

Kazakhstan's Snap Presidential Election

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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. The former First Secretary of Soviet Kazakhstan's Communist Party, 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 have prompted a burst of protest and democratic activism across the country.

Presidential Succession

In accordance with Kazakhstan's constitution, the Speaker of the Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, became acting president for the remainder of Nazarbayev's term, which was set to end in 2020. Although he is no longer president, Nazarbayev maintains significant powers as head of the National Security Council and chairman of the 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. Many observers consider Tokayev's victory "[guaranteed](#)" because of the government's strict control of the electoral process. Nonetheless, seven people are running, the largest number of candidates ever in a Kazakhstani presidential election (including Daniya Yespaeva, the first woman to run). Amirzhan Kosanov is running as a government critic, marking the first time an opposition candidate has been allowed to run since 2005.

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

[President Tokayev](#), 65, is a highly credentialed diplomat with significant international experience. He is widely seen as a Nazarbayev loyalist, and his stated motivation for running is 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 appears to have 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 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." Tulesova maintained a hunger strike for the duration of her detention.

This demonstration sparked a wave of youth activism that is unprecedented for independent Kazakhstan. One day after the marathon, over 200 people gathered in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, for a discussion on political participation. Young Kazakhs across the [United States](#), [Europe](#), and [Asia](#) demonstrated in support of the marathon protestors. On April 29, an artist was arrested and convicted of "petty hooliganism" for hanging a [banner](#) from a highway overpass reading "The only source of state power is the people," a quote from Kazakhstan's constitution.

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. Unusually, the authorities allowed the demonstrations to continue for some time before breaking them up. 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](#). Police beat some demonstrators with rubber batons. Many of the detained have since been either fined or sentenced to jail terms ranging from 5 to 15 days. 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. The arrests may not deter activists. On May 6, a man was [detained](#) by police in the city of Oral for holding up a [blank sign](#). Further arrests took place throughout the country on the May 9 Victory Day holiday; because independent media websites and social networks were [blocked](#), the extent of demonstrations and detentions remains unclear.

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.