IPS

INTERVIEWS 12.06.2019

'Tokayev's victory was of course predictable'

After almost 30 years, Kazakhstan has now elected its second president since independence. Christoph Mohr reports

Read this interview in German.

The early presidential elections in Kazakhstan could be described as an extraordinary historical event: a new president was elected for the first time since Kazakhstan's independence. Was Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's victory a foregone conclusion?

Yes. As interim president and designated successor to the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled Kazakhstan for almost thirty years, Tokayev's victory was of course predictable. As a candidate of the ruling party Nur-Otan, he had resources at his disposal that were not available to the other candidates. The largely unknown other candidates remained pale and could not present a new political vision that credibly distinguished itself from the previous administration. The opposition candidate Amirzhan Kossanov, who surprised with almost 16 per cent of the votes, may be the exception.

Tokayev, on the other hand, is a respected politician: he's considered a scandal-free cosmopolitan – he has studied in Russia, speaks Chinese and has worked as a diplomat both in China and for the UN in Geneva. As a former foreign and prime minister of Kazakhstan and chairman of the senate, he has very good contacts in business and politics – and accordingly the political profile. Most importantly, the first President Nursultan Nazarbayev chose him as his successor.

What were the key issues in the election campaign?

An election campaign in the European sense – with TV duels, election campaign appearances and the like – was indeed carried out, but felt more like a simulation. It was not important for the election.

There are, however, issues of high social importance regardless of the election campaign. People ask themselves: will the new president follow in Nursultan Nazarbayev's path? Will everything remain the same?

Politicians need to answer questions about economic diversification, job creation, health care, the housing market in large cities or Kazakhstan's role in the region and the world. The social divide in Kazakh society is widening, although the economy grows. And the question of social justice becomes more and more important.

What's the prevailing mood in society?

President Nursultan steered the country's fortunes for almost three decades. When he unexpectedly announced his resignation, this caused great uncertainty in large sections of society. During his reign, Kazakhstan was particularly successful in the economic sector. His record – especially in the context of the post-Soviet past and its regional neighbours – is quite positive: a relatively broad section of the population was able to participate in socio-economic improvements, at least until a few years ago.

After his resignation, commentators spoke of an awakening of civil society in Kazakhstan. How do you see this?

Nazarbayev's resignation created a sense of optimism among some young, well-educated men and women living in the cities. This was however tarnished by the realisation that the resignation was not a great upheaval, but the initiation of a slow and not yet defined transition process. This led to protests in some large cities. It remains to be seen whether this will actually lead to an "awakening of civil society", as some international observers and journalists have said. The biggest question is certainly how Nazarbayev's "orderly retreat" will continue.

Did the elections take place democratically and without violations of the right to vote?

It's too early to make any reliable statements here. The international election observers must take a stand on this. The OSCE reported that the election was partially irregular and that fundamental rights such as freedom of expression had been violated. The election was also marked by a lack of critical voices and government dominance.

Other observation missions, however, spoke of an orderly process and no undue influence. But the elections were held only 60 days after their announcement. There was very little time to register as a

presidential candidate and to set up an election campaign.

Will the country's foreign policy change under the new president?

There's every indication that the region will regain its geopolitical importance. The major players have recognised this: next to China's commitment and its Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's influence doesn't only lie in history, but also in the Eurasian Economic Union, in the volume of trade and in a similar foreign policy of Kazakhstan and Russia. The European Union has just published a new Central Asia strategy and tries to play a greater role in the region.

As the largest economic player in the region, Kazakhstan wants to secure its supremacy and continue its multi-vectoral foreign policy. Kazakhstan is attempting to manoeuvre between the interests of the major powers and to strike a balance. In this way, it was possible to secure its sovereignty in making political decisions as well as a certain distance. At the same time, it has good relations with Europe and the United States. Kazakhstan is also increasingly seeing itself as an intermediary and mediator in regional and international negotiations. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has his part in crafting this foreign policy. We can assume that he will continue this successful approach for Kazakhstan.

What about domestic policy?

On the domestic front, many experts expect the policy of Tokayev's predecessor to continue at a constant pace. However, how the new president will react to the challenges described above remains to be seen. In the medium term, Tokayev will have to deal with regional and global dynamics and increasingly social and economic difficulties.

This interview was conducted by Olga Vasyltsova.



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