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The straw that broke Kazakhstan's back

The most violent protests of the past 30 years have erupted across Kazakhstan — exposing decades of inequality, injustice, and corruption

Protests of an unprecedented scale have rocked cities across Kazakhstan for days, as the population grew increasingly dissatisfied with the country's leadership. The government initially tried a carrot-and-stick approach to the unrest, but later was pushed to call a state of emergency and ultimately to request military help from former Soviet allies.

On 6 January, foreign troops landed in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, with a mandate from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a NATO-like military alliance that includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. This marked the first official deployment of CSTO forces in the organisation's so-far unassertive existence.

Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called for CSTO countries to send in military help and aid the country's army and special forces in restoring public order. Although temporary and limited in its remit, the CSTO operation could be a cautionary tale regarding the capacity of the Kazakhstani leadership to maintain law and order in the country.

So far, official sources say there are hundreds of casualties, both among law enforcement agents and protesters, thousands were injured in clashes resulting in up to 164 deaths (the number of deaths is currently disputed by the authorities), that lasted multiple days in several cities. More than 6,044 were arrested during the violent confrontation.

The explosive mix of inflation and poverty

The spark that generated such a massive wave of protest originated in the sharp increase of the price of liquified petroleum gas (LPG), a type of fuel that is commonly used in the western regions of the vast Central Asian country. Initially justified by the government as the unintended consequence of a decision to enhance competition in the fuel market, the price inflation was met with street protests in Aktau and Zhanaozen, major cities in the Mangistau region, on 2 and 3 January. Importantly, Mangistau is also one of the main hydrocarbon-producing regions in the country and oil workers often take to the streets when they feel wronged by the companies or the government.

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In 2011, for example, an eight-month strike in Zhanaozen was dispersed violently by special forces and police. Unarmed oil workers were shot and the government declared a state of emergency. In the aftermath, the regime did not allow an independent investigation of the matter and jailed three-dozen civilians, calling them guilty for the clashes that officially resulted in 16 deaths.

Up until the first days of January, 'Zhanaozen' was synonymous with 'tragedy' in Kazakhstan. And it is one of the darkest pages in the country's three decades since independence. Afraid of even uttering the word, most people referred to the killing of oil workers as 'the events'.

This time, however, the protests quickly spread to other urban centres across the country, reaching a peak on 4 January in Almaty, where thousands gathered near a sports arena before moving to the main square. Unsurprisingly, the protesters were met by a mass of special police forces that used tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. The protest continued the next morning with a more belligerent crowd, which set ablaze the city government building and the presidential residence. Fires were reported in other cities as well.

Blind eye towards long-lasting discontent

Drivers in Almaty or the capital Nur-Sultan, however, do not use LPG to fuel their cars, which begs the question: Why did they protest? The answer is political dissatisfaction, which can be summarised in three words: inequality, injustice, and corruption.

After two years of hardship also caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Kazakhstan's socio-economic texture was damaged beyond repair. Inflation and a weak currency accompanied by worsening employment statistics is a recipe for disaster. Four million people lost their jobs during the pandemic, a weaker oil price negatively influenced the Kazakh tenge/US dollar exchange rate, which saw the tenge weaken by 16 per cent in two years.

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While the poor were getting poorer, the rich were getting richer. The Forbes list of billionaires grew from four to seven in 2021. And this does not include the riches accumulated by Tokayev's predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled the country from its independence until his resignation in 2019.

Under Nazarbayev and Tokayev, political reforms lagged behind the people's demands. Rule of law was an arbitrary concept and was considered a systemic cost by trans-national companies who were willing to invest.

A weak set of rules opened a significant space for corruption. The Kazakhstani elite is known for having used offshore vehicles to launder money, for having taking bribes, and for curbing competition in certain market sectors. The LPG market in the west of the country, for example, was rigged, and this was well known.

In 2019 and 2020, the promise of reform that came with the new leader was disattended, and the population reacted with a wave of protests that were once again brutallyrepressed. Already in 2021, an incessant wave of labour protests demonstrated how the government was unable to keep most sectors of the population satisfied.

The geopolitical angle

On 5 January, as tensions grew into urban violence in Almaty, to the south, and Aktobe, in the north of the country, Tokayev sacked and arrested long-time Nazarbayev loyalist Karim Massimov from his post as the chief of the KNB, the successor of the KGB. Tokayev also took charge of the position of head of the National Security Council, a post previously held by Nazarbayev.

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In the meantime, the world had turned its eyes to Central Asia. When Tokayev asked for a deployment of CSTO troops, his legitimacy within the domestic power apparatus fell. It became clear that he needed both the material help and the approval of his neighbours and allies to stay in power.

This scenario seemed to be reasonable for Russia, which sent the first military contingent and equipment to the south of the border. After taking control of strategic logistics assets, such as the Almaty airport, which had been previously seized by protesters, the CSTO soldiers moved into the city and took part in the local army's 'special operation' to quell the protests. While the official explanation rests on the infiltration of 'foreign-trained terrorists', it is more likely that Russia decided to nudge the CSTO towards an intervention given the weakness of the Tokayev regime.

Speculations of a confrontation between great powers, with Russia and China as the neighbouring interested parties, and the West as the herald of democracy and business interests, seem to be premature. It is yet unclear if and how Tokayev would retain power, what kind of concession will he or his successor be willing to make for the people – who still feel dissatisfied, marginalised, and betrayed – and what long-term reforms would be planned to make sure that the violence of January 2022 does not repeat.

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