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Kazakhstan: The Myth of Stability

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By Liana Fix

The 16th of December was meant to be a jubilant day in Kazakhstan. Parallel to the unveiling of a Paris-style triumphal arch in Astana, all major cities celebrated the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence. But in Zhanaozen, a small town in the oil-rich Western province of Mangystau, the festivities turned into tragedy. An unresolved conflict about higher wages between the state-owned oil company KazMunayGas and striking oil workers escalated – police forces opened fire on the protesters in the central square, leaving 17 dead and dozens injured. K+, an independent Kazakh TV station broadcasting from Kyrgyzstan, presented video footage of retreating demonstrators being relentlessly attacked by armed police. President Nazarbayev, autocratic ruler of the country for 20 years, immediately imposed a state of emergency on the Western region prohibiting internet access and mobile phone contact to the outside world.



The brutal police crackdown marks the darkest hour in the former Soviet republic's young history. Kazakhstan's image as Central Asia's oasis of stability is starting to crumble. And so is the legitimacy of the President. The leitmotif of Nazarbayev's faux-democratic reign is his alleged concern for stability and prosperity. But Zhanaozen poses a crucial question: Can an authoritarian regime actually provide social stability? Or does authoritarian governance imperil stability in the long term? Indeed, Zhanaozen is not Cairo. And the people who took to the streets in Zhanaozen had no intention of regime change. Neither are they starving, or even unemployed. They merely demanded better pay and more labour rights. But an autocratic regime that proved to be incapable even of handling union strikes seems an incapable guarantor for social stability in the future.

The Kazakhs have appeared willing to patiently endure autocratic reign as long as they feel sure about stable relations between the over 130 ethnic groups, and about continuous economic growth. But Nazarbayev's government is increasingly facing the social pressures imposed by a population that has come to expect a steadily improving living standard as its due. The protests at Zhanaozen were not the first: In September 2006, a serious strike took place at Mittal Steel's Temirtau mines after a methane explosion took the lives of forty-one miners. The protests ended peacefully with a modest compromise. But this time it was different. During the long-lasting controversy in Zhanaozen, KazMunayGas refused to pay danger money for the tough working conditions, and local courts declared the strikes illegal. The comments of the Kazakh Foreign Minister must thus appear cynical to all those involved in the protests: "Education and social welfare have always been top priorities, and since 1994, average income per capita has increased twelvefold. (...) The workers of Zhanaozen have benefited from these conditions, too, and will feel the benefits in the future even more." But after the bloodshed, it might be too late to solve the discontent merely with better pay.



President Nursultan Nazarbayev

In an attempt to restore social order, Nazarbayev demanded a full investigation into the bloodshed and dismissed his son-in-law Timur Kulibayev, who oversaw KazMunayGas and the powerful Samruk-Kazyna holding. He also blamed "third elements" for sparking violence, notably his former son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev who lives in exile after a dispute with Nazarbayev. The final report on the incidents in Zhanaozen suggests that "one of the reasons of the mass disorder was active efforts of some individuals who persuaded fired workers to continue protests and to violently oppose the authorities." Therefore, a number of "leaders and active members [...] have been detained." Restoring order and control was the main priority after the riots, not least because of the parliamentary elections on 15 January. In his State of the Nation address

Nazarbayev declared that "the situation has returned to normal."

However, the OSCE criticised the January elections as not meeting democratic standards: the counting process significantly lacked transparency and cases of fraud were noted. Nazarbayev's party Nur Otan officially won 80.7 percent of the vote. That is 8% less than in the parliamentary elections in 2007. The pro-business Ak Zhol party as well as the Communist People's Party joined Nur Otan in parliament after an awkward legislative term of one-party rule. Nazarbayev praised this result as a new era of multi-party democracy. However, both parties are loyal to the President. Genuine opposition was ruled out a priori:

The social democratic OSDP Azat Party faced allegations of irregularities in financial declarations and was thrown out of the elections. In a peculiar reinterpretation of the results, Lord Fraser, Chairman of the British Kazakh Society, [asserts](#) that “there are strong grounds to believe that the elections represent the start of a carefully controlled process by Nazarbayev to develop a new political model for taking the country forward based on the gradual creation of political competition.” This seems to be a rather dewy-eyed assessment. Nazarbayev still seems unlikely to transfer any significant power in his lifetime.

A crucial factor of Nazarbayev’s longevity in leadership is the support of Western policymakers who buy into his self-projection as the guardian of stability and rely on Kazakhstan’s oil and gas supply. As Rachel Denber from Human Rights Watch [comments](#), “Western policymakers like to point to Kazakhstan as a regional leader in a rough neighbourhood. Led by Germany and France, the EU warmly supported Kazakhstan’s bid to chair OSCE in 2010, (...) The gamble that the chairmanship would prod reform turned out to be misguided.” Instead, the chairmanship was mainly exploited for public relations purposes, culminating in an ostentatious summit in Astana in December 2010.

Kazakhstan’s “multivectoral” foreign policy – balancing between various centres of power – is based on its oil wealth which won the regime the support of virtually every important player. Nazarbayev has achieved a delicate balance in relations with Washington, Brussels, Moscow and Beijing: Kazakhstan cooperates closely with the US in anti-terror operations and even sent a small peacekeeping group to Iraq in 2003, thereby attempting to overcome the rift in relations following the “[Kazakhgate](#)” [affair](#); a corruption scandal at the highest level, involving Nazarbayev himself. With Beijing, Kazakhstan [maintains](#) a strategic partnership and hosted the 10th anniversary summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana in July 2011. And in 2010, Astana agreed on a customs union with Russia and Belarus. Last but not least, the EU regularly emphasises the importance of Kazakhstan in the field of energy. On the initiative of Germany – an important trading partner with a large German minority in Kazakhstan – the EU adopted a Central Asia Strategy with Kazakhstan as the focus of attention. In the end, Nazarbayev’s vision for his country is as the Saudi-Arabia of Central Asia: too important to be criticised.

Consequently, the violence in Zhanaozen evoked only modest criticism within the international community. The EU’s High Representative Catherine Ashton [tried to avoid](#) any impression of political implications and called for a solution through “social dialogue”. Russia’s President Medvedev let his actions speak for themselves: At the informal summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States, President Nazarbayev failed to secure his usual seat at the table next to the Russian president. Instead, the democratically elected president of Kyrgyzstan [got the honour](#). This might have bothered Nazarbayev immensely. During his 20 years in power, he has always remained concerned about his public image and likes to decorate himself with titles such as “Leader of the Nation”. Furthermore, in a bizarre turn he recently [recruited](#) ex-Prime Minister and statesman-for-hire Tony Blair, allegedly to be advised on how to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Shortcomings in the democratic development of Kazakhstan seem less troubling to many prominent politicians in Western capitals – but who will pay the price for these shortcomings? The pace of events is quickening. Last week, new strikes [broke out](#) in Atyrau, a similarly oil-rich region. Will we witness the beginning of a “[Central Asian Spring](#)”? Irina Chernikh from the Kazakh Institute for Strategic Studies [lowers such expectations](#), “The West has overestimated the expectations, the requirements towards Kazakhstan. They would like to see speeding up liberalization in our country, as it happened in Arabic countries in Africa. [...] I think that is very dangerous for a state and it might even lead to loss of statehood.” The mantra of stability prevails, but it fails to acknowledge that only democratic states can protect the rights of their citizens, in case of doubt even against the state’s own monopoly on the use of force. Zhanaozen should be a wake-up call for the Western community not to flatter Nazarbayev, but to put him under pressure to embrace reforms. This is the only way to keep Kazakhstan stable.

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