

Political Risk Alert (30 May 2019)

Kazakhstan: Lack of prospects for change triggers new style of protest

Event: Kazakhstan hosted the leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) for a summit meeting on May 29-30.

Significance: Despite resigning as president of Kazakhstan in March, Nursultan Nazarbayev upstaged the country's interim president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in welcoming President Putin and other leaders to Astana. Tokayev is heading for victory in the June 9 presidential election with the backing of Nazarbayev and the ruling Nur Otan party, who are stressing that this will ensure policy continuity. However, their assurances that the election will not bring about change has had the effect of generating a wave of protests that has caught the authorities off guard. The victory of Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine, as a political outsider defeating the incumbent president in a genuinely contested ballot, has highlighted the limited nature of the June election.

Analysis: The authorities have sought to give the first presidential election that does not involve Nazarbayev a different character from past ballots, with a wider range of candidates being allowed to stand. These include long-time regime critic Amirzhan Kosanov, who is likely to be the focus of opposition activity, Daniya Yespayeva, the first woman to stand for president, and Amangeldy Taspikhov, who represents an association of trade unions in western Kazakhstan, a region that has seen regular industrial disputes.

Although Tokayev is attempting to convey a sense of energy through a stronger social media presence and more active campaigning, his candidacy has proved uninspiring due to an unwillingness or inability to forge an identity that is separate from Nazarbayev. This was symbolised by his first act as interim president, which was to change the name of the capital from Astana to Nur-Sultan in honour of his predecessor, but then reinforced in campaign speeches that have primarily been tributes to Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev's continuing presence on the international stage and within Kazakhstan compounds this sense of dependence.

Tokayev should manage a healthy enough victory to claim legitimacy and a low turnout, which in the context of Kazakhstan would be below 75%, is not expected. However, it appears an increasing possibility and would be troubling for the regime.

The authorities do not appear to have anticipated the wave of protests across Kazakhstan, centred on the national holidays of May 1 and May 9, that are focusing on the inability of voters to affect real change. As yet, government officials do not appear too concerned. They are experienced in dealing with protests, which are usually allowing to run their course with limited but sufficient interventions. A key organiser of previous protests, exiled oligarch Mukhtar Ablyazov, does not enjoy widespread support within Kazakhstan and is viewed with suspicion by many opposition-minded people.

However, the emergence of a new form of activism has caught the authorities off-balance and without a clear response. It involves deliberately provoking arrest through acts of a non-conformist but comic and benign nature. These have included displaying a banner quoting the Kazakh constitution and standing with a blank placard. The heavy-handed response from local police has prompted online derision and creates an image of a regime frightened of its people.

This activism is notable for two reasons. First, there is the extent and speed with which such

stunts and hashtags have penetrated popular culture. The slogan "you can't run away from the truth", first displayed alongside athletes running in the Almaty marathon, has become ubiquitous as a political slogan. Unusually, state employees and regime loyalists have been seen to share such activist slogans and memes on social media.

The second novelty is the diffuse nature of the movement. There is no central hub, hierarchy or leadership among these activists, who instead converge and exchange ideas and support online. Moreover, they are overwhelmingly in their late teens and early 20s and so come from a generation that has not experienced the Soviet period or the hardship of the 1990s. These young people are more likely than their parents to work in the private sector and to be uninterested in joining the public sector despite, or indeed because of, its opportunity for advancement within the system.

It is likely that the outbreaks of protests seen throughout the campaign will settle down as the election passes, if only because there are no more public holidays until July. The government has also taken a more conciliatory approach to the sorts of social concerns that have caused sporadic protests over the last year. On May 16, for example, senior government figures met a group of mothers seeking improvements to welfare payments following months of intermittent protests.

The longer-term impact may be more significant, however. A hand-over process that must have appeared to be Nazarbayev's safest option for transitioning out of the presidency has ended up damaging the legitimacy of Tokayev and the wider political system. It has essentially transformed the presidency into something closer to a prime ministership, with the focus still on Nazarbayev in his role as president for life of the Security Council. Combined with acts such as renaming the capital and calling snap elections, this has eroded public faith in the constitutional order. Moreover, at 66, Tokayev does not represent the kind of generational change that would be needed to confer a sense of renewal. By the end of his term in 2024, Tokayev will be 71, meaning the succession question will just have been deferred, not resolved, and must still be tackled.

Looking ahead: There is no doubt that Tokayev will win comfortably on June 9, yet Nazarbayev's looming presence nullifies any sense of a real transition. Tokayev is promising nothing but continuity. Conceived as a safe option, this approach risks weakening not only his presidency but the political system that has been in place since independence. It should become clearer after the election whether he is willing or able to establish himself as a credible figure not wholly dependent on his predecessor's patronage, but the emphasis on continuity has politicised a new generation of activists.

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