
Post-Succession Scenarios in Central Asia

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The first generation of Central Asian presidents will not be around forever. It is only a matter of time before the region experiences several successions stemming, most likely, from the death or incapacitation of a leader. What follows the passing of the head of state has been a topic of much speculation among Central Asia watchers, who in the last decade have spent inordinate time analyzing predictably unpredictable Kyrgyzstan. In the next decade, the chances are high that some of the predictably predictable states of the region—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—will experience major leadership turnovers. The former two have septuagenarian leaders and unclear succession plans. The latter two are ruled by somewhat younger heads of state who came to power after independence, but they preside over equally opaque and convoluted political systems (and are also approaching the life expectancy for men in their countries).

Most analyses of succession in Central Asia tend to the extremes. One scenario envisions a smooth transition decided behind closed doors (aka the Turkmenistan Scenario): high-ranking officials meet in a conclave and select a mutually acceptable and pliant figure who can protect the interests of the relevant “clans.” Stability prevails, but so does authoritarianism. The elite-led nature of the transition prevents any political openings that could enable any mass movements to bid for power. For those inclined to wager, this is probably the most likely scenario, given that it has already occurred in Central Asia, as well as in Azerbaijan.

The other scenario—more frequently mooted, since it provokes the imagination and spills a greater amount of ink—involves state collapse and anarchy. With no plan for succession, elites compete for power without clear guidance for who should take the reins, leading to a violent struggle that spills out onto the streets. This “failed state” paradigm of political change allows analysts to implicate their favorite regional scourge

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once order breaks down, the more popular ones being rival clans, Islamists, neighboring hegemony seeking to protect kinsmen, or a resurgent Russia—not necessarily in that order.

This memo details a middle course between these two popular yet contradictory narratives of succession. I undertake a thought experiment on the plausible dynamics and most likely players in a political struggle after a leader's passing. In order to give the scenarios, speculative as they are, surface plausibility, I anchor the assessment in institutional patterns and political dynamics that have been witnessed before: in Russia before Putin, Tajikistan during its civil war, and Kyrgyzstan in 2010. I identify two arenas of power that have suffered relative analytical neglect in discussion of the post-succession dynamics in Central Asian states: elites outside the president's entourage and social sources of order that emerge in response to the unraveling of a ruling coalition in the capital.

Pacts Are Not Made to Last

For two decades, the informal rules of political order in Central Asia have worked effectively in the limited domain of securing elite interests: by managing the distribution of resources and preventing challenges from society. Networks of elites sharing common interests based on regional, professional, or educational background have competed for government posts and control of property, and they have agreed to unwritten pacts that recognize the distribution of power. Presidents have served as balancers among these interest groups and as arbiters when disputes arise. There are occasional notional glitches, as evidenced by major arrests or untimely deaths of leading figures, yet the system has endured and effectively managed change.

The longevity of the system is also a weakness, however. Because the system has been so successful, there has been no impetus to rewrite the rules—or to devise rules on how the rules might be rewritten—leaving the players with no experience in dealing with change. When the arbiter is no longer around, without precedents to manage crises without the intercession of the president or *known* reliable mechanisms to transfer power, actors will be operating under a cloud of uncertainty.

The question of change in Central Asia is often framed as whether there is a succession plan or not. The logic has it that if the president has imposed a mechanism to choose a successor and the relevant players agree to it, then the succession is solved. It can be self-enforcing if the designated successor acts as a focal point, or because someone who deviates will expect to be punished. However, this premise assumes a level of trust and open communication among elites that is lacking in opaque and fiercely competitive systems.

In reality, even if there is a succession plan promulgated by the president, once he leaves the stage there will no longer be an enforcer to carry it out. If players are distrustful, they might not want to reveal their intentions and will be suspicious of the intentions of others. In an atmosphere of distrust, elites who reasonably fear they might be arrested or outwitted by rivals have incentives to retreat into defensive alliances, formulate backup plans, or act preemptively. If the rules do not stick, elites will find themselves without clear guidance for action and will have to improvise. The chances for miscalculation are high. It is at this point that most narratives turn dire.

Insecure Incumbents

One dimension of politics that will shape post-succession outcomes is the distribution of power among the existing elite. Political scientist Henry E. Hale's [model](#) of patronal presidentialism is useful for understanding the ensuing dynamics. In post-Soviet politics, presidents preside over a web of patronage and manage resource flows. Power can be exercised through a single pyramid corresponding to a system of one-man rule or through a multiple-pyramid system with several powerful leading figures. When a president exits the scene, elites rally around the presumed successor or, if he is perceived as weak or intends to step down, will defect and gravitate toward the most promising alternative.

But this model does not provide clear predictions under two conditions that often obtain in systems that deter open opposition: the lack of emergence of a consensus successor and an incentive structure that deters opportunistic actors from subordinating themselves to a new claimant. These scenarios are interdependent, as the lack of a clear successor—and a prolonged interregnum during which a credible leader does not emerge—is likely to beget alternative projects that compete with central authorities.

Although it is convenient to depict elites as interchangeable nodes in a network, in practice they are not all of equal stature. Actors vary in proximity to the president; in the amount of formal and informal power they wield; in the extent and cohesiveness of their networks; and in personal characteristics. Rulers cannot eliminate all centers of power by repressing or exiling their foes. They may co-opt rivals and absorb them into the system, but this does not deprive them of latent power. Actors within the state structure gain influence simply by virtue of their position. They replicate the actions of their superiors and establish their own patronage networks, producing pyramids within pyramids.²

Contenders and kingmakers in a potential succession struggle might emerge from middle levels of the ruling pyramid. Sub-pyramids may be relatively inconsequential during normal politics, but they represent a critical advantage for elite competitors

² Hale and [Eric McGlinchey](#) also consider this type of variation.

amidst high uncertainty after institutional breakdown. The more powerful elites must decide whether to subordinate themselves under an emerging pyramid or aspire to lead a competing pyramid. They also act as brokers, signaling whether others should throw their support behind a claimant or withdraw it.

The Central Asian states are all single-pyramid systems (with the arguable exception of Kyrgyzstan, which formally has a parliamentary form of government), but they vary notably in the distribution of power within the state. Uzbekistan is a classic unitary pyramid with the great “khan” at the pinnacle. Nonetheless, [revelations](#) from leaked diplomatic cables and European legal cases show that elites, including the president’s eldest [daughter](#), have used their proximity to the president to amass resources and perform lucrative gatekeeping functions. Agencies in the state are staffed by principles of nepotism, and their principals jockey for position. Longstanding but latent competition between regional groups originating from Tashkent/Fergana and Samarkand/Bukhara could reemerge and structure the formation of political coalitions.

In Kazakhstan, thanks to early privatization and energy revenues, there is a wider array of players. Businessmen who benefited from privatization and members of President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s extended family have accumulated assets and clienteles. Nazarbayev’s son-in-law Timur Kulibayev has both the connections and the immense assets to make him a kingmaker (or, possibly, king). However, less visible but influential financial-industrial groups, which blur the lines between business and politics, [may also be](#) critical nodes of power in a disputed succession.

In Tajikistan, thanks to the civil war, President Emomali Rahmon’s pyramid is of limited scope and fails to extend into regions that are sympathetic to the former opposition or logistically difficult to reach. For example, elite networks in Gorno-Badakhshan have retained autonomy from Dushanbe and profit from the cross-border drug trade.

Although nominally the same from outside, these internal differences matter. If a succession pact fails, elites can coordinate on the basis of these sub-pyramids. Heads of influential pyramids will seek to demonstrate their power in order to deter rivals and generate bandwagoning dynamics. Yet due to the opacity of elite networks in normal times, there are likely to be disagreements about the relative power of competing pyramids. Outcomes of these struggles are inherently unpredictable, but analysts seeking to make sense of elite machinations can identify autonomous pyramids from the key holders of assets and the flow of resources they control at the time the grand pyramid collapses.

Unexpected Upstarts

A second dimension of power stems not from identifiable elite actors in the president’s orbit but from social sources of order. Analysts typically look to the capitals, where the

wealth and media coverage are concentrated, to identify political contenders. But experience from post-Soviet conflicts suggests that local elites in the provinces may also have a say in post-presidential politics or act as spoilers. Due to their peripheral position, especially in rural areas, local elites face less monitoring of their activities from the center. Official neglect often generates resentments which local elites can exploit to amass clienteles.

In ordinary political times, local patronage networks are simply the vehicle through which business is done. Central governments rely on local brokers to implement policies and provide feedback about local needs and sentiments. Yet in tumultuous times, local informal networks that operate under the radar can be the basis of rival orders. Local challengers may not be visible at the start of a succession crisis; their emergence is part and parcel of the wider breakdown of order.

The perception of a weak state is self-fulfilling. People act on expectations of reward or punishment. If a rupture in national politics is not quickly sealed, and if the state visibly fails to deter criminality and property grabs, this can cause dramatic shifts in perceptions of the state's ability to enforce the law. At the local level, actors estimate the future likelihood that the central state will be strong and decide where to throw their weight. If the state appears ineffective, entrepreneurs will invest more in securing alternative sources of order, whether through associations of economic entrepreneurs, private militias, or the mobilization of "people power."

If local leaders emerge to present alternative nodes of power to the center, elites in the capital may defect—perhaps allying with groups from their home regions—and further devolve power to the peripheries. Opportunistic leaders coordinate with actors who have constructed similar clienteles and create the skeleton of a new political order.

In highly centralized political systems, it may be hard to imagine how local powerbrokers, much less warlords, might emerge. Even though the strength of local networks is related to central weakness, we can surmise about regions in which defiant coalitions might emerge by noting where there is a combination of weak supervision, resentments, and resources. For example, we could look to second cities and economic-cultural hubs that gave rise to influential patronage networks during Soviet times. Another source of probable resistance are salient cultural or ethnic markers, especially where those differences are repressed or persecuted. Another factor that could lend strength to a local network is location in border zones, which could attract outside patronage, whether from states or ethnic kin.

It is also difficult to envision who can emerge as a leader where presidents have total control over appointments. In Kyrgyzstan, criminal authorities and charismatic elites have appeared and raised resistance to the weak state. In other states, where independent local elites have ostensibly been eliminated, they may emerge from within

the state itself. Even loyal appointees cannot help but create clienteles, especially if they have local roots. They may comprise mayors, local police chiefs, and members of the security establishment, who have the advantage of wielding force. In case of central breakdown, there could be alliances of diverse actors possessing different skills but sharing an aversion to central *diktat*: oligarchs, criminals, former politicians, local charismatics, and local functionaries.

Conclusion

The upshot is not necessarily state failure nor even violence but rather a renegotiation of the distribution of power, whether formalized or not. In the short term, the new leadership would be compelled to make concessions to regional forces and expend capital co-opting them into the dominant patronage network or trying to remove them (say, by firing, exiling, or killing). The first post-Soviet presidents consolidated power for several years before their pyramids were complete, but their supremacy was never in doubt. Yet extreme political centralization may be a historical anomaly, resulting from the imbalance of power between strong Communist Party first secretaries and weak social movements that prevailed in 1991. The second generation of leaders, which will not enjoy the presumption of legitimacy of their predecessors, may not have it so easy. If a succession struggle persists, it may not be possible to claw back all the power that is lost in the process.

Analysts tend to focus on heads of state and action in national capitals. Yet it is precisely because some actors can avoid the spotlight that they can gain leverage in quiet times to deploy in more turbulent ones. In many states at comparable levels of development to Central Asia (Kazakhstan being an exception), it is normal for the center to struggle to project power throughout the whole expanse of territory; de facto power sharing agreements with regional elites and areas of limited central state control are the norm. This may become the new normal in Central Asia once power is not simply handed over to heirs apparent who inherit an elite consensus.