

PERSISTENT AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN KAZAKHSTAN

Igor Kotler

Following Nursultan Nazarbayev's resignation in March 2019, Kazakhstan appeared poised for political change. However, the core structures of authoritarianism he had built over nearly three decades remained largely untouched. His successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, assumed office with promises of reform and greater political openness, yet in practice, the government has continued to suppress dissent, restrict media freedom, and exercise tight control over civil society. Despite minor adjustments in rhetoric and leadership style, the post-Nazarbayev era has been marked more by continuity than transformation, with the regime prioritizing stability and the preservation of elite power over substantive democratic change.

On March 19, 2019, President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation. However, his abrupt departure from office did little to alter the country's entrenched political climate. As Luca Anceschi, a Central Asia expert at the University of Glasgow, observed at the time, the resignation did not signal meaningful political change: By exiting the office of the president willingly, Nazarbayev was able to play a central role managing the behind-the-scenes process of determining his successor, especially given the array of powers he will continue to command. This meant that Nazarbayev could still play a substantial role in directing Kazakhstan's future, especially in foreign affairs, where he maintained strategic working relationships with the leaders of the country's powerful neighbors, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. I don't think the system can reinvent itself. Kazakhstan is in an inevitable period of authoritarian decline. The focus of the elite will be on consolidating

power, not liberalizing or reforming the country.¹ Anceschi's prediction was ultimately validated by subsequent developments.

From the very beginning, the formally new regime continued the practices of its predecessor. On May 1, 2019, the government cracked down on protests targeting Nursultan Nazarbayev and his family. Police detained dozens of demonstrators, and a court in the capital issued jail sentences against several of those arrested. Other courts across the country soon followed suit, reinforcing the continuity of authoritarian repression under the new leadership.²



Kazakh police officers detain opposition protesters in Almaty on May 1, 2019.
<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-courts-start-issuing-jail-sentences-against-may-day-protesters/29916164.html>

The presidential election held on June 9, 2019, solidified the power of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who had been appointed interim president by Nursultan Nazarbayev following his resignation. Tokayev's regime quickly demonstrated its continuity with Nazarbayev's authoritarian rule, overseeing an election widely criticized as fraudulent and responding to

¹ Reid Standish. Nazarbayev Is Giving Up Presidency, Not Power, in Kazakhstan. Foreign Policy, March 19, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/nazarbayev-is-giving-up-presidency-not-power-in-kazakhstan/>

² Kazakh Courts Start Issuing Jail Sentences Against May Day Protesters. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 2, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-courts-start-issuing-jail-sentences-against-may-day-protesters/29916164.html>

dissent with mass arrests. According to the country's interior minister, nearly 4,000 people were arrested during protests surrounding the election, with around 700 detained for several days. Demonstrations erupted on election day and continued in the days that followed, as critics denounced what they viewed as a carefully orchestrated transfer of power rather than a genuine democratic process. Police used force to disperse protesters.

Initial official figures significantly underreported the number of arrests, claiming fewer than 1,000, but Interior Minister Erlan Turgumbayev later revealed the higher total. Tokayev, a close ally of Nazarbayev and the former speaker of Kazakhstan's upper house of parliament, won the election with more than 70 percent of the vote, further reinforcing perceptions of a managed and undemocratic succession.



Arrest of a protester. June, 2019.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/kazakhstan-updates-tally-of-protest-arrests-to-nearly-4000/2019/06/18/cec9c562-919f-11e9-956a-88c291ab5c38_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b73498df06e2

At least nine journalists were among those detained during the protests. They later revealed troubling details of the government's heavy-handed response. Pyotr Trotsenko, 33, a reporter for the Kazakh-language service of Radio Free Europe, was arrested while covering election day demonstrations in both the capital, Astana, and Almaty.

Authorities claimed they were unaware the detainees were journalists and insisted none carried media credentials. Trotsenko, however, offered a different account. He stated that police grabbed him from the crowd before he had a chance to show his press ID. “I tried to explain that I was a journalist and had a professional camera with me,” he told the Associated Press. “It was obvious I wasn’t just hanging around taking pictures for fun.” He spent two hours at a police station, where he was questioned about his political views before being released without explanation. The following day, while photographing further arrests, he was threatened by an officer who told him, “If you don’t leave the square, I’ll strangle you.” Freelance journalist Assem Zhapisheva, 30, reported similar intimidation. At an overcrowded detention center, officers questioned her, asking, “Why are you writing bad things about Kazakhstan?”

Such public displays of discontent, especially related to elections, are rare in Kazakhstan, where political opposition is tightly controlled. Information Minister Dauren Abayev, one of the few officials to comment on the protests, acknowledged the demonstrations as evidence that citizens “cannot be indifferent to the election results.” However, he defended the mass detentions, claiming they were necessary to ensure the election proceeded in a “calm environment.”³

In February 2020, protesters took to the streets of Almaty to demand the right to register opposition parties and to speak out against the ongoing harassment and repression of government critics. In response, police, acting under government orders, detained at least 70 participants. The crackdown marked yet another blow to Kazakhstan’s already dismal human rights record, revealing the regime’s deep fear of open dissent and free expression.

³ Kazakhstan updates tally of protest arrests to nearly 4,000. Associated Press, June 18, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/kazakhstan-updates-tally-of-protest-arrests-to-nearly-4000/2019/06/18/cec9c562-919f-11e9-956a-88c291ab5c38_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b73498df06e2

The Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, an opposition movement, became a direct target of this pressure. Facing relentless intimidation and obstruction by authorities, the party was ultimately forced to cancel its founding congress, highlighting the extent to which political pluralism is suppressed in the country.⁴



Detention of a protestor. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/kazakhstan-crackdown-opposition-dashes-hopes-fair-polls-200224065405011.html>

The political crackdown began in mid-March 2020 with the arrest of three activists who were traveling to Almaty, Kazakhstan's most populous city, to attend the congress of the newly formed Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK), led by former journalist Zhanbolat Mamai.⁵ Around the same time, a suspicious act of arson was carried out against the opposition, signaling an escalating campaign by the authorities to suppress political challengers and maintain their firm grip on power.

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⁴ Kazakhstan: Dozens detained in a crackdown on peaceful protest. Amnesty International, February 22, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/kazakhstan-dozens-detained-in-a-crackdown-on-peaceful-protest/>

⁵ Tamila Varshalomidze. Kazakhstan's crackdown on opposition dashes hopes for fair polls. Aljazeera, February 25, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/kazakhstan-crackdown-opposition-dashes-hopes-fair-polls-200224065405011.html>

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In that same month, the United Arab Emirates extradited Rustam Ibragimov, the former managing director of Kazakhstan's BTA Bank, to Kazakh authorities. Ibragimov, who was reportedly connected to opposition leader Mukhtar Ablyazov, residing in France, was placed in a detention facility in Almaty. Ablyazov, a former head of BTA Bank, was wanted by Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine on allegations of embezzling approximately \$5 billion—charges he and his supporters dismissed as politically driven. In 2018, a court sentenced Ablyazov to life in prison in absentia for allegedly orchestrating the 2004 murder of a banker. In a separate 2017 trial held in absentia in Kazakhstan, he was convicted of embezzlement, abuse of power, and forming a criminal group, receiving a 20-year prison sentence. Ablyazov, who coordinated the activities of the banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement from abroad, denied all accusations.⁷



Kazakh police detain a demonstrator during a demonstration called by political opposition groups, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 6, 2020.

⁶ Tamila Varshalomidze. Kazakhstan's crackdown on opposition dashes hopes for fair polls. Aljazeera, February 25, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/kazakhstan-crackdown-opposition-dashes-hopes-fair-polls-200224065405011.html>

⁷ U.A.E. Extradites Ablyazov Associate To Kazakhstan. RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, March 5, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-a-e-extradites-ablyazov-associate-to-kazakhstan/30470257.html>

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/06/kazakhstan-over-100-detained-in-first-protests-since-lockdown-eased>

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, many people in Kazakhstan were so determined to challenge the regime that they continued to take to the streets in protest. On June 6, 2020, more than 100 individuals were detained across Kazakhstan during opposition-led demonstrations. In central Almaty, an AFP journalist witnessed five people being detained, while reports indicated that around 70 others were apprehended in different areas of the city. Radio Free Europe's Kazakh service reported 10 detentions in the capital, Nur-Sultan, and a journalist in the northwestern city of Uralsk estimated that as many as 30 individuals were taken into custody there. "They filled up two jeeps and two buses with protesters, then drove them off," said Raul Uporov, a journalist with the independent newspaper *Uralskaya Nedelya*, speaking to AFP.

The protests had been called by two opposition movements—the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) and the unregistered Democratic Party, co-founded by activist Zhanbolat Mamai. Both groups have reported systemic repression of their members, and Kazakh courts have officially labeled DCK and its affiliate, the Koshe Partiyasi (Party of the Street), as extremist organizations.⁸

In July 2020, the government targeted the opposition once more by sentencing prominent civil rights activist Sanavar Zakirova to one year in prison on charges of causing bodily harm—an accusation she firmly denied.⁹ This appeared to be part of a longstanding tactic of manufacturing charges against dissenters.

⁸ Kazakhstan: Over 100 detained in first protests since lockdown eased. Euronews, June 6, 2020 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/06/kazakhstan-over-100-detained-in-first-protests-since-lockdown-eased>

⁹ Kazakh Civil Rights Activist Gets One Year In Prison For 'Inflicting Bodily Damage'. RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, July 15, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-rights-activist-zakirova-prison-bodily-damage/30727554.html>

Later, on October 24, 2020, police disrupted a peaceful rally in Nur-Sultan held in support of political prisoners, where activists were also selling handmade goods to raise funds for families of detainees. Law enforcement officers declared the event unauthorized and detained several participants. Among those assaulted was journalist Saniya Toiken, a correspondent for Radio Azattyq, the Kazakh branch of U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Toiken later sought medical attention, and doctors documented numerous bruises and injuries to her arms and legs. A photo of the medical report was shared on Facebook by Nazira Darimbet, acting director of the Federation of Equal Journalists of Kazakhstan.¹⁰



Kazakhstan's police officers detain a protester during an opposition rally in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Jan. 10, 2021, as voters in resource-rich Kazakhstan are going to the polls in a parliamentary election lacking any serious opposition. Dozens of activists were detained in at least three major cities, including the capital, Nur-Sultan, and Almaty, with reports of independent observers being denied access or detained at some polling stations. (AP Photo/Vladimir Tretyakov)

¹⁰ Kazakh police assault, injure journalist Saniya Toiken covering protests in Nur-Sultan. Committee to Protect Journalists, October 26, 2020. <https://cpj.org/2020/10/kazakh-police-assault-injure-journalist-saniya-toiken-covering-protests-in-nur-sultan/>

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On February 28, 2021, another protest rally was forcibly broken up in Almaty, resulting in the arrest of approximately 50 demonstrators. Anti-government protests had spread to multiple major cities, with citizens voicing frustration over what they described as systemic political repression in the resource-rich country. In Almaty, police detained many activists before they could gather in a central park, and internet access was reportedly disrupted. As they were forcefully loaded into police vans, some protesters shouted demands for the release of political prisoners.¹³



A protester is detained during a demonstration denouncing what opposition supporters describe as political repression. <https://www.dw.com/en/kazakhstan-dozens-detained-at-opposition-rallies/a-56729190>

¹¹ Protesters Detained for Criticizing Kazakhstan's Vote. Associated Press, January 10, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-01-10/protesters-arrested-for-criticizing-kazakhstans-vote>

¹² Protesters Detained for Criticizing Kazakhstan's Vote. Associated Press, January 10, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-01-10/protesters-arrested-for-criticizing-kazakhstans-vote>

¹³ *Kazakhstan: Dozens detained at opposition rallies.* DW, February 28, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/kazakhstan-dozens-detained-at-opposition-rallies/a-56729190>

In recent years, numerous politicians and activists have fled Kazakhstan, citing fears for their safety and concerns over politically motivated legal actions.¹⁴ On July 2, 2021, a group of activists in Shymkent was detained while calling for the release of political prisoners and the reversal of court decisions that banned two political organizations. In a swift crackdown, a local court sentenced Erlan Faizullaev and Nurzhan Abildaev to 15 days in jail, and fined Ermek Qonyshbaev \$340, citing violations of public assembly laws. All three were on hunger strike at the time. Another supporter, Zhanmurat Ashtaev, was also sentenced to 10 days in jail.¹⁵

Just days later, on July 8, an unsanctioned protest in Almaty against inflation and growing Chinese influence ended in clashes with police. Organized by opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamai, the demonstration was quickly blocked by security forces, resulting in several minor injuries and at least three arrests. Around the same period, several leaders and proposed delegates for a new opposition party were detained ahead of the 2021 parliamentary elections, prompting widespread concern over the lack of political freedoms and the suppression of any movement not sanctioned by the ruling party, which has held power since 1991.¹⁶

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, widely viewed as a political figurehead under the influence of his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev, appeared to continue established patterns of repressing dissent. The unrest that erupted on January 2, 2022, in response to fuel price hikes in Zhanaozen quickly spiraled into a nationwide protest against corruption, political inertia, and

¹⁴ U.A.E. Extradites Ablyazov Associate to Kazakhstan. RFE/RL's Kazakh Service (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), March 5, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-a-e-extradites-ablyazov-associate-to-kazakhstan/30470257.html>

¹⁵ Hunger Strikers Jailed In Kazakhstan Amid Ongoing Crackdown Before Nazarbaev's Birthday. RFE/RL's Kazakh Service (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), July 2, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-activists-jailed-detained/31337743.html>

¹⁶ Kazakh Police Break Up Protest Over Rising Inflation, Chinese Investment. July 6, 2021. RFE/RL's Kazakh Service (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), July 6, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-democratic-party-protest/31344232.html>

social inequality. The demonstrations escalated into violent confrontations, resulting in at least 238 deaths, including 19 security personnel, and left major cities ravaged.¹⁷

Exiled businessman Mukhtar Ablyazov, founder of the banned opposition group Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK), played a significant role in rallying dissent through online platforms.¹⁸ In January 2022, Ablyazov urged Western nations to intervene, warning that without international support, Kazakhstan risked becoming another Belarus under Russia's expanding influence.¹⁹ His message added further momentum to the public uprising.

The violence in Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital and still its business and cultural hub, shocked just about everyone — not only its leader, who, fortified by Russian troops, ordered security forces to “fire without warning” to restore order, but also government critics who have long bridled at repression and rampant corruption in the oil-rich nation.

The crisis coincided with a power struggle within the government, fueling talk that the people fighting in the streets were proxies for feuding factions of the political elite. On January 8, 2022, in what appeared to be another sign of political infighting, Kazakhstan's powerful intelligence agency said that it had arrested Karim Masimov, who only days earlier was the agency's leader, on suspicion of treason.²⁰

In November 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was reelected in Kazakhstan. Officially, he received 81.3 percent of vote. Voter turnout in Kazakhstan's snap election was 69.44%, with five other candidates scoring in the low single digits, data showed. Voters' second

¹⁷ Police In Almaty Detain Demonstrators Gathered For Anti-Government Rally. Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, May 1, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-rally-arrests-ablyazov/32387240.html>

¹⁸ Police In Almaty Detain Demonstrators Gathered For Anti-Government Rally. Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, May 1, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-rally-arrests-ablyazov/32387240.html>

¹⁹ Guy Faulconbridge. West must stand up to Russia in Kazakhstan, opposition leader says. Reuters, January 7, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-west-must-stand-up-russia-kazakhstan-dissident-former-banker-says-2022-01-07/>

²⁰ Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew Higgins. In Kazakhstan's Street Battles, Signs of Elites Fighting Each Other. The New York Times, Published January 7, 2022; updated January 10, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/world/asia/kazakhstan-protests.html>

most popular choice was "against everyone", with 5.8% of ballots.²¹ President Tokayev showed that he consolidated power in his hand and there is no one who could challenged. The elections proved that one dictator replaced another one.

The government intensified its attack on the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) after the January 2022 events. Police in Almaty on May 1, 2023 detained about a dozen people at an opposition rally called by fugitive Kazakh oligarch and opposition politician leader Mukhtar Ablyazov. Demonstrations were held on May 1 in other cities in Kazakhstan after civil activists announced peaceful rallies in support of Ukraine and Kazakhstan's withdrawal from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in which Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are also members. Applications filed by some activists for peaceful assemblies on May 1 were refused by authorities citing other events and incomplete information on applications for rallies. One human rights group reported police surveillance of civil activists in different Kazakh cities, and some activists reportedly were detained or summoned to the police department.²²

The regime in Kazakhstan is going forward unchanged. The KNB, police and other law enforcement agencies protect the regime. Torture remains endemic in the practices.²³ The old apparatus and the ruling elite continue to keep and consolidate power and there is no prospect for any democratic changes in the foreseen future.

Following the civil unrest in 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev implemented a combination of harsh crackdowns and promised reforms. However, tangible

²¹ Kazakh President Tokayev wins re-election with 81.3% of vote. Reuters, November 21, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tokayev-wins-kazakh-presidential-election-with-813-vote-2022-11-21/>

²² Police In Almaty Detain Demonstrators Gathered For Anti-Government Rally. Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, May 1, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-rally-arrests-ablyazov/32387240.html>

²³ Malika Toqyadi. Kazakhstan: Executive Summary. Freedom House, 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/nations-transit/2020>

change in Kazakhstan remains elusive. Tokayev's promises are unlikely to lead to systemic change, as genuine democratic reforms would threaten Kazakhstan's authoritarian system, which primarily benefits Tokayev and his inner circle. In fact, Tokayev's regime has mastered the art of creating the appearance of change without implementing meaningful reforms. Ambitious concepts, such as the notion of a "new Kazakhstan," have proven to be little more than attempts to mask the void left by years of political stagnation.

Initially perceived as modest and pliable, Tokayev has transformed into a classic autocratic patriarch, with indications that his regime may grow even more authoritarian. In 2023, opposition activist Marat Zhylyanbayev was sentenced to seven years in prison for allegedly "financing an extremist organization." Similarly, journalist and activist Duman Mukhammedkarim, who gained popularity after the 2022 unrest, received a seven-year prison sentence for the same charge in 2024. Meanwhile, Janbolat Mamai, leader of the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, was given a six-year suspended sentence in 2023 for "organizing mass unrest" and prohibited from participating in any public activities. With Tokayev successfully consolidating his authority, he seems increasingly willing to impose stricter control. Fear and disillusionment have driven society into a state of widespread apathy.²⁴

Authoritarianism in Kazakhstan is defined by the consolidation of power around President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and his inner circle, along with the systematic suppression of dissenting voices. Despite projecting an image of reform and modernization, the government has failed to implement genuine democratic changes, instead resorting to swift and severe measures against any form of political opposition. Activists, independent journalists, and opposition

²⁴ Aliya Tlegenova and Serik Beysembaev. Have President Tokayev's Reforms Delivered a "New Kazakhstan"? CarnegiePolitika, September 18, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/09/tokayev-kazakhstan-reforms?lang=en>

figures frequently endure harassment, arbitrary detention, and severe prison sentences under broad accusations such as "inciting unrest" or "supporting extremism," which serve as tools to silence criticism. This relentless crackdown has fostered an atmosphere of fear and widespread apathy, deterring public resistance. The regime's authoritarian control guarantees its continued dominance but extinguishes any prospects for authentic political diversity or civil freedoms.

In the 2019 annual report issued by Freedom House, an independent human rights organization, Kazakhstan is assigned 23 on a scale of 1 to 100, with 1 representing the lowest level of freedom.²⁵ In 2024 it was standing at the same 23rd place.²⁶

The curtailment of civil liberties and human rights in Kazakhstan is particularly apparent in the regime's handling of public uprisings. For example, during the January 2022 demonstrations, which arose from economic hardships and mounting discontent over corruption, security personnel responded with ruthless force, employing live rounds against protestors. Hundreds were killed or injured, and thousands were detained, many of whom later reported enduring torture and inhumane conditions while in custody. Despite widespread international condemnation, the Kazakh authorities have declined to permit independent inquiries into these events, further underscoring their disregard for human rights. As Kazakhstan's authoritarian rule continues to deepen, the absence of accountability and the ongoing crackdown on opposition voices raise profound concerns about the nation's democratic future and the state of human rights.

Overall, Kazakhstan's political system is widely viewed as authoritarian due to its consistent efforts to silence opposition, centralize authority, and limit genuine civic engagement. Power is heavily concentrated in the presidency and supported by loyal security and

²⁵ Annual Report. Freedom House, 2019 <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

²⁶ Annual Report. Freedom House, 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2024>

administrative structures, which exert strong influence over the judiciary, legislature, and media. Dissenting voices are routinely suppressed, and political opponents are often disqualified, intimidated, or absorbed into the ruling apparatus. Electoral processes lack competitiveness and transparency. Civil society organizations operate under restrictive laws, face constant monitoring, and risk severe consequences for holding protests or voicing criticism. As a result, democratic principles are eroded, and the general public remains largely excluded from meaningful political participation.

May 29, 2025