



Kazakhstan's Snap Presidential Election Met with Protests

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Overview

Kazakhstan, an important U.S. partner in areas such as nuclear nonproliferation and counterterrorism, has embarked on an unprecedented process of political transition. On March 19, 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation as president after almost 30 years in office. A former Soviet official, Nazarbayev became Kazakhstan's first elected president in 1991. He was subsequently reelected four times, most recently in 2015, although none of these elections were deemed free and fair by international observers. His authoritarian government faced [criticism](#) for human rights violations and suppression of political dissent. Nazarbayev nevertheless enjoyed strong domestic popularity because of his largely successful efforts to promote stability and economic development. Nazarbayev is now moving to implement a tightly controlled succession process in which he maintains significant power, but his resignation and the announcement of a snap presidential election prompted protest and democratic activism across the country. Although Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, handily won the June 9 election, independent observers have raised questions about the integrity of the results. Widespread frustration with the vote has catalyzed further protest, raising the possibility of escalating government repression.

Presidential Succession

On March 20, in accordance with Kazakhstan's constitution, Senate Speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became acting president for the remainder of Nazarbayev's term, which was set to end in 2020. Nazarbayev maintains significant powers as head of Kazakhstan's Security Council and chairman of the

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Nur Otan party. As First President and *Elbasy* (Leader of the Nation), he enjoys constitutionally protected status, including [lifelong immunity](#) from prosecution. His daughter, Senator Dariga Nazarbayeva, succeeded Tokayev as Speaker of the Senate on March 20 and is therefore first in the presidential line of succession.

On April 9, Tokayev announced that Kazakhstan would hold a snap presidential election on June 9. While there were seven candidates (including Daniya Yespaeva, the first woman to run), many analysts considered Tokayev's victory "[guaranteed](#)" because of the government's strict control of the electoral process. Amirzhan Kosanov ran as a government critic, marking the first time an opposition candidate was allowed to run since 2005. [OSCE](#) observers deemed the election "tarnished by clear violations of fundamental freedoms" and "significant irregularities." According to official results, Tokayev garnered 71% of the vote, while Kosanov came in second with 16%. Tokayev was inaugurated on June 12.

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

[President Tokayev](#), 66, is a highly credentialed diplomat with significant international experience. He is widely seen as a Nazarbayev loyalist, and his stated motivation for running was to maintain Nazarbayev's "strategic course" and "ensur[e] the continuity of our Leader's policies." Nazarbayev, in his capacity as chairman of Nur Otan, personally put forward Tokayev's candidacy for the June 9 election.

Born in 1953 in Alma-Ata (present-day Almaty), Tokayev studied at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, an elite university under the purview of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After graduating in 1975, he began his career as a Soviet diplomat, serving at the USSR's embassies in Singapore and Beijing. Tokayev is fluent in Kazakh, Russian, and Chinese. He also speaks English and French.

After Kazakhstan became independent in 1991, Tokayev served twice as Minister of Foreign Affairs, in addition to stints as Prime Minister and Speaker of the Senate. In 2011 he was appointed U.N. Deputy Secretary-General and Director-General of the U.N. Office in Geneva. In 2013, he returned to Kazakhstan to reprise his post as Speaker of the Senate.

Pro-Democracy Protests

Despite the government's emphasis on a smooth transition, Nazarbayev's resignation has catalyzed grassroots activism and protest. Although public demonstrations are rare in Kazakhstan due to restrictive laws, pro-democracy protests were given new impetus on April 21, when activists Asiya Tulesova and Beibarys Tolymbekov were detained by police after they unfurled a [banner](#) at the Almaty marathon bearing the words "You cannot run from the truth" in Russian. The banner also included hashtags in Kazakh and Russian reading "For a free election" and "I have a choice." Three others were arrested and fined for filming the incident. Tulesova and Tolymbekov were both sentenced to 15 days in jail, the maximum sentence. [Amnesty International](#) recognized them as "prisoners of conscience."

This demonstration sparked a wave of youth activism that is unprecedented for post-independence Kazakhstan. The government has responded by detaining activists (for instance, a young man was [detained](#) by police in the city of Oral for holding up a [blank sign](#)) and [blocking](#) access to social media and independent news outlets. A new movement calling for political reform and transition to a parliamentary system, Oyan, Qazaqstan (Wake Up, Kazakhstan), was [launched](#) on June 5.

The protest mood has expanded in recent weeks. On May 1, several hundred people [protested](#) in Almaty and in the capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), as well as in some smaller cities, voicing frustrations with the government and calling for free elections. According to Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, 80 people were arrested in Almaty and Nur-Sultan, although media reports suggest that the [number may be higher](#). Grassroots social media campaigns have sprung up to provide material support to those jailed or fined. The government blames [Mukhtar Ablyazov](#), a fugitive former banker living in France and a vocal Nazarbayev critic, for orchestrating the unrest, but the demonstrations appear to reflect genuine grassroots grievances. Further arrests took place throughout the country on the May 9 Victory Day holiday. A larger wave of protest broke out during and immediately after the election. As many as [thousands](#) of people were reportedly detained by police between June 9 and June 12. Police targeted both protestors and passersby, also detaining domestic and foreign [journalists](#) as well as a representative of the [Norwegian Helsinki Committee](#).

Congressional Interest

Tokayev’s diplomatic experience may suggest interest in increasing engagement with foreign partners, although he will almost certainly maintain Kazakhstan’s traditional “multi-vector” approach. The recent pro-democracy protests suggest new possibilities for civil society in Kazakhstan. If the government responds with more repressive measures, however, the human rights situation in the country may further deteriorate, potentially raising questions about U.S.-Kazakhstan security cooperation and foreign assistance.

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