
Authoritarian Learning

MAKING SENSE OF KAZAKHSTAN'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

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Azamat K. Junisbai¹
Pitzer College

On March 19, 2019, President Nursultan Nazarbayev shocked the country he has dominated since before the collapse of the Soviet Union by announcing that he had reached a “difficult” decision and was going to step down from the presidency. 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 posts as Head of the Security Council, Chair of the ruling Nur-Otan political party, and member of the Constitutional Council. He stated that his goal for the future was to empower a new generation of leaders who would continue his policies. Lastly, Nazarbayev announced that, in accordance with Kazakhstan’s constitution, Chair of the Senate Kassym-Jomart Tokayev would [succeed](#) him as interim president until elections were held. Tokayev’s first address as interim president a day later on March 20 was a vow of policy continuity. He also lavished extravagant praise on his appointer and called for renaming the capital Astana and central streets in all of Kazakhstan’s large cities after the *Elbasy*.

The peculiar transition format and the resulting configuration of Kazakhstan’s political system after March 19, 2019, represent a clear example of what Stephen Hall and Thomas Ambrosio [describe](#) as authoritarian learning, “a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments.” Kazakhstan’s ruling elites are keen to avoid the Uzbekistan scenario wherein President Islam Karimov’s unexpected passing in September 2016 severely upset the status quo in Tashkent with dire consequences for the entire Karimov clan. Because of Nazarbayev’s own advanced age, the urgency of authoritarian learning could hardly be greater. However, we have yet to see whether the lessons learned from Uzbekistan will prove sufficient for protecting and preserving the formidable positions of *Elbasy*’s family members and closest associates.

¹ [Azamat K. Junisbai](#) is Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College.

June 2019 Election: Tainted but Acceptable

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 June election fell short of international standards. The OSCE final report [published](#) in October described the election as having been tarnished by violations of fundamental freedoms and pressure on critical voices prior to the election day and widespread ballot-box stuffing, blatant disregard of counting procedures, and detentions of peaceful protesters on election day.² Despite this inauspicious beginning, Tokayev's ascension to the presidency was seen by many people in Kazakhstan as historic simply because of the nearly three-decade-long rule of his predecessor.

A Tokayev Presidency with Nazarbayev's Involvement

Despite the formidable powers retained by Nazarbayev after stepping down from the presidency, both Nazarbayev and Tokayev publicly denied the existence of a power tandem. However, news coming out of Kazakhstan's newly renamed capital tell a more complicated story. By all indications, Nazarbayev remains intimately involved in matters of state and is 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.

The new president is now expected to consult Nazarbayev before appointing cabinet ministers (with the exception of defense, internal affairs, and foreign affairs), regional governors and city mayors, as well as heads of various security forces, including the head of his own security detail. Predictably, this development further shifted the balance of power toward Nazarbayev, whose portfolio had already included overseeing the powerful National Security Committee, the foreign intelligence service, and the Prosecutor General Office. Chronologically, the October 9 decree followed what must have been seen as yet another disturbing development, this time in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where President Almazbek Atambayev's hand-picked successor, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, quickly turned on his benefactor and eventually [succeeded](#) in arresting and imprisoning him in August 2019. For Kazakhstan's political elites, the developments in Kyrgyzstan must have further highlighted the dangers inherent in political transition and amplified the need for careful transition management.

² To wit, in the capital, independent election observers managed to obtain signed and stamped protocols (*протоколы "с синей печатью"*) from 208 polling stations representing 38 percent of all polling places in the city. Tally of the votes from these 208 protocols [showed](#) that Tokayev's main opponent, Amirzhan Kosanov, received 72,316 votes. However, in the official results for the entire city, published the next day, Kosanov was shown as having received just 50,366 votes.

Kazakhstan's Transition Format as a Product of Authoritarian Learning

The concept of “authoritarian learning” offers a useful lens for making sense of Kazakhstan’s unusual power-sharing configuration. The developments in Nur-Sultan are best understood as the outcome of a carefully crafted strategy by the country’s ruling class determined to avoid the fate of the Karimov clan in neighboring Uzbekistan.

Soon after Karimov’s unexpected passing in September 2016, the deceased president’s closest associates and loyalists were pushed out, his personality cult discarded, and even his own widow, Tatyana Karimova, was eviscerated with harsh criticism by Uzbekistan’s new leader. Importantly, Uzbekistan’s new reformist president—Shavkat Mirziyoyev—had not come from the ranks of political opposition but was instead a long-standing member of Uzbekistan’s political establishment under Karimov.

It is plain to see that from the perspective of Nazarbayev, members of his extended family, and their closest associates, post-Karimov developments in Uzbekistan provide a terrifying lesson about the price of failure to plan for and manage the transition process. The August 2019 developments in Kyrgyzstan must have further escalated the perceived urgency of authoritarian learning for Kazakhstan’s political elites. Thus, Kazakhstan’s current political configuration should be thought of as an insurance policy designed to provide peace of mind for those in Nazarbayev’s inner circle. Whether or not this insurance will prove sufficient remains to be seen.

In the perpetual “bulldog fight under a rug” among elite factions vying for leadership in the post-Nazarbayev era, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was [reported](#) to have been viewed by different elite interest groups as well-suited to managing the transition because of his reputation as a neutral figure devoid of obvious ambition for long-term personal power. However, only time will show whether this calculation was correct as Tokayev works to strengthen his own hand using his power of the purse and his somewhat constrained power of appointment. It is reasonable to expect that, in the zero-sum environment of Kazakhstan’s patronage-based politics, any efforts by Tokayev to significantly strengthen his own position are bound to be met with resistance by other members of the elite. The signing of the October 9 decree suggests that Nazarbayev and his closest associates saw the need for additional checks on Tokayev. However, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have bolstered Tokayev’s position, as will be discussed below.

Dim Prospects for Political Reform under Tokayev

While the current political configuration appears to be designed with the explicit purpose of preventing Kazakhstan’s second president from building an independent power base among the political elite, news from Nur-Sultan suggests that Tokayev is working to further his legitimacy among the general population.

He has been positioning himself as a highly competent technocrat with nuanced knowledge of the many challenges confronting Kazakhstan, including some decidedly local issues. For example, Tokayev's order to halt construction of the controversial ski resort outside Almaty was very [well received](#) by environmental activists in Kazakhstan's largest city who have long fought against the project. At the same time, it was ridiculed by others who commented that Tokayev was personally intervening in a local issue because it matched the extent of his mandate. In any event, we can expect Tokayev to continue with efforts aimed at enhancing his own popularity despite, or perhaps because of, the severe curbs on his powers of appointment.

However, those hoping for meaningful political reforms under the Tokayev presidency are bound to be disappointed. The *raison d'être* for elevating Tokayev while Nazarbayev retains major levers of power is the preservation of the status quo. Nazarbayev's signature emphasis on the primacy of economic reforms coupled with resistance to political liberalization created a society where significant wealth can only be gained and maintained through political patronage networks. Indeed, survey research shows that the vast majority of Kazakhstan's citizens, young and old alike, believe connections and patronage, rather than hard work and qualifications, to be the main reasons for individual wealth.³

In this environment, pursuing major reforms aimed at political liberalization would be akin to pushing a self-destruct button for the very status quo this transition format was designed to safeguard. Significant political reforms would not only disrupt the existing wealth-generating patronage networks but would also trigger scrutiny about the origins of ostentatious wealth so often on brazen display in a society where most citizens live very modest lives. Therefore, Kazakhstan under Tokayev will remain largely the same as Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev for as long as the latter retains his power.

Future Considerations

Nazarbayev has spent decades presiding over and carefully maintaining a patronage-based political system designed to keep in check the ambitions of influential interest groups composed of his family members and elite figures close to him. This system rewarded loyalty to *Elbasy*, with those in his inner circle benefiting the most. According to Kate Mallinson, [writing](#) in a recently published Chatham House report:

“Various family syndicates have developed over the past 20 years, at the core of which are several key figures: Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva; his son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev (married to Nazarbayev's second daughter, Dinara); and his nephew, Kairat Satybaldy. These three individuals, along with their spouses, children and those close to them, influence a large proportion of the national economy.”

³ Junisbai B. and Junisbai A., “[Are Youth Different? The Nazarbayev Generation and Public Opinion in Kazakhstan](#),” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2018, p. 1-13.

In addition to the formidable political powers retained by Nazarbayev after stepping down, legal and constitutional amendments provide him with life-long legal immunity, and, crucially, guarantee the inviolability of property belonging to him and his family members. If the respective patronage networks and vast property holdings of Nazarbayev's closest associates remain largely intact even after his ultimate departure, Kazakhstan's unorthodox political transition should be seen as a triumph of authoritarian learning.

However, several recent developments hint at the fragility of even the most carefully laid transition plans. On March 15, plummeting crude oil prices forced Kazakhstan's Central Bank to [allow](#) a 6.7 percent devaluation of the national currency against the U.S. dollar. On March 16, 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.

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 4, Tokayev [appointed](#) Maulen Ashimbayev to be a member of the Senate, and, just two hours later, Ashimbayev was unanimously elected to replace Nazarbayeva as Senate Chair. On May 16 and June 10, Tokayev signed constitutional amendments expanding his own powers during a state of emergency or war. Finally, on June 18, the press secretary for *Elbasy* [announced](#) that the former president, about to turn 80 years old, had tested positive for COVID-19 but that he was feeling well and continuing to work remotely.

What happens next will test whether deliberate authoritarian learning is sufficient for preserving the political status quo in the world's largest landlocked country. If the elite jockeying for position in the post-Nazarbayev era produces clear winners and losers among current members of his inner circle, it will upset the delicate equilibrium that Kazakhstan's first president has long worked to maintain. In the absence of robust and independent political institutions capable of providing stability and continuity, an all-out conflict between different elite factions could have profoundly destabilizing effects for the whole of society. Such an outcome would not only illustrate the limits of authoritarian learning but could very well throw the whole country into turmoil.