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RUSSIA

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Yury Fedorov reports from Prague:

KAZAKHSTAN: LOOMING INSTABILITY?

Analysts are increasingly predicting the possibility of an explosive escalation of tensions between political power groups in Kazakhstan. They fear that the government may lose control of the situation as the transition of power draws near.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev became a septuagenarian in 2010. Questions are increasingly being raised about his personal and political prospects. The problem is not just his age. Nazarbayev has been in power in Kazakhstan for over 20 years, ever since his election as the secretary-general of the Kazakh branch of the Communist Party in 1989. The Kazakh political elite obviously has personalities and groups that have grown tired of waiting. They are unhappy with the rules of the game set by the incumbent president, and have an eye on his job.

Kazakhstan has always been regarded as a paragon of authoritarian stability. But the Arab revolutions in late 2010 - early 2011 have demonstrated that many seemingly unshakeable authoritarian regimes have feet of clay, suffering as they do from deep internal ailments. Nevertheless, it is next to impossible to predict with any precision when and how exactly the latent crisis will explode into the open.

THE MECHANISM OF NAZARBAYEV'S POWER

Nazarbayev's personal authority has been the main factor of his country's political stability. He has kept the political elite under control by manipulating the bureaucratic clans and business conglomerates. That mechanism has evolved over time, reflecting the changes in the country's political and business elites.

In the first years after the fall of the Soviet Union Nazarbayev's power relied on the loyal Communist Party cadres. But he also had a deliberate policy of promoting representatives of the younger generation, turning them into another pillar of his regime. The principles of recruitment to the upper echelons of power also evolved. In the 1990s a successful political or business career required membership of one of the three *Zhuz*, the Kazakh tribal clans - or direct family ties. But starting from the early 2000s that factor was supplanted by unconditional personal loyalty to the president and a ready willingness to implement all his orders, reinforced by complete personal dependence on Nazarbayev's favor.

The existing mechanism of power in Kazakhstan is centered on the president, who remains at the top of the bureaucratic pyramid. He makes all the important appointments, as well as all the political and economic decisions of any consequence. The mechanism is built on a system of checks and balances, enabling Nazarbayev to act as the supreme arbiter in resolving conflicts between the bureaucratic clans, financial and industrial conglomerates or the several secret services, all keeping each other under close watch.

Nazarbayev's tactics also include actually stimulating conflicts in the upper echelons of power. He conducts regular reshuffles to prevent the formation of powerful cliques in the ministries and agencies, with their own clientele. He rewards personal loyalty by various means, including appointments that enable the appointee to re-route the financial flows in his own favor. He also metes out severe punishment to those he suspects of disloyalty.

EARLY ELECTIONS IN 2011

The early presidential election held in 2011, just one year ahead of the regular one that was scheduled for 2012, became an important event in Kazakhstan's politics, signaling a looming crisis. The ostensible reasoning for that election was as follows.

On December 23, 2010 several prominent public figures unexpectedly proposed a national referendum to prolong Nazarbayev's term of office until 2020. The idea was immediately backed by the Central Election Committee. Only 4 days later it registered an initiative group to collect signatures among members of the public in favor of such a referendum. By January 2011 the group had collected over 5 million signatures, which makes up 55% of the voting population. The Kazakh parliament unanimously approved the required changes to the constitution and submitted them to the Constitutional Council's vetting. It would be completely unimaginable for such a far-reaching political combination not to have been initiated by the president himself.

But the Constitutional Council ruled that the idea of replacing the presidential elections with a referendum to prolong the president's term

was unconstitutional. Nazarbayev promptly agreed with the ruling and proposed an early presidential election for April 2011. The idea was enthusiastically backed by parliament. The election was held on April 3, 2011. Nazarbayev was re-elected for a fourth term of office, which expires in 2016, with more than 95% of the vote.

It appears that the scale of the vote-rigging during the poll was quite substantial. The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights, which monitored the election with the backing of Freedom House and the Open Society Institute, said the turnout was 21 percentage points lower than the official figures announced by the Central Election Commission. Nevertheless, it is clear that the majority of the Kazakh voters gave their support to Nazarbayev.

The early election has raised two important questions. First, why did Nazarbayev abandon the idea of a referendum so easily, even though it was clearly him who had initiated it in the first place? And second, why did he need the early election?

His decision to abandon the referendum to extend his term of office until 2020 and to hold an early election instead has an easy explanation. He clearly did not want to ruin what remains of his reputation in the West. It is also clear that he needed the early election to demonstrate to everyone - especially to the Kazakh elite - his own legitimacy, political authority and popularity among the people.

But the true question is, what was the purpose for demonstrating his political might? As Russian expert Adzhar Kurtov puts it, «early elections are normally held at times of crisis, when the president, parliament or cabinet need to renew their mandate of trust. But that is not the situation in Kazakhstan at this time... It is difficult to find a legitimate explanation for this election». In essence, however, the answer is contained in the question itself. The early election means the country really is in a crisis - or its leadership fears that such a crisis is imminent.

It is tempting to link the early election in Kazakhstan with events in the Arab countries. But the referendum proposal was made on December 23, 2010, i.e. a day before first trouble broke out in Tunisia. And the proposal itself had obviously taken at least several days - more likely, several weeks - to develop. It is quite possible, however, that when they were cooking the referendum and early election plans, Nazarbayev and his entourage took into account the events in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where President Bakiyev was deposed after the key power groups united against him.

There have been several interesting statements made by senior Kazakh officials. In one of his speeches, Nazarbayev's senior domestic policy

***¹What to expect of the presidential election in Kazakhstan? Online conference with Yermukhamet Yertysbayev.
<http://www.customsunion.ru/info/2896.html>
(Retrieved on July 1, 2011)***

advisor Yertysbayev mentioned four reasons which he believes gave rise to the idea of the referendum and then early election¹:

- A new wave of a protracted financial crisis is expected by the end of 2011;
- The Kazakh elite and Nazarbayev's entourage lobbied the idea of prolonging the president's term of office until 2020 in order to avoid a messy transition of power in the coming decade;
- The entire government system hinges on a single man at the top, and the institutions are not functioning properly;
- There is still only one political party represented in the country's legislature.

It is true that effective institutions reduce the risk of destabilization in the event of a crisis in the upper echelons of power. But it appears that when Nazarbayev and his entourage speak about modernizing the country's political system, they try to supplant the question of succession (which increasingly troubles the Kazakh elite) with the question of reforming parliament. On the whole, the most likely explanation for the early election is that Nazarbayev needed to bolster his own positions amid growing tension and irritation among the political elite caused by uncertainty over the president and presidency.

INSTABILITY FACTORS

The mechanism of personal authority built by Nazarbayev has underpinned the stability of his regime for 20 years. It continues to enable the president to preside as the supreme arbiter over the conflicts and tussles between the various bureaucratic and business groupings, clans and cliques. In what has become a trademark of Kazakh politics, these groupings have always competed for the president's favor rather than the favor of the electorate or power as such. The president's favor, meanwhile, depends on access to revenues from exports of energy and minerals, and on control of other profitable industries, such as transport, telecommunications and banking. «It is largely for this reason that electoral politics in Kazakhstan is either totally absent or remains stuck at the very early stages. As a result, shadow politics is more important than public politics. Political parties are created not to promote an idea or to express the interests of various social groups, but to serve one man or one grouping»².

***²Influence groups in the political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan. November 29, 2005.
Eurasian Center of Political Studies and Epicenter social technologies agency.
<http://www.zonakz.net/articles/10280>
(Retrieved on July 1, 2011)***

The various factors of instability that have recently started to emerge cannot be controlled by the existing mechanisms. The concentration of power in the hands of Nazarbayev is much too high. As his ability to make rational decisions declines (in an echo of the late Brezhnev era), the

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power vacuum in the country will continue to build up. That vacuum will inevitably lead to bitter infighting between the financial and industrial conglomerates, bureaucratic cliques and various clans, all jostling for political power and control of the key law-enforcement agencies and key provinces. Observers are already detecting an increase in separatist sentiment in the western provinces, which hold the bulk of the country's oil wealth.

Theoretically, there are two ways of forestalling such a turn of events. The first is for the president to choose a successor, who would gradually take over the key power instruments and secure the support of the most influential figures of the regime. Such an option was chosen by Azerbaijan; it is also being implemented in North Korea. Some experts see Nazarbayev's son-in-law Timur Kulibayev, who heads the country's most influential business group, as the most likely successor. But there is little evidence that Kulibayev is being groomed to succeed his father-in-law. There is a good explanation for that. The appointment of an heir-apparent, in whichever shape or form, would inevitably undermine the president's own authority and turn him into a lame duck. That is something Nazarbayev is unable to accept.

There is another way of avoiding a bitter struggle for power and chaos in the event of a sharp deterioration of the president's health or mental faculties. The leading figures of the regime, including the heads of the army and the secret services, could agree between themselves a candidate for the role of the successor. In the events of a crisis they would submit that candidate for the approval of the upper echelons of power, with the subsequent launch of all the formal constitutional procedures. Something along these lines probably happened in Turkmenistan shortly before the death of President Niyazov. The option is of course risky; if Nazarbayev learns of such collusion behind his back (and it is more than likely that he will), all its participants will immediately face the president's wrath.

The second source of tension in Kazakhstan is that the country's elite is closed to the outsiders. For anyone hailing from the common social classes the way to the upper echelons of government, business and politics is barred. As a result, Kazakhstan is witnessing the emergence of a counter-elite consisting mainly of young (or youngish) and ambitious university-educated representatives of the lower and middle classes. Recent events in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab states have once again demonstrated that such social groups are the main driving force of anti-government campaigns. If an open struggle for power breaks out between the various Kazakh clans and cliques, the counter-elite groups could throw their weight behind the grouping that offers them the most favorable terms.

In the end, the future of Kazakhstan will depend on the ability of the leading business and bureaucracy groups to reach a common stance on the

next leader of the country. The most common scenario in such situations is for behind-the-curtains consultations and compromises to yield a weak candidate who does not have a strong support base of his own among the law-enforcement agencies and business groups. But the experience of many authoritarian regimes has demonstrated that the leaders first seen as weak transitional figures often go on to take control of all the key instruments of power, and reign as dictators for many years. And if they fail, their country gradually slides towards instability and chaos.

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