

Interview – Akezhan Kazhegeldin

Written by E-International Relations

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Akezhan Kazhegeldin is a Kazakh politician who served as the second Prime Minister of Kazakhstan from October 1994 until his resignation in October 1997. The Digital Freedom Network credits Kazhegeldin's premiership with the establishment of a 'stable currency, bank system, and privatisation programs which led to growth.' In 1998, he was elected President of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Kazakhstan. Following the publication of his book, *Kazakhstan: The Right to Choose*, differences between Kazhegeldin and President Nazarbayev emerged over his criticisms regarding the political and economic situation in the country. Subsequently, Kazhegeldin's 21st Century Freedom Foundation sponsored amendments to the Kazakh constitution concerning free elections. A campaigner for democracy and human rights in Kazakhstan, Akezhan Kazhegeldin lives in exile in the West. This interview was conducted by Stephen M. Bland.

Following protests in Kazakhstan, the like of which have not been seen since 1986, on Wednesday the 5th of January the government resigned and a two-week state of emergency was declared after the mayor's office and city hall were set ablaze in Almaty. Although these protests were been sparked by a rise in fuel prices, the anger behind them seems to speak to a long-standing discontent with the authorities. What is your take on events?

These were peaceful demonstrations by the Kazakh people – across the country this time, it was massive throughout the regions and cities – people had demands on economic issues and for political reform. Things just kept getting worse, and the slogan was to replace Nazarbayev from every single position he still controlled. Unfortunately, in Almaty, the former capital with a population of over three million, a destructive element got involved on the night of the 4th of January and they compromised the peaceful movement and started attacking state buildings. We believe it was provoked and led by the oligarchs and rich people who were losing their power together with Nazarbayev, including his family and inner circle.

Do you think the protests have been quelled or will remain ongoing?

I hope things will settle down over the next couple of days, and then we'll see what the government is going to do. I hope and I strongly suggest that Mr Tokayev gets back to his office and starts to work with Kazakh citizens and listens carefully to their demands, including the political and economic reforms he promised two and a half years ago. Of course, we understand he was not solely in charge; Nazarbayev was always behind him, and that was not constructive. His destructive influence has been a constant interruption for any decisions by Tokayev, yet Tokayev remained loyal until January 5th, when he took over the whole thing. Right now, we understand that he's in charge, though the situation remains unclear as to what could happen. I hope he will continue to take over and use all the tools at his disposal to bring order and reshuffle the government, starting with law enforcement, the military and the security apparatus. It's time to kick away everybody appointed by Nazarbayev and bring the era of Nazarbayev to an end. It's a shabby end to thirty years of Nazarbayev in power, unfortunately with bloodshed and many people killed, some who participated violently, and some who were completely innocent. Therefore, we believe the investigation by the government which has already begun and is being led by the president is going to be objective, transparent, and the people of Kazakhstan will understand what really happened. We also believe that every single person involved in this attempted coup will be brought into the light and people will understand the role of the inner circle. We don't believe Mr Massimov [the arrested former Security Chief] acted alone. It's almost impossible because the deputy

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next to him is the nephew of Nazarbayev [Samat Abish], the man who looked after him and was in control of Mr Massimov and how he was leading the security agency.

Do you think Nazarbayev is finished now? And do you think he's still in the country or he's fled?

There are a lot of rumours. He's not speaking personally with the nation, and it's not a good time for him to, because he's absolutely out of trust. If he tried to even appear on the TV, he would make the situation much worse. It's time for him just to leave in peace. If Tokayev has given him a guarantee, he must be quiet, settle somewhere, and just shut up. It's time for him to leave.

What have you made of the CSTO troops coming in? Do you think Tokayev has made a deal that he's going to give something to Russia in order to get those "peacekeepers" on the ground?

I don't think so; I don't believe there has been any sort of exchange. I think this treaty – and it's the first time they've used this tool – can also be applied in other cases in other countries. Unfortunately, the treaty says they can help each other in case of an invasion where some third party attacks a member of the organisation, but right now it looks like they're using it more like an auxiliary police service; but there's also clear evidence that Tokayev obviously doesn't trust the Security Service or law enforcement because of what's happened. His order for a State of Emergency was ignored by the Almaty authorities, by the mayor, the head of police, and even by men he appointed to be in charge of the State of Emergency program. So, he can't trust law enforcement or the military services. I understand why he asked the CSTO to come in, but if he asks ask them to leave, let's say in the next couple of weeks when everything has settled down, that will mean he's really in charge and he's responsible. The second event, which convinced me he's really in trouble, is that he asked investigators from Russia to find out what happened. That means he still can't trust his own investigators. And I understand why, because who is supposed to investigate what happened? The head of the National Security Agency is already under arrest, so he can't turn to them. This shows he's in trouble, and the situation is very complicated for him.

Even after this is settled, he has to tackle the economy, which is in a very poor position. A lot of state capital has been stolen by the inner circle, and a large amount of this is in the West, including the United States and the United Kingdom. One of the tasks Tokayev faces is trying to recover these stolen assets to use them to develop the economy. He has very, very big problems. His role right now is like that of a crisis manager.

What have you made of the Western response? It seems a lot of the media coverage has focused on the financial aspect – oil, crypto-currency and Bitcoin Miners – rather than the human cost.

It's quite weird, the reputation our country has. For the last almost ten years, it's been one scandal after another involving a family with a huge corruption scheme, and this has made our reputation very poor, and now it's even worse because there's no political stability. There are no guarantees investing in the Kazakh economy; a couple of days ago, even Chevron stopped pumping oil because of the unrest. The oil workers all walked out demanding a pay rise, because their salary isn't good enough. There's huge corruption, and the revenue isn't coming back into the economy and the budget of the Republic. That's a big part. That revenue is still in the West. What is unfortunate right now is that the authorities in the United States know a large amount of money there belongs to the family, which is hiding it in the United States. They know that and they have the Magnitsky Act and an anti-kleptocracy act. They have executive orders, and three weeks ago Mr Biden announced his program to fight kleptocracy and foreign corruption, and we believe they will step forward and take action and freeze these stolen assets until a new government in Kazakhstan is elected in free and fair elections and requests the return of those assets. Otherwise, this group will continue to loot our economy and nation, and these stolen assets will be used by them to challenge the government again. Who is buying the weapons which were used against the government? It's big money over there. Keep the assets frozen and safe. One day, Kazakhstan will come and demand the money back, but not now, of course.

We had a very disappointing experience with part of the frozen money in Switzerland which the World Bank was trying to use for some projects in Kazakhstan. Four years ago, the United States Congress arranged a hearing and

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found that exactly half of this capital which had been returned to Kazakhstan had been stolen again by the daughter of President Nazarbayev, Dariga. You can find it in the congressional records. It's not rumours or hearsay.

Do you put much weight on the official figures for those killed and arrested [164 and 5,800 as of January 11th], or do you think they're an underestimate?

I can believe that number have been arrested, maybe even more, and I'm afraid the number of people killed is much, much higher. Videos show that some of them were executed, shot in the forehead. It wasn't snipers. When everything is settled, they will start to arrest more people and sentence them, but I think this would be a big mistake for Tokayev, because he's not the king, and he's going to run in the next election, which is going to be a huge challenge for him. He needs to do something really big to change the opinion of the majority of Kazakh people, otherwise it's going to be very hard for him to win. I'm sure people will be very active in the next election. I'm quite sure they will try to control the voting system, but then, the next day, people will come onto the streets to protect their voice. Anything could happen. And then what – can he call for foreign assistance again? No. To win the election, he needs to settle the situation as regards the economy, the financial system and the government, and by 'settle,' I mean reset. It's about two years until the election, and with the stolen capital, a very poor situation with the economy, the pandemic, and big trouble in the global economy, it's not easy to do.

Do you do you think Nazarbayev regrets stepping down and appointing Tokayev president?

Probably the very next morning. For Nazarbayev, power is much bigger than family; bigger than his children or grandchildren. For him, power is a drug, as is money. That is the problem.

What do you think will happen in the next week or two, and who could support or confront Tokayev?

I think Tokayev will believe and trust in the new government to support him, and I suggest he starts to speak to civil society and not be arrogant. He must try to make peace and have a real dialogue with those who took to the streets to protest peacefully and didn't resort to violence. These are the Kazakh citizens who'll be going to the polling stations in the next couple of years, and he must work with them. Of course, I completely agree with him that you must not negotiate with terrorists, but you must negotiate with your citizens. At the end of the day, he's the president and he must return peace and order to Kazakhstan, not only by using the police and the army. I hope after a couple of weeks he'll be able to turn his attention to what to do about the economy. Dealing with the economy isn't just about a government reshuffle or appointing somebody else as prime minister. It's a big issue. He must try to understand why state assets, why the currency reserve of the national bank is abroad right now, why money belonging to the state is in foreign accounts. He tried to get the money in foreign accounts back two and a half years ago, but Nazarbayev didn't allow him to, and this is one of the biggest challenges facing him.

Do you think Tokayev will have the political will to keep people like Massimov behind bars? Massimov and his ilk have an enormous amount of money; do you think if they're released they could make the situation even worse?

It's quite possible; I just want to avoid this. It's been in my mind and I completely agree; I'm just trying to send a positive message to the nation. Of course, anything can happen, and they won't forgive what's happened in the last couple of days. With the situation as it is right now, if he's really in charge, Tokayev must keep his power. A couple of years ago, a Russian journalist said to me it looked like the regime was very stable, the state was strong, and Nazarbayev was powerful. I said to him, nobody and nothing has challenged this system. Now the situation has been challenged, and it's been shown that the system does not exist. It's collapsed and gone. I understand Tokayev is trying to hold on to power by using the neighbours. If the neighbours help him to settle the situation and withdraw on time, they're going to win in the eyes of the public in Western society. They will say, listen, we don't just do bad things, sometimes we do good things, too. We'll see what happens. Power belongs to Tokayev right now, but also to the Kazakh people. The people have proven they're not always so quiet and peaceful, sometimes they can explode. Don't challenge the Kazakh people.

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