

# Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev resigns amid mounting political crisis

By David Levine and Clara Weiss  
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In a sign of growing social and political turmoil in Central Asia, Kazakhstan's 78-year-old president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been head of state of the country since its formation out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, announced his immediate resignation on Tuesday, March 19. Kazakhstan is of enormous geostrategic and economic significance. It is the largest country in Central Asia and generates well over half of the region's GDP.

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who had been chairman of the Kazakhstan Senate, the upper house of parliament, was sworn in as president of Kazakhstan on March 20. He is to remain in office until new elections are held next year.

Nazarbayev was for decades a high-ranking functionary of the Stalinist bureaucracy and played a central role in the restoration of capitalism in Kazakhstan, which threw millions into poverty and impelled millions more to emigrate. Among the positions he held were president of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (1990–1991), secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (1979–1984), deputy of the Soviet of the Union of the USSR (1979–1989) and first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (1989–1991).

Nazarbayev's authoritarian regime has been characterized by extreme social inequality, nepotism, corruption and the violent suppression of political and social opposition, involving a rigorous regime of political censorship, as well as a language policy discriminating against non-Kazakh people who previously comprised the majority of the country's population. The Kazakh economy has grown significantly, especially since 2000, largely based on the extraction of the country's vast precious mineral and oil resources. When oil workers in Zhanaozen went on a militant strike in late 2011, Nazarbayev oversaw a police massacre of the striking

workers, with 11 killed and many more wounded.

In his March 19 announcement, Nazarbayev made clear that he plans to remain a key player in Kazakhstan's politics. Nazarbayev will remain the most powerful person in the country for the rest of his life and oversee the process of a reshuffling of power relationships among Kazakhstan's elites.

A 2010 law established Nazarbayev's special status as Yelbasy, "Leader of the Nation" and bestowed upon him the title Halyq Qaharmany, "Hero of the People." Nazarbayev enjoys lifetime immunity from criminal prosecution. The secrecy and inviolability of his own assets and wealth, as well as those of the family members living with him, are guaranteed.

Nazarbayev retains his special status as Yelbasy, and will remain chairman of the Security Council, chairman of the Nur-Otan Party, and a member of the Constitutional Council. He will also remain chairman of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and chairman of the Managing Council of the Samruk Kazyna sovereign wealth fund. The latter company, owned by the state, is the sole or majority shareholder of the national railroad company, the KazMunayGas oil company, the airline Air Astana, and a long list of other key industrial enterprises.

Nazarbayev will thus have veto power over any and all decisions of government, including the power unilaterally to issue decrees with the effect of law, and has special powers that will effectively allow him to make key national economic policy decisions directly, without approval from the government.

In his inaugural address on March 20, Tokayev, the new president, proposed that the Kazakhstan capital city of Astana be renamed as Nur-Sultan in honor of Nazarbayev. The proposal was quickly adopted by the parliament as well as the city council. The central street in Almaty (Alma-Ata), Kazakhstan's largest city, had

already been renamed in Nazarbayev's honor in 2017.

When protests against the decision occurred several days later, the police arrested numerous demonstrators.

Also on March 20, the Senate elected Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, to take over Tokayev's position as chairperson. Nazarbayeva, born in 1963, has had parallel careers in both politics and business and had an estimated wealth of \$595 million as of 2013. Political commentators have suggested her as the most likely successor to take the presidency after the 2020 election.

Nazarbayev did not name a specific reason for his sudden and somewhat unexpected resignation. His health condition is mostly a matter of secrecy, but it is known that he underwent prostate surgery in Germany in 2011. His government has been rocked by crisis recently, with Nazarbayev dismissing all members of his administration on February 21.

Definite political and social conditions point to the broader concerns that underlie the political crisis in Astana and the decision of Nazarbayev to initiate the process of "transitioning" to another president.

First, the country's ruling class, recruited to a high degree from the former Stalinist bureaucracy, is highly sensitive to the international resurgence of working-class struggles throughout the globe, including in Central Asia and the former Soviet Union. Kazakhstan, in particular, has seen a series of strikes and protests over the past few years and in recent months.

Social anger also recently erupted after a fire in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) on February 4 killed five children while their parents were at work. The family had been living in a temporary building heated by an electric heater and a stove. While official public mourning events were held in multiple cities, protests occurred in Astana involving public statements by women with multiple children.

Urzada Uaisova, an Astana resident and mother of six children, was quoted by news agency Interfax.by as saying, "I have been standing in line [for housing] since 2007. Twelve years have passed, and they haven't given us anything yet. They have made some promises, but we just keep getting fooled. Each month, I pay 50,000 tenge (about US\$130) for my housing, and there are costs for coal to heat the home. Why doesn't the state give subsidies for the mothers of multiple children? If they would just let us rent an apartment for 50,000 tenge, we would be happy to pay that if we could later take ownership of the apartment."

Videos of the statements of Uaisova and other women

have been viewed on YouTube hundreds of thousands of times—very significant numbers for a country of just 18 million people and far exceeding the number of views of all the videos containing Nazarbayev's own statement on the event. Later in February, protests took place in several cities demanding the creation of jobs, support for mothers with multiple children, and the resignation of Nazarbayev.

Second, Kazakhstan is engulfed in the crisis generated by the escalating war preparations of US imperialism against Russia and China. The country maintains significant and growing economic ties with China and has long-standing relations with Moscow. China buys about 25 percent of Kazakhstan's oil output and Kazakhstan is the important country for the land route of China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), which is seen by US imperialism as a major geostrategic challenge.

The Carnegie Endowment for Peace and Democracy, an important think tank of US imperialism, noted with concern in May 2018 that "[a]s part of its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is rapidly investing in east-west infrastructure projects across the Central Asian republic that have overshadowed previously launched programs backed by the US and Russia. ... From Beijing's point of view, Kazakhstan, where the BRI was first announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, is a critical element of its fast-growing drive for international influence. It sits in a strategic spot between China and Russia and is far away from potential competing powers including the US and the EU." The article noted that the only way for Astana to counteract Chinese influence was to seek closer cooperation with Russia, but above all the EU.

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