



First glimpses of Tokayev's Kazakhstan: The listening state?

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Since the inauguration of its second president on March 22, Kazakhstan has taken a beating in the world press. And not without cause. Two days after the event, police shut down several unprecedented demonstrations in the capital. Over the following weeks several thousand young men and women were apprehended, journalists were roughed up, and men in black masks used umbrellas to prevent film crews from recording the events. An open letter from thirty-eight journalists and activists complained about this and other confrontations. The Ministry of Internal Affairs laid the blame on "vigilantism" but promised an investigation. The police, whose actions were at issue, chose silence. Only later did the government admit that mistakes had been made.

Meanwhile, international commentators found other bones to pick. They pointed to former President Nazarbayev's continuing role as head of the ruling Nur Otan party and his life-long chairmanship of Kazakhstan's security council. They cited the many deferential statements about his predecessor by the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and concluded that nothing had really changed. Even when Tokayev took initiatives, like his early visits to Moscow and Beijing, he was criticized for tilting in the wrong direction. All this seemed to justify a cautious "watch and wait" policy towards the new president on the part of the West and other like-minded countries.

While such a conclusion may seem prudent in terms of the facts on which it is based, it fails to take account a significant body of evidence that points in a very different, more positive direction. Largely ignored by the western press, these other developments suggest that the United States and other countries favoring open and market-based systems should take a more engaged and active approach to Tokayev's Kazakhstan. These developments are occurring in areas as diverse as politics, law, the economy, administration, civil society, and foreign relations.

It is understandable that the Tokayev government, anxious to oversee a peaceful transition, stresses continuity and stability. It has therefore done little to ballyhoo its new initiatives. Indeed, ambiguity reigns, as in the claim that Kazakhstan can reach a new stage of development "by maintaining continuity of the policy of the Leader of the Nation [i.e., Nazarbayev] and through systemic reforms" (emphasis added). Moreover, many of Kazakhstan's new policies and programs exist for now only as statements of intent. They are nonetheless significant. Together, they indicate new directions in Kazakhstan that should elicit engagement and support from the United States and Europe.

That political currents in Kazakhstan are shifting was signaled by the fact that President Nazarbayev left office voluntarily, something which no Central Asian leader had done since independence. Then, in an Address to the Nation, Tokayev boldly announced that the old formula of "economy first, politics second" was no longer valid. Turning the old maxim on its head, he declared to the *Wall Street Journal* that "without political changes economic development would be impossible."

A desire for engagement

In spite of his stolid and imperturbable mien, Tokayev is well aware that today's citizens of Kazakhstan, and particularly young people, differ sharply from his own generation. He is among the most active users of social media of all Eurasian leaders and realizes full well that the government must now deal with organized groups of environmentalists, new media folk, mothers, civil libertarians, Islamists, and others, all of them seeking immediate change. In such an environment he has argued that that government must become more transparent and that it must accept the "culture of debate and opposition" as a fact of life. In this spirit he has readily admitted past failures. In a typical statement he admits that the government had invested huge funds to various projects but that the money had "disappeared into thin air or, rather, into the pockets of officials."

Tokayev's first measure to engage the emerging forces of society was to establish a Commission on Public Trust. With forty-four members and only three from the government, it would have seemed a positive step. But leaders of the main activist party have not yet been included, nor were representatives of several other small parties. It remains to be seen whether this body evolves into a standing forum for the leading social forces or becomes a mere talking shop. A key to its success will be its willingness and ability to attract new leaders. However, the fact that one candidate in the presidential election, Amirzhan Kosanov, received a respectable sixteen percent of the vote suggests that Tokayev is quite right in seeking to create new vehicles for social dialogue.

The main forum for policy-related debate and the “culture of dialogue” favored by Tokayev remains the bicameral parliament. He has expressed the hope that the lower house (Mazhilis) will better reflect the country’s diverse voters and that more parties will be represented there. It is significant that Tokayev sees the parliament as an instrument for monitoring expenditures by governmental agencies. If the Mazhilis gains the ability to interrogate ministers, which it does not currently have, this could significantly reduce the ability of local officials to engage in corrupt practices. A further Tokayev proposal that could greatly strengthen parliament’s hand is for it to set up an “Institute for Legislative Research.”

The legal system that emerged in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the USSR contains many anomalies that remain unresolved to this day. Tokayev bluntly acknowledged this in his Address to the Nation, when he observed that in their status both as plaintiffs and defendants “citizens are not on an equal footing” with the state apparatus “because they lack the resources with which to advance their cause or defend themselves.” To right this balance, he proposes to “tighten punishments for sexual violence, drug and human trafficking, domestic violence against women, etc.” Above all, he attacks the existing police and penal system. In late July he ordered the arrest and firing of officials at a penal facility north of Almaty, where the torture of prisoners had been caught on film. Potentially far more important is his call for the complete reform of the law enforcement system. His stated goal is to transform the police from being solely instruments of the state to being the providers of services to the citizenry.

With the president’s immediate focus on the police, it remains to be seen how far the president will go to put citizens on an equal footing with the government in the courtroom. The possibilities are vast, including the rewriting or abolition of many laws, upgrading the rights and skills of defense attorneys, and fundamental changes in the education of lawyers. For now, though, Tokayev appears to favor a step-by-step approach.

Jumpstarting the economy

Kazakhstan was, and remains today, an exporter of oil, uranium, and other raw materials. Tokayev knows this will continue but now asserts that “agriculture is our main resource.” He is right to do so. With China and all Asia next door, Kazakhstan is well positioned to be a major provider of grains, livestock, and seeds. Foreign firms and investors can help develop this resource, but there must be expertise at the local level to attract them. Tokayev therefore charges local governors (akims) with helping to recruit foreign investments to their territories, a dramatic enhancement of their duties.

Whereas his predecessor dipped into the country’s sovereign wealth fund to finance pet projects in IT and other sectors, Tokayev promises to be stingier with this rainy-day reserve. Instead, he will promote foreign investment and also hopes to expand the volume of bank loans, especially from second and third tier institutions outside the capital. He wants these to be directed above all to innovative small and medium-sized industries.

But loans cannot save the many inefficient state-run enterprises that are a heritage of Soviet times. Rather than tackle all these well-connected behemoths at once, Tokayev proposes to start by cutting back their number, focusing first on the least efficient ones. In this respect he is bolder than China’s Xi Jinping, who seems intent on dodging the same problem.

Foreign and domestic loans together cannot cover the many new investments that are needed. In his search for new funds Tokayev is looking boldly at what he considers Kazakhstan’s overly-generous social assistance and pension programs. The cost of welfare programs has mushroomed, he argues, claiming seventeen times more Tenge today than in 2017. This has also created dependencies which reduce the supply and productivity of labor. Meanwhile, an overly-generous pension system further saps the budget.

President Tokayev’s willingness even to mention these two highly-charged issues is striking. Governments that have adopted such policies in an effort to pacify the public rarely succeed in cutting them back, let alone abandoning them. Action in this area, however, will require a rare combination of deftness and firmness.

Countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union often brag about their high rates of literacy. But all such countries—Kazakhstan among them—suffer from a woefully inadequate supply of young workers with modern skills. Meanwhile, large numbers of secondary school graduates, rather than receiving vocational training and entering apprenticeships, are moving on to the proliferating universities, both public and private. Tokayev quite reasonably argues there are too many universities in Kazakhstan. Rather than let the market decide, he wants to cut back their number and shift more investment instead to vocational training institutions. Finally, as part of his new stress on agriculture, he wants to increase teachers’ salaries by a quarter in order to attract more of them to rural and small-town schools.

It is obvious that the programs described here could prove stressful to large segments of the population, which are already burdened with debt. To reduce the consequent tensions (and also to buy time for reform), the president favors a program to write off penalties for overdue bank loans. This autumn the debts themselves will be forgiven.

Like reformers everywhere, Tokayev rails against his country’s ineffective and corrupt bureaucracy, especially provincial governors and their staffs. Governmental funds for procurement are wasted or stolen. Citizens are saddled with illegitimate fees and payments. Decent people, with no one to whom to turn at the local level, address their complaints directly to the president and ministers. Rarely are responses forthcoming. The country’s administrators, he claims, are “deaf” to the public.

To address these pathologies, the otherwise cautious Tokayev used his Address to the Nation to propose remedies that are strikingly radical. First, he announced that the number of civil servants will be cut by a quarter. Then, in a sharp break with past practice, he called for a thoroughgoing decentralization of the civil administration. He also proposed that local governments at all levels be given more money from the central budget and, at the same time, be granted greater financial independence.

A managed opening to society

How can these sharp changes be prevented from causing a descent into chaos? On the one hand, Tokayev declared that governors must henceforth assume greater responsibility, and at the same time be held strictly accountable for their actions. At a cabinet meeting this past summer he demanded greater openness and transparency from the governors, arguing that the time for their being “local tsars” had passed. And to make sure these changes are actually instituted, Tokayev has proposed to establish a state body to review the handling of all citizens’ complaints to state bodies and hand out rewards and punishments accordingly.

In his Address to the Nation Tokayev advanced the notion of the “Listening State,” which “quickly and efficiently responds to all constructive citizen requests.” He embraced the right of citizens to lodge complaints against the civil administration and set forth a process by which a governor could actually be removed on the basis of citizen complaints. What he does not do is to address the question of what happens when citizens organize themselves to pursue such complaints, or when they create political parties to push their demands at the regional or national level.

He clearly accepts this possibility, however, and has spoken of a greater number of political parties in the lower house of parliament. This body, the Mazhilis, today includes only three parties: the ruling Nur Otan (“Light of the Fatherland”) party with eighty-four seats and the pro-business Ak Zhol (“White Path”) party and the leftist Communist People’s Party of Kazakhstan, with seven deputies each. The president clearly expects all emerging parties to be non-radical and “constructive” and has hinted that groups not meeting this criterion would not be acceptable.

Does this reveal an iron hand in a silk glove? Possibly, but for now Tokayev’s experience with voluntary organizations has been largely positive. When an enormous explosion destroyed much of the southern town of Arys, countless charities emerged nationally and sent food and clothing to the survivors. With the foreign minister himself donating a day’s salary to the suffering townspeople, it appeared an idea collaboration of civic and official initiative. While one may hope that future civil society projects and parties will be similarly welcomed by the government, one must wonder what will happen when they are not. Cautious activism on the world stage

It is clear that the president dreams of a Kazakhstan that is united in deed and word. For now, the country’s official language is Kazakh, with Russian designated as the language of “inter-ethnic communications” and English the world language. In the long term, Tokayev seeks to develop and spread the Kazakh language so that it can become the official language of inter-ethnic communications, with all Kazakh students also studying English. Ethnic Russians now comprise only 20 percent of the population, a figure that is dropping due to high Kazakh birth rates and Slavic emigration. But the president’s expectation of a more united and integrated country is bold by any measure, and will require a mixture of patience and firmness.

Some western pundits have expressed fear that Tokayev’s emergence as President will lead to Kazakhstan’s tilting towards China. While Tokayev speaks Chinese (as well as Russian and English) and was responsible for Kazakhstan’s initial opening to the East, such a fear is groundless. After all, it was Kassym-Jomart Tokayev who, in a book published in 1996, invented the notion of what he called “a multi-vectored” foreign policy—one in which ties with China were used to balance ties with Russia—and it was Tokayev who, a half-decade later, added the United States and Europe to the equation to provide a further balance to the two Eurasian mega-states.

The European Union, which is Kazakhstan’s main trading partner and largest export market, signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Kazakhstan back in 2015 and has recently revised its regional policy as well. Meanwhile, the United States is the number one investor in Kazakhstan (technically behind an offshore Dutch entity) and is issuing a new regional strategy that promises to increase Washington’s commercial and diplomatic engagement with Kazakhstan and the region.

A major goal of Kazakhstan’s strategy since gaining independence has been to open transport corridors to the east, south, and west. To this end, Kazakhstan has made major investments in its own roads, railroads, and ports. These projects are quite independent of China’s Belt and Road initiative. Afghanistan plays a particularly important role in this strategy as it is the key to transport to the Indian sub-continent and southeast Asia. Few are aware of the fact that Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, as foreign minister, was the first Central Asian leader to venture into Afghanistan (in 2005) after the fall of the Taliban and Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country to open a trade mission in Kabul.

This long-term axis of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy dovetails with that of the United States and other coalition members in Afghanistan. It also meshes with the approach of the other Central Asian states, notably Uzbekistan. Indeed, never since independence have interactions between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan been closer or more positive, with ministers, experts, and business leaders interacting on a daily basis. A new dry port is planned for the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan border, which will further open up long-blocked channels of trade.

Kazakhstan became a member of Russia’s Eurasia Economic Union in May 2014, but that has not prevented either Nazarbayev or Tokayev from taking a leadership role in enhancing regional cooperation and coordination within Central Asia. Such thinking has led Tokayev to push for regular meetings of regional presidents, to endorse Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia, and to push for the demilitarization of the Caspian Sea at a time when Russia and Iran have reinforced their naval presence there. Reform, but from above

This, then is a summary of President Tokayev’s strategy as set forth in his Address to the Nation and other statements and actions since his inauguration on June 12, 2019. He confidently predicts that his ambitious program will enable Kazakhstan’s economy to grow by five percent annually by 2025. Yet it is sobriety and caution rather than boldness or raw ambition that are the hallmarks of the new administration in Nur-Sultan.

Tokayev, in his Address to the Nation, spoke bluntly about the fears that underlie his caution. “Explosive, unsystematic political liberalization,” he said, can lead to instability and—in a striking addition—“loss of statehood” (emphasis added). In other words, Tokayev shares Russian President Vladimir Putin’s fear of “color revolutions” yet, unlike Putin, still believes that some steps towards liberalization are important in principle, absolutely necessary, and unavoidable.

Tokayev could have listed further causes of concern: a “hangover” of corruption dating to Soviet times; billionaire fugitives from Kazakh justice who fund anti-government groups and publications; pressures from Russia, with which Kazakhstan shares a 7,000-kilometer border, and China, with its 1,800 kilometer border; and millions of young men and women who, thanks to the Internet, are linked more closely with each other and like-minded people abroad than with their own government.

Aware of these dangers, Tokayev has chosen a strictly top-down approach to reform. On almost every issue it is the government and not society that is to take the initiative. Indeed, the new president seems to have worked out a governmental plan for every problem area, from investment to medicine to sports. Even the effort to control bureaucracy and corruption are assigned mainly to the state itself. The alternative might be to call on society to monitor and constrain corrupt or ineffective bureaucrats. This is what President Shafkat Mirziyoyev has done in Uzbekistan. But, Tokayev might argue, Uzbekistan, with its size and power, the absence of common borders with great powers, and the fact that the first president Karimov died, enabling Tashkent to “turn a page,” all suggest that Kazakhstan must take a more cautious approach.

Kazakhstan may have ample reasons to be cautious, but its step-by-step approach runs the danger of being overtaken by events. One factor mitigating against such a crisis is that the transition of leadership and policy in fact began several years before President Nazarbayev formally stepped down. Those early moves included the first steps towards administrative decentralization and the strengthening of parliament. As a result, the new leadership had ample time to plan strategy, rank priorities, and assemble a team. The same occurred in Uzbekistan, where Mirziyoyev’s thirteen years as prime minister gave him ample time to chart a path forward and identify his key partners. Therefore neither new leader was caught unawares or unprepared.

If President Tokayev persists in his cautious but publicly declared effort to reform and open Kazakhstan’s governmental system, it will doubtless have a significant impact across the region. Indeed, Mirziyoyev’s reforms are already causing notice in all the neighboring countries of Central Asia, including Afghanistan. That the region’s two most developed economies are both advancing reforms and doing so in a state of mutual amity is of major importance. Since the Tokayev reforms are not directed against anyone in particular, major powers have no grounds for playing regional states against each other, as they have so often done in the past. Indeed, countries that consider themselves friends of Kazakhstan should find ways to support the reform process, or at least not to impede it. By doing so they will be helping to unlock the biggest landlocked area on earth and to transform it from a zone of mutually hostile authoritarian states into region of modern, open, and self-governing societies.

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