

The Limits of Authoritarian Learning

DECONSTRUCTING KAZAKHSTAN'S 2022 COUP ATTEMPT

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Throughout his nearly three-decade rule of Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has always been eager to project a positive image of himself in the international arena. In a 2016 interview with journalists from Bloomberg, then 76-year-old Nazarbayev [asserted](#) emphatically that he had made no plans to eventually transfer power to his children, stating that a dynastic transfer of power “was not for us.” In March 2019, Nazarbayev [announced](#) that he had reached a “difficult” decision and was going to step down from the presidency and that, in accordance with Kazakhstan’s constitution, the chair of the Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, would succeed him as interim president until elections were held. Yet, as he continued reading his statement on television, it became clear that this was an unusual transition. Nazarbayev reminded viewers of his special status as First President-Leader of the Nation (*Elbasy*) and stated that he would retain his lifelong posts as chair of the Security Council, chair of the ruling Nur-Otan political party, and member of the Constitutional Council. Given the zero-sum nature of Kazakhstan’s patronage-based politics, any effort by Tokayev to strengthen his position and chart his own course was always going to lead to conflict with the very elites whose interests this transition was designed to safeguard. The unusual transition format of Kazakhstan’s political system and the resulting configuration represented a clear example of what Stephen Hall and Thomas Ambrosio [describe](#) as authoritarian learning in which regimes embrace survival strategies based on the successes and failures of other governments.²

You Can’t Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

For Kazakhstan’s power elite, the [aftermath](#) of President Islam Karimov’s unexpected passing in 2016 offered an ominous lesson about the price of failure to plan for and manage the transition process. If successful, Kazakhstan’s unique transition would secure the

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² See: Azamat Junisbai, “[Authoritarian Learning: Making Sense of Kazakhstan’s Political Transition](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 660, July 2020.

future of those who acquired great wealth and power during Nazarbayev's long rule, including his family members, while avoiding the appearance of dynastic power transfer a la Azerbaijan. It was an audacious attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, "to have one's cake and eat it too."

To this end, Tokayev's power was severely curtailed, with Nazarbayev effectively retaining control over the entire security apparatus and remaining intimately involved in matters of state. The official results of the early presidential election held on June 9, 2019, offered no surprises. Tokayev received 71 percent of all votes cast amidst a reported voter turnout of 78 percent. As has been the case with every election in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history, the election fell short of international standards. The OSCE final [report](#) published in October 2019 described the election as having been tarnished by violations of fundamental freedoms and pressure on critical voices prior to the election day and ballot-box stuffing, disregard of counting procedures, and detentions of peaceful protesters on election day.

By all indications, Nazarbayev was also loath to allow his successor to build his own team using the powers of appointment available to him as president. This was most vividly illustrated by a decree signed by Tokayev on October 9, 2019, which [curtailed](#) his own authority and effectively granted Nazarbayev veto power over key appointments made by himself. That Tokayev's authority was limited was hardly a secret for anyone who cared to look. The insulting handle "*furniture*" became part of common parlance when describing the extent of Tokayev's power despite his post as Kazakhstan's second president. Yet, there were several indications that he was not content with this truncated role. On March 16, 2020, Tokayev declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and announced that he signed a decree allowing his government to act more effectively and to "strengthen the power vertical." The state of emergency, originally declared for 30 days, was extended on April 10 and finally lifted on May 11, 2020. During this time, on May 2, the new president issued a decree dismissing *Elbasy's* daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, from her position as Speaker of the Senate. No official explanation for her dismissal was offered, nor was a new posting for her announced. On May 16 and June 10, 2020, Tokayev signed constitutional amendments expanding his own powers during a state of emergency or war.

The January 2022 Coup Attempt

Publicly available information suggests that, in January 2022, Kazakhstan experienced an attempted coup aimed at overthrowing Tokayev. Although the attempt fell short, it represented the most significant challenge to Kazakhstan's incumbent government in the country's history.³ By systematically attacking and destroying government facilities in multiple cities throughout Kazakhstan, the plotters aimed to demonstrate Tokayev's failure to bring the security situation under control and force his resignation. Several

³ A helpful timeline of the January unrest can be found here in [English](#) and [Russian](#).

factors support this conclusion, including the scope of the unrest, the prominent role of organized provocateurs, and the peculiar behavior of law enforcement organizations in Almaty, Taldykorgan, Kyzylorda, and Taraz on January 4 and 5.

In a country where protests of any kind have always been aggressively suppressed and locally contained, the January events were highly unusual. What began as a peaceful rally with specific economic demands in the western oil town of Zhanaozen on January 2 rapidly spread to the other regions and transformed into the largest and most violent unrest in the country's history by January 6. City halls, police precincts, ruling party offices, and infrastructure objects came under simultaneous attack across the geographically vast country. In Kazakhstan's 30-year existence as a sovereign nation, the scope, the timing, and the character of the events of January 2022 have no precedent. Kazakh officials said 227 people, including 19 law enforcement officers, were killed during the unrest across the country.

In addition to the unusual scope of the unrest, the composition of its participants is also noteworthy. Specifically, it is important to differentiate between three categories of participants: 1) peaceful protesters with genuine economic and political demands; 2) opportunistic looters who raided retail outlets, broke into ATMs, or simply helped themselves to gasoline from ransacked gas stations; and 3) organized provocateurs who incited the storming of government buildings, burned down the city hall and presidential residence in Almaty, attacked television stations and police precincts, and distributed firearms. The presence of the first two groups in the context of any large-scale protest is hardly unique to Kazakhstan and does not by itself point to an attempted coup. However, the undeniable presence of the third group, as well as the scope and the coordinated nature of the attacks against government facilities, is consistent with the view that what happened was more than just a protest that spun out of control.

Last but not least, reports describe the puzzling response of various law enforcement agencies, typically not known for their restraint in dealing with a protest of any sort, to the unrest on January 4 and 5. For example, in the cities of Taldykorgan and Taraz, police officers walked away from their armories without a fight, while in Almaty, the National Security Committee (NSC) officers did the same. The government [estimates](#) that more than 1,500 firearms were lost as a result. Multiple respondents interviewed by the author in Almaty and Taraz in late January reported that on January 5, their cities appeared to be largely abandoned by law enforcement. In the aftermath of the events, former Defense Minister Murat Bektanov was [arrested](#) and charged with "inaction" and ex-NSC Chair Karim Masimov was [arrested](#) and charged with "treason."

Unanswered Questions and Helpful Clues

Importantly, Tokayev himself [described](#) the January events as an attempted coup. While this label appears to be accurate, several key questions remain. The main unknown is the

identity of those behind the attempted coup. As of mid-May 2022, Masimov (ex-chair of the NSC) is the highest-ranked government official charged in connection with the plot. Several of Masimov's deputies at the NSC were also [arrested](#). However, Nazarbayev's nephew, Samat Abish, who served as Masimov's first deputy at the NSC, has not been arrested but [merely](#) "relieved of his duties." Official government accounts [portray](#) Masimov as the coup leader and mastermind. However, the idea of Masimov, an ethnic Uyghur on his mother's side and a long-time confidante of Nazarbayev, acting on his own accord to seize power in Kazakhstan strains credulity as it manages to defy both logic and history. Yet, for now, the Kazakh government appears to be unable or unwilling to name other prominent figures in connection with the coup attempt. It also has yet to produce credible evidence of significant foreign involvement in the unrest despite the initial claims of such involvement, likely necessitated by the requirements for receiving military assistance under the Collective Security Treaty Agreement (CSTO).⁴ To date, high-profile efforts to prove foreign involvement have largely [imploded](#). Yet, at this point, a significant change in the government's official interpretation of the January events appears unlikely, as much remains shrouded by secrecy and hidden from public view.

Given the lack of publicly available information, one is reminded of Winston Churchill's famous [observation](#): "Kremlin political intrigues are comparable to a bulldog fight under a rug. An outsider only hears the growling, and when he sees the bones fly out from beneath, it is obvious who won." While it is now clear that the attempted coup failed and that Tokayev "won," the question of "who lost" has yet to receive comprehensive and convincing answers. A quick glance at the "bones" flying from beneath the proverbial rug in the aftermath of the January events offers tantalizing clues:

- **Kazakh Anti-Corruption Service Detains ex-President's Nephew**
(Kairat Satybaldy) ([Reuters](#))
- **Kazakhstan: Bolat Nazarbayev Named and Shamed Over Bitcoin Mining**
(Bolat Nazarbayev; Aliya Nazarbayeva; Kayrat Sharipbayev; Aleksandr Klebanov; Yerlan Nigmatullin; Tlegen Matkenov) ([Eurasianet](#))
- **Kazakh Ex-leader's In-laws Leave Key Energy Sector Jobs**
(Kairat Sharipbayev; Dimash Dossanov; Dariga Nazarbayeva; Aliya Nazarbayeva)
([Reuters](#))
- **Dariga Nazarbayeva Relieved of Her Powers as Majilis Deputy**
(Dariga Nazarbayeva) ([Inform.kz](#))
- **Nur Otan No More? Kazakhstan's Ruling Party Rebrands as 'Amanat'**
(Dariga Nazarbayeva; Kayrat Sharipbayev; Aliya Nazarbayeva; Dinara Nazarbayeva; Dimash Dossanov; Timur Kulibayev) ([The Diplomat](#))
- **'His Family Robbed the Country': Personality Cult of ex-Kazakh Leader Crumbles** ([The Guardian](#))

⁴ Developing a nuanced understanding of the reasons for the usage of "foreign involvement" narrative by Tokayev is important but lies beyond the scope of this memo.

Such headlines were utterly unimaginable at the end of 2021. And yet, they were recently eclipsed by a simple Facebook [post](#) penned by Kazakhstan State Secretary Erlan Karin. Writing about the proposed constitutional amendments to be put for voters' approval in a nationwide referendum in early June, Karin informed his readers that the amended constitution would omit mention of Nazarbayev as Kazakhstan's *Elbasy*. This move [strips](#) the former president and his close relatives of lifetime immunity from prosecution. It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of these changes in Kazakhstan's political history. One could attempt to argue that the flood of terrible news for Nazarbayev and his family members is a mere coincidence and that Masimov was indeed the sole leader of the failed coup, but this would be a rather extravagant and difficult argument to sustain.

Conclusions and Questions for the Future

The Uzbek scenario wherein Karimov's passing severely upset the status quo in Tashkent may have inspired those in Nazarbayev's inner circle to design an elaborate political transition that would safeguard their massive power and wealth for decades to come. However, only three years after Nazarbayev's surprise resignation in March of 2019, this meticulously crafted plan failed, laying bare the limits of "authoritarian learning." Back in 2019, Tokayev was [reported](#) to have been viewed by different elite interest groups as a temporary figure well-suited to managing the transition because of his reputation as a neutral technocrat largely devoid of ambition for power. Yet, just three years later, he has proven himself to be a skillful politician who prevailed against an attempted coup and consolidated his power, while Nazarbayev and members of his extended family have experienced an unfathomable reversal of their fortunes.

Tokayev's victory against the coup d'état afforded Kazakhstan a historic opportunity for meaningful political reforms and modernization. Only time will tell whether this unique opportunity will be used or squandered. Many ordinary Kazakhstans fear that one extended patronage network will merely be replaced by another while the "rules of the game" will remain fundamentally the same. Several questions appear to be particularly significant for Kazakhstan's future trajectory. Are genuine political reforms possible without a thorough and honest [reckoning](#) of the January events? If, for the sake of peace and stability, this reckoning never happens, does this omission become a crucial birth defect of "New Kazakhstan?"

There are credible [reports](#) about the killings of nonviolent protesters and even simple passersby on January 6 and beyond. Similarly, there are many reports of arbitrary detention and torture of those suspected of participation in the unrest. Will there be political will to conduct thorough investigations and hold those responsible accountable? If this does not happen, can the "New Kazakhstan" be built on the foundation of lies about the actions of the army and law enforcement?

Unable to rely completely on Kazakhstan’s own law enforcement agencies or the army, Tokayev was [forced](#) to call upon CSTO military forces led by Russia. Arguably, the rapid deployment of CSTO forces to Kazakhstan played a key role in defeating the coup d’état. What price will Kazakhstan need to pay for Putin’s help?

In any event, Kazakhstan now has a rare opportunity, however small, for genuine political reforms. Only time will tell whether cautious optimism about the future is warranted.