefdom, in order to push Tokayev to resign. Almaty was almost out of control, especially after police forces totally disappeared from the streets and from the city's international airport. The total absence of police was certainly a sign that key people in charge of the country's security were trying to use the socioeconomic demonstrations push their political agenda. Satybaldy's involvement may be why the authorities, now under Tokayev's control, talked of *internal forces trying to destabilize the country*.

According to two of our sources from the ruling circles in Kazakhstan, on January 5th, Karim Massimov, the head of the KNB since 2016, went to Akorda to ask Tokayev to resign. The following day he was arrested for high treason. Several of his lieutenants were arrested as well. The fate of Samat Abish is unclear. He was said to have been jailed, then it was denied, and later it was announced that he went on vacation. Finally, his dismissal or resignation was confirmed.

On Saturday, 9 January, for the first time since the beginning of the crisis, Nazarbayev made a statement through his spokesperson. He asked everyone to stand behind President Tokayev. Nazarbayev pretended that he had stayed alongside Tokayev during the week-long crisis, but if this is true, why didn't he earlier ask the Kazakshtanis to abstain from violence? Why didn't he earlier ask that Kazakhstanis stand behind the current president? The reason for his denial of having been opposed to Tokayev, and the similar denials of such animosity from Tokayev and his team, lays in the bargaining that took place during those critical early January days.

As Almaty was about to spiral out of control, Tokayev decided to ask the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), a Russian-led military alliance, to intervene. The very day when Tokayev took the power in Kazakhstan for real, he became indebted to Russia, largely because of the dirty tricks of elites in Kazakhstan. Once Tokayev's victory was sealed (a victory which is less, in my eyes, the result of a premeditated effort to take power than just a necessity imposed by the seriousness of the January events and the dirty tricks organized by people from the former ruling clique), the Nazarbayevs began to be purged from their official positions. On 15 January, for 'example, two of the three former president's sons-in-law, Kairat Sharipbayev (the secret husband of Dariga) and Dimash Dosanov (Aliya's husband) respectively "resigned" their positions on the board of

directors of KazakhGaz and Kaztransoil. Several other Nazarbayev family members lost their positions, while Dariga Nazarbayeva has made no further appearances in her role as Senator and has been removed from the political council of Nur Otan, the presidential party of power.

The Nazarbayev group is divided and some may survive despite the clique's role in Kazakhstan's *bloody January*. The most powerful member of that group, the *second* son-in-law Timur Kulibayev (who is married to Dinara Nazarbayeva, with whom he controls a \$6 billion fortune), happens to have kept his positions. Kulibayev, whose nickname is *Mr. Oil*, has managed to get one of his lieutenants appointed as the new energy minister, Bolat Akshulakov, while the former energy minister, Magzum Mirzagaliyev, also a Kulibayev man, became advisor to Tokayev, despite his failure to manage the GPL price issue. Kulibayev, who has positioned himself as politically neutral for years, according to our sources around Tokayev, seems untouchable, because he is too powerful to risk offending. His bank, *Halyk Bank*, controls about 40% of the Kazakh market. Additionally, he has considerable influence among the oil families from the western part of the country, and he is close to Russian leadership (on 25 January, he was reelected as a member of Gazprom's board of directors, where he sat in 2011).

Tokayev has tried to compensate for his lack of roots in the regional and business groups of the country by courting the Kazakhstani people. After denouncing the "caste of wealthy" people from Nazarbayev's clique, he immediately declared that the "time has come to pay tribute to the people." With that he announced the creation of a new republican fund, intended to encourage the richest Kazakhstanis to contribute to social welfare. Many see that move as a positive sign. But it is probably, on the contrary, a sign that Tokayev does not want to fundamentally change the system; otherwise, he would just amend the tax code and not create a tool by which *oligarchs* will curry his favor and the people's by contributing to a social welfare fund.

January 2022 in Kazakhstan has shown the extent of the weaknesses concealed by the Nazarbayev system. As the Kazakh political scientist Dosym Satpayev wrote in a Facebook message, “intra-elite conflicts can destabilize the country more than any peaceful democratic opposition, which for many years the authorities have seen as the main threat to security.”