

Resolving Kazakhstan's Unlikely Succession Crisis

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Conventional logic would suggest that a president who has been in power since 1991, has just been awarded another four-year term by winning over 95 percent of the vote, and is not held accountable to any term limits would likely not be characterized as a "lame duck." Yet that seems to be what is happening in Kazakhstan today. Although Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's first and only president since independence, has ruled Kazakhstan for over twenty years, remains vastly popular, and could potentially continue to rule the country for many years to come, the people of Kazakhstan have become almost obsessed with the question of who should inherit the mantle of power from him. As a result, an unlikely succession crisis is developing in Kazakhstan despite the fact there are no signs that a transition in leadership is imminent.

While speculation about succession has long been a favorite "parlor game" of Kazakhstani intellectuals with an interest in politics, it is only very recently that the concept of a post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan has received substantial scrutiny from the general populace. The question of what will happen once Nazarbayev is gone has gradually migrated from the pages of opposition newspapers with small print runs to national media outlets under significant government control. At the same time, it has become a topic on which most citizens have an opinion and are willing to discuss with little prompting. In most cases, these opinions and discussions are fraught with uncertainty and anxiety, as the citizens of Kazakhstan wonder how a government that has relied on the power of a single individual to lead it since its very inception can manage political transition while maintaining stability.

In short, there is a public recognition in Kazakhstan of how unprepared the country is to choose a new president in the event they are forced to do so. The anxiety related to this recognition is beginning to undermine confidence in governance, while also encouraging political and economic elites to begin positioning themselves in

anticipation of a transition in leadership. While the situation is not yet an open political crisis, it has the potential to develop into one, especially if Nazarbayev begins to lose his ability to manage intra-elite competition in the country, a skill that has been a hallmark of his rule in Kazakhstan for over twenty years.

Nazarbayev's System of Governance

This curious situation is perhaps a natural outcome of Nazarbayev's style of rule. On the one hand, he has created a system of governance that depends entirely upon his leadership and in which independent political power is virtually impossible. On the other hand, he has cultivated a broad-based economic elite, with significant capacity, financial resources, and political ambitions. As a result, there has long existed competition within the elite for power, but the president has carefully ensured that no single member of the elite (other than himself) can maintain greater power than others for very long. As long as Nazarbayev controls this system, it is quite effective in maintaining loyalty to him while cultivating a competitive and vibrant political economy. Without Nazarbayev, however, it presents an opportunity for intense elite competition with no institutions to regulate it or to mitigate conflict. Given that Nazarbayev is 72 years old and rumors are again circulating about his health, the people of Kazakhstan are beginning to wonder how this system can be maintained without its creator and master.

Although this system of rule is not entirely unique in post-Soviet Eurasia or elsewhere in the world, there are certain characteristics of Kazakhstan's political situation that make the country particularly prone to instability during a transition of leadership. First, unlike in many authoritarian countries, Kazakhstan's elite have substantial financial resources that are not dependent upon the internal economy of Kazakhstan. Many have significant offshore investments, and their companies are publicly traded in international financial markets. Thus, if a struggle for succession were to ensue, there are numerous players who could finance their own bid to take power. Second, Nazarbayev has been the country's only leader during its two decades of independence, longer than any other leader in the former Soviet Union except Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. As a result, it is difficult for the people of Kazakhstan to imagine a different leader, and they are becoming less confident of the models for a succession process provided by other countries in similar situations.

Searching for Succession Models

For years, people in Kazakhstan looked to models of succession elsewhere in the former Soviet Union with similar power structures. Prior to 2005, for example, most Kazakhstanis were not concerned about succession issues and assumed that Nazarbayev would be followed either by a "hand-picked" protégé, known locally as the "Yeltsin model, or by a member of his own family, often referred to as the "Aliyev model" or the "dynasty model." The "color revolutions," however, created doubts about these models' replication, as what were viewed as incumbent-led plans for managed succession in

Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were undermined by discontented elites and the mobilization of populist movements.

If the experiences of the color revolutions instilled doubt among Kazakhstanis concerning the reliability of the “Yeltsin model” and the “Aliyev model,” most in the country appeared to still believe, until very recently, that Nazarbayev would nonetheless hand over power in one of these two ways. That sentiment changed only in the last two years as a series of events inside Kazakhstan cast doubt on both of these models of succession. In particular, these events suggested that Nazarbayev has little interest in picking a successor in the near future and most likely will seek to stay in power for life.

This sentiment began to emerge in the public consciousness already during the last months of 2010, as the parliament contemplated various ways to secure Nazarbayev’s presidency for the foreseeable future. In the end, it was decided to put forth a constitutional amendment that would apply to Kazakhstan’s “First President” only, keeping him in office until 2020. Although Nazarbayev publicly voiced opposition to this amendment, there is ample reason to question whether his public expressions were sincere. Regardless, in January 2011, the Constitutional Court rejected the referendum, perhaps in response to the international community’s negative view of once again bypassing elections for Nazarbayev in favor of a referendum.¹ Subsequently, Kazakhstan held early presidential elections three months later, and Nazarbayev handily won an additional four-year term with over 95 percent of the vote.

Although the election reaffirmed Nazarbayev’s power, the clumsy attempts at amending the constitution highlighted both how dependent the state had become on its first president and the fact that he had no intention of handpicking a successor any time soon. Indeed, Nazarbayev is vastly popular in the country, and he has played an important role in making Kazakhstan the most dynamic economy in the region. While his 95 percent-plus election victory benefited from various manipulations, most analysts believe he would easily win a free and fair election in the country today. Still, while a large majority of the population of Kazakhstan preferred Nazarbayev over any of his competitors in the 2011 election, many are concerned that he is remaining in power too long and risks leaving as his legacy a system that cannot be sustained without him.

If Nazarbayev does not manage his own transition in the ways done by Yeltsin or Aliyev, the people of Kazakhstan are likely to look toward other succession models in post-Soviet Eurasia, most of which are much less predictable. In Central Asia, for example, Kazakhstanis can consider the models for succession in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan during the last decade.

When Saparmurat “Turkmenbashi” Niyazov unexpectedly died in Turkmenistan, the country’s political elite presumably met behind closed doors to choose a worthy successor. While this process transpired quite smoothly, with the new president quietly pushing aside his few competitors by arresting them during his first

¹ In 1995, Kazakhstan held a referendum extending Nazarbayev’s rule and bypassing competitive elections.

months in power, Turkmenistan is significantly different from Kazakhstan. It is a much less populous country with little access to the outside world, and its small circle of political and economic elites are completely dependent upon the internal political economy of Turkmenistan. The elites thus had ample reason to come to a consensus on a new leader. In Kazakhstan, they do not necessarily have the same incentives to do so.

On the other end of the spectrum, Kyrgyzstan has experienced considerable turmoil over the last seven years, including two revolutions, the replacement of one authoritarian and corrupt leader with another, and most recently the growing pains of establishing free and competitive elections as well as creating a balance of power in government. While this transition is more likely to create a sustainable solution to succession issues over the long term than the transfer of power witnessed in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan has suffered from this experience economically and socially. In the context of Kazakhstan's generally stable and successful economy, it is unlikely that too many citizens would advocate such a tumultuous transition to democracy in the event of Nazarbayev's sudden passing.

Breaking the Post-Soviet Mold: A Different Solution to Succession

In many ways, the fact that Nazarbayev's succession is becoming a subject of public concern and debate at this time is an indication of a sophisticated populace, concerned about the future of the country. There is a recognition that Kazakhstan must plan for the inevitable and that when it is forced to choose a new president, it has no clear mechanisms to do so. The question is whether Kazakhstan's political elite are sophisticated and responsible enough to begin early preparations for succession. Do they understand that retaining Nazarbayev's system of authoritarianism will be a risky proposition both during the succession process and into the future, in the event that his successor is not as strong a statesman? Can they imagine a stable and democratic system of governance that sustainably handles leadership transitions, and do they have the capacity to begin laying the foundations for such a system? These are the most critical questions today as Kazakhstan looks toward the future.

Given Kazakhstan's natural and human resources, as well as its connections with the rest of the world, it can arguably transition to a form of democratic governance without the turmoil experienced in Kyrgyzstan. To do so, however, it must begin building institutions and cultivating experiences for its citizens that would facilitate such a transition in the future. At present, neither the government nor the population has any experience with free and fair elections or with a system of governance in which power is balanced across institutions and not concentrated in a single individual. Without such experience, it will be extremely difficult to successfully choose and appropriately hold accountable a new leader in the post-Nazarbayev period without the types of instability that have transpired in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Thus, if Kazakhstan's present leadership has the foresight to understand that a democratic system of governance is the country's best path to securing a smooth transition from the Nazarbayev era, it must also begin reforming its political system now. This includes supporting the development of multiple political parties, gradually

opening up its media sector, and beginning to implement competitive elections for positions other than that of president.

These recommendations are not meant to suggest that Kazakhstan's government will immediately embrace U.S. and European democracy promoters. If it moves forward with political reform, Kazakhstan's government can be expected to formulate a democratic system of governance on its own terms and remain at the helm of this process. But if any form of Kazakhstani democracy is to manage the uncertainty of leadership succession, it must include popular elections and the establishment of a sophisticated multiparty system that cultivates a market of ideas rather than a competition of personalities. Developing such a system takes time, but it also requires action.

For its part, the international community should encourage such a solution to Kazakhstan's evolving succession crisis. In doing so, however, it should frame the issue as one of stability rather than one of ideology or morality. This is both respectful of Kazakhstan's many successes as a state to date and more palatable to Kazakhstan's present leadership and population alike. Most of all, the international community should make it clear to Nazarbayev and his closest confidants that gradually but deliberately developing democracy in Kazakhstan now is likely to secure Nazarbayev's legacy as a visionary and great leader of the twenty-first century. At the same time, it should be made clear to the present leadership that failing to take this path runs the risk of Nazarbayev being remembered as the architect of a system that was meant to crumble in his wake.

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