The Perils of the Autocratic Developmental State
Leadership and Presidential Succession in Kazakhstan

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Leadership, Autocracy, Stability, and Development in Central Asia

The former Soviet states of Central Asia are one place in the world where politics is almost all about leadership. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the leaders of these countries are autocrats who rely heavily on personal power to steer the course of their states. Kyrgyzstan only recently broke out of this autocratic model to form a parliamentary system after two successive popular ousters of authoritarian presidents. The other four Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—show little intention of following Kyrgyzstan’s lead by abandoning powerful, autocratic presidential systems in favor of more pluralistic models of governance.

In the case of the region’s four authoritarian states, political leadership has proven itself at least capable enough to prevent state failure, protracted conflict, or economic collapse. While such accomplishments only meet a very low bar of good governance and leadership, they appear to satisfy many Central Asians, who fear radical change and cherish stability following the fall of the Soviet Union. The leaders of these states perpetuate this attitude among their citizens by suggesting through their speeches and via the media that strong-armed leadership is paramount to stability in their respective countries and that political change is likely to bring chaos. Kazakhstan’s president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has been particularly successful in promoting this idea, continually suggesting that his leadership has been the key to the country’s stability and success. In campaigning for elections last year, in which he won over 95 percent of the vote, he simply made his candidacy synonymous with stability, noting, “I am confident Kazakhstani will vote for stability in our state, to support the policy our country has so far been following under my leadership.”

These narratives of autocratic stability dovetail nicely with the “developmental state” theory popular among economists and social scientists studying emerging economies. Since the rise of the “Asian Tigers” in the 1980s, numerous social scientists have advocated for an authoritarian “developmental state” model in developing countries. These scholars argue that an autocratically well-run state focused on facilitating development can push through reforms and establish an enabling environment for rapid economic growth—without the messiness of political competition and populist policies. While these assertions make sense theoretically, they require leaders with benevolent intentions and a vision for their countries’ development—leadership qualities that are not easy to find.

It is difficult to argue that the authoritarian “developmental state” model inherently outperforms a democracy when comparing autocratic Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to democratic Kyrgyzstan. These four countries all rank as “medium human development” on the United Nation’s Human Development Index (HDI), suggesting that their overall level of development is comparable. Still, they are qualitatively quite different, in regards to both their level of development and their civil liberties. Tajikistan remains the region’s least developed country, and its quality of life measured via virtually any metric is poorer than that in Kyrgyzstan. While gross domestic product (GDP) figures for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are significantly greater than those for Kyrgyzstan, these two autocracies’ wealth, which depends heavily upon natural resources, is poorly distributed and accumulated alongside extreme political repression and human rights violations. Thus, despite their larger economies, it is difficult to argue that either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan has witnessed more favorable development than Kyrgyzstan, especially if seen through the prism of Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach to development.

If the authoritarian “developmental state” argument is not strongly supported by the examples of Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, it appears much more salient when comparing Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan stands out from the rest of the states in the region in terms of overall development. If the other four Central Asian states have been relatively stable since the fall of the Soviet Union, their general development trajectory appears to lack vision and remains unpredictable. In contrast, Kazakhstan’s development appears to build on the country’s strengths and is driven by a vision for its future. While Kyrgyzstan’s liberal political system offers its citizens more input on governance issues, Kazakhstan’s government is far more efficient.

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3 See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). Sen expands on traditional economic development, positing that development necessarily involves freedoms such as political freedoms, freedom of opportunity, and freedom from abject poverty.
Furthermore, despite its lack of political liberalism, Kazakhstan does have a high level of economic liberalism; Kazakhstan provides citizens with opportunities to pursue a variety of development paths which are not available to Kyrgyzstani citizens given their country’s poor overall economy. Furthermore, while Kazakhstan controls information about internal political debates, it encourages its citizens to obtain high quality education and to develop critical thinking skills, which ultimately enhance their capabilities to guide their own development.4

In short, Kazakhstan’s experience appears to support the argument that a non-liberal “developmental state” model can be optimal for emerging economies if it is open enough to provide citizens with certain liberties. Even citizens in the more democratic Kyrgyzstan look to Kazakhstan’s economy as an example of what a post-Soviet state can accomplish. Although Kazakhstan’s success is largely due to the country’s natural resource wealth, which Kyrgyzstan lacks, its political leadership also deserves credit for managing those resources intelligently. However, Kazakhstan’s autocratic-led “developmental state” model is heavily dependent upon its present leadership and therefore not sustainable over the long-term. In fact, despite being the most successful state in the region in terms of development, Kazakhstan may ironically be the country in Central Asia that is most vulnerable to instability as it prepares to pass the mantle of leadership for its “developmental state” to a new personality.

Kazakhstan and the Developmental State Model

President Nazarbayev has proven to be an extremely skilled leader who has drawn on “developmental state” examples from East Asia, including Singapore and Malaysia. He has established a diverse group of foreign investors in the country, carefully avoiding dependence on any single economic power. Nazarbayev has also cultivated a class of technocrats in the spheres of finance and international economics, and, while he ensures his closest associates benefit the most from Kazakhstan’s economy, his policies have facilitated the establishment a largely merit-based middle class of entrepreneurs and professionals. Additionally, he has helped build relatively strong state institutions and populated them with a mostly professional cadre of civil servants. Finally, he has recently sought to further copy Singapore’s success in building human capital by establishing state-sponsored, elite educational institutions and welcoming highly skilled foreign specialists to work in Kazakhstan. These policies have helped Kazakhstan lead Central Asia and most of the former Soviet Union outside the Baltic states in nearly every indicator of development.5

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5 Kazakhstan leads Central Asia and most of the former Soviet Union outside the Baltic states in GDP per capita, GNI, and the Human Development Index. Kazakhstan also boasts high rankings in the World Bank’s “Doing Business” index and, according to the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, has the second most effective governance and is the third most stable state in the former Soviet space outside the Baltics.
Kazakhstan only significantly lags behind a number of its post-Soviet neighbors in the areas of political freedoms and civil liberties. According to Freedom House, Kazakhstan falls behind over half of the post-Soviet states in these categories, including the Baltic States, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. However, it is noteworthy that even in such areas of political development, Kazakhstan ranks slightly better than all of the other post-Soviet autocracies. The relative liberalism that positions Kazakhstan as “more free” than other post-Soviet autocracies is part and parcel of the country’s economic success as a “developmental state” in the age of neo-liberalism and globalization.

If these indicators suggest that Kazakhstan presents an excellent example of how an authoritarian “developmental state” model can spur development in the post-Soviet context, they suggest little about the sustainability of this development. The country’s success is largely due to Nazarbayev’s leadership, and, while he shows no signs of stepping down from power, the seventy-five-year-old leader cannot live forever. The sustainability of the successes achieved by Nazarbayev will depend upon his successor, raising obvious concerns regarding that person’s leadership qualities and capacity. However, given that Kazakhstan has not facilitated a change in leadership since its independence from the Soviet Union, I would argue that Kazakhstan faces an even larger dilemma regarding presidential succession: uncertainty about how Nazarbayev’s successor will be chosen.

The “Black Box” of Kazakhstan’s Presidential Succession

Nazarbayev is the only president to have held office in an independent Kazakhstan. Despite a constitutional stipulation of a maximum of two presidential terms, Nazarbayev is now in either his fifth or sixth term, depending upon how one interprets “presidential terms” in Kazakhstan. While “loopholes” in the constitution first facilitated his additional terms, a 2007 law determined that, as the country’s first leader, Nazarbayev would not be subject to term limits. While this law appears to allow Nazarbayev to remain in office for life, it also paves the way for him to step down graciously while alive. First, it protects Kazakhstan’s first president from any legal repercussions for his actions while in office. Second, it gives him the right to appoint his successor. Finally, it outlines a special role for him as advisor to any successor in the event that he does step down. In short, this law appears to be tailored in a way that explicitly facilitates a “golden parachute” departure scenario for Nazarbayev.

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7 The post-Soviet autocracies include Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan; Ibid.
Soviet autocratic regimes, which have successfully appointed successors. In particular, citizens of Kazakhstan have long speculated that Nazarbayev would adopt one of two models—drawn from either Azerbaijan or Russia—for a managed succession.

The Azerbaijan model is drawn from the experience of that country’s first president, Heydar Aliev, who installed his son as successor shortly before his death. The Russia model is based on the events surrounding Boris Yeltsin’s alleged appointment of Vladimir Putin as his successor prior to stepping down. However, there are good reasons to be skeptical of the expectation that Kazakhstan would be able to replicate either of these scenarios. First, Nazarbayev does not have a legitimate male heir as did Azerbaijan’s Aliev, and it is unclear whether one of his daughters would be supported in Kazakhstan’s relatively patriarchal society. Second, Nazarbayev shows no immediate intention of stepping down from the presidency, and he demonstrates few signs of favoritism towards any particular political figure as an obvious successor. Finally, Nazarbayev’s most recent election has him scheduled to be in office until 2020—when he will be eighty years old.9 While this situation does not ensure that Nazarbayev will serve as president until his death, it does increase the odds that this will be the case.

Kazakhstan’s constitution prescribes an orderly procedure for presidential succession if Nazarbayev were to die in office. According to Article 48 of the Constitution, in the event of the premature discharge or death of the country’s president, the chairperson of the Senate should fulfill the remaining presidential term.10 Once that term has ended, regular presidential elections are to be held to determine who takes over the office of president. However, there is little reason to expect that these procedures will actually be followed given the country’s history of circumventing the constitution and rule of law for political purposes.11

Due to frequent manipulation of the constitution and other laws related to elections, Kazakhstan has never held a free and fair competitive election that meets international standards, and it would be hard-pressed to implement such elections even if the political will to do so existed. In short, given the precedent set by Nazarbayev in the political manipulation of the constitution and state legislation, there is little reason to believe that others would follow these prescribed “rules of the game” once Nazarbayev leaves the scene.

Since a strictly constitutional and democratic change of leadership in Kazakhstan is unlikely, many await a succession scenario that involves negotiations among the country’s

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9 Nazarbayev allegedly received 98 percent of the vote in the most recent election. See “Kazakhstan’s Strongman Leader Re-elected with 97.7% amid Record Voter Turnout,” Reuters, April 27, 2015.
11 For example, the constitution’s stipulation that Kazakhstan’s president can only serve two consecutive terms has been circumvented in a variety of ways to allow Nazarbayev to remain president for the last twenty-four years. The government has also manipulated laws to suppress political opposition, disqualify candidates, and change the timing of presidential elections.
elites. In Turkmenistan, for example, a new leader essentially emerged without much explanation, quietly circumventing that country’s constitutional stipulations for such a succession. It is generally assumed that Turkmenistan’s new leader, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, was chosen through elite negotiations, but the process was certainly not transparent. Turkmenistan’s succession was at least peaceful, smooth, and without crisis. For this reason, one might suggest that Kazakhstan can also weather a smooth, elite-managed transition in its presidency that does not disrupt the country’s “developmental state” model and keeps the economy on track.

However, Kazakhstan also differs markedly from Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan’s population, for example, is over three times larger in comparison. Furthermore, Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society with a small and tightly knit elite stratum, which must collude to facilitate the country’s insular natural gas-driven economy that supports their wealth and power. By contrast, Kazakhstan’s elite population is larger in size and more diverse in its economic interests, and its wealth is not as dependent upon the country’s internal political economy as much as it is tied to the wider global economy. In this sense, there is more competition among Kazakhstan’s elite, and its members may perceive less risk to getting involved in a power struggle for the presidency given their economic resources outside the country.

These factors suggest that Kazakhstan’s presidential succession process remains a completely unpredictable “black box.” It is possible that Nazarbayev will choose a successor in the near future and manage his succession while he is still alive. It is also plausible that his health will remain excellent, and he will serve as president for another two decades. However, there is a third possibility, in which he remains president until he passes away sometime in the next several years. If that were to happen, it may lead to an unpredictable process of elite negotiation that could easily devolve into a power struggle between the wealthiest and most powerful people in the country, including those within Nazarbayev’s own family. The uncertainty around this process is disconcerting, but the situation is further compounded by the country’s present economic situation and increasingly precarious geopolitical position.

Perils of Presidential Succession in Kazakhstan in the Present Geopolitical Moment

Despite the ambiguity regarding the process of presidential succession in Kazakhstan, there is hope that the country’s elites would rise above their personal interests and peacefully negotiate a new system of political power in a post-Nazarbayev state. After all, Kazakhstan’s diverse and relatively robust elite stratum does share a common interest in the continued success of their country. That said, at the present historical moment, there are additional stresses that could prevent a smooth elite-negotiated

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succession process in Kazakhstan.

First, the country is facing perhaps its gravest economic crisis to date, propelled by the low price of oil internationally and the impact of Western sanctions on Russia, to whom Kazakhstan is inextricably linked by its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Kazakhstan remains extremely dependent upon its oil exports, but its energy sector is running a large deficit in contrast to generating a substantial surplus only a year ago. Its foreign currency reserves are being depleted, and its industrial sector is experiencing difficulties competing with Russian companies. This situation has led to a rapid 40 percent devaluation of the country’s currency, creating serious stresses in the local consumer market and financial anxiety among the population writ large.\textsuperscript{13} In his capacity as the leader of a “developmental state,” Nazarbayev has responded to this crisis by undertaking a massive privatization of state enterprises to, hopefully, attract foreign investors and generate needed capital for the country’s economy. However, international analysts remain skeptical that this plan will succeed.\textsuperscript{14}

Kazakhstan’s deteriorating economic situation is likely to lead to substantial social discontent as the population struggles with almost inevitable inflation and a resultant drop in their standard of living. While Kazakhstan may be able to weather this crisis if global oil prices rise and Nazarbayev generates capital from his privatization plan, resolution of the crisis would be seriously disrupted by a sudden need to manage presidential succession. If Nazarbayev were to unexpectedly depart from the scene in the midst of managing the present economic crisis, one would anticipate a lack of consensus within the country’s elite regarding to how to remedy Kazakhstan’s financial woes. This situation, in turn, could generate a prolonged and vicious power struggle to determine new leadership for the country, which could even mobilize segments of the population that are experiencing significant economic stresses. The instability resulting from such a scenario is unpredictable without clear “rules of the game.”

Second, and perhaps more ominously, a power struggle may not only be propelled by rival oligarchs and politically powerful people within Kazakhstan, but also aggravated by external influence. One of Nazarbayev’s most important policy successes has been balancing Kazakhstan’s international political and economic partners. As a country situated between Russia and China, Kazakhstan has established strong relations with both of these global powers, while also courting substantial interest from Europe and the United States. This approach to foreign policy, which Nazarbayev has called “multi-vectorism,” has helped balance Kazakhstan’s foreign investment and allowed the country to avoid dependence upon any one powerful neighbor. While Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector” foreign policy affords it the ability to avoid outright dependence on

\textsuperscript{13} Nariman Gizitdinov,”Devaluation Nightmare Haunts Kazakh Banker Over Tenge Legacy,”\textit{Bloomberg}, October 29, 2015.

\textsuperscript{14} For a thorough analysis of Kazakhstan’s economic crisis at the time of the writing of this article, see \textit{Stratfor}, “Kazakhstan Confronts Economic Uncertainty,” December 1, 2015, https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kazakhstan-confronts-economic-uncertainty.
Russia, Nazarbayev makes clear that he will not abandon his loyalty to Moscow.\(^{15}\) In this context, the outcome of Kazakhstan’s presidential succession could have critical implications for Russia. If Nazarbayev’s successor fails to display his same loyalty to Moscow, it could be devastating to Russia, particularly given the present international isolation of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, if Kazakhstan’s second president is more subservient to Moscow than his predecessor—perhaps abandoning the “multi-vector” foreign policy approach in favor of dependence on Russia—it would be even more advantageous to Russia. As a result, there exist significant incentives for Russia to have a hand in who succeeds Nazarbayev. For Europe, the United States, and China, there would be far less interest in either influencing Kazakhstan’s succession or reacting to Russia exerting undue influence on the process. As a result, Russia has both the incentives and capacity to interfere in Kazakhstan’s succession with impunity.

Those in Kazakhstan who assume Russia is a source of stability in the region might actually welcome Moscow’s interference in its succession process, but others, including ethnic Kazakh nationalists and those with pro-Western sentiments, might resist Russian involvement. In this context, one would expect that Russian interference in the succession process could further aggravate a nascent power struggle and increase the likelihood of instability in the country. In fact, one could even imagine that Russia might interfere militarily to support Kazakhstan’s ethnic Russian population—as it has done in Ukraine—if it sensed that other avenues to influence the succession process were closed.

Thus, due to the present economic and geopolitical climate, Kazakhstan would face numerous challenges if it were required to manage a post-Nazarbayev presidential transition in the near future. This is not to say that Kazakhstan is facing an imminent political crisis, but—in the event of an unplanned succession—there is enough uncertainty, as well as internal and external factors, to possibly destabilize the country. Kazakhstan has the human capital and institutions to avert such a succession crisis, but it would also require leadership from Nursultan Nazarbayev himself. The question that remains is whether Nazarbayev has the leadership capacity and vision to change the conditions under which his successor is chosen in order to put his country on a path to more sustainable development.

**Conclusion: Leading the Transition from a “Developmental State” to a Democracy**

This essay has sought to demonstrate why Kazakhstan’s “developmental state” model of governance has been successful to date, but also why it remains unsustainable and vulnerable to a potential downward spiral of instability resulting from a succession crisis. In opposition to this argument, it is noteworthy that there are few examples of authoritarian leaders of “developmental states” leaving their countries in disarray after

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dying in office. Rather, the downfall of most autocrat-led developmental states has resulted from leaders who have stayed in office too long prior to passing away, leading to entrenched corruption within the elite and the leaders’ ouster by popular political movements. In Tunisia and Indonesia, for example, the extended rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Suharto, respectively, eventually led to a squandering of many of the developmental gains these leaders had ushered in earlier in their reigns and ultimately led to the downfall of their regimes.16

Thus, even if Nazarbayev does not pass away in the next several years, historical precedent suggests that he would face difficulties maintaining his concentrated power for too far into the future. I would argue that this is an almost universal problem for authoritarian “developmental states.” The vision and discipline of a single capable leader can jump-start a country’s development and result in economic growth; however, such autocratic leadership must eventually give way to more pluralistic forms of governance if the state is to maintain sustainable growth, particularly as development broadens the capabilities of the citizenry writ large. While some might suggest that China presently provides a counter-example to such a progression from autocratic developmental statehood to democracy, it should be remembered that the People’s Republic of China is not led by a single personality, but by the corporatist body of the Communist Party. Although Nazarbayev is attempting to replicate such a corporate style of leadership in his Nur-Otan mega-party, this party is built around his personality rather than around a durable ideology, and thus could easily dissolve with his death.

However, there may be a way for Nazarbayev himself to lead the transition from his autocratic style of benevolent despotism to a more pluralistic democratic model capable of sustaining Kazakhstan’s impressive development record. The question of whether he has the capacity to manage such a transition will ultimately determine his historical legacy as a leader. First, he could allow functional opposition political parties to develop in the country, permitting them to freely compete in the next parliamentary elections. Second, he could allow the establishment of truly independent television stations to cultivate a more vibrant political debate about Kazakhstan’s future development trajectory. Finally, he could appoint a successor, whose time in office would be limited to one five-year term while he or she oversees political reforms with Nazarbayev as advisor.

To be successful, such reforms do not need to follow a democracy model based on American liberalism. The country could choose from manifold paths towards more pluralistic governance, which provide varying balances between the powers of the parliament, the president, and other state structures. Regardless of the form of governance

16 In Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali led the country through a period of unprecedented economic development, but state corruption prevented the full population from benefiting from these achievements, and he was deposed by a popular “revolution” in 2011 after twenty-four years in office. Similarly, Suharto helped to industrialize and develop Indonesia, but his regime’s systemic corruption and the impact of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis on the country’s economy eventually led to a popular “revolution” that deposed him in 1998 after thirty-one years as president.

[80] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
Kazakhstan might choose, it will be critical that the nation not invest its entire future in a single personality. While such authoritarian leadership has helped the country to develop over the last twenty-four years, the likelihood that Kazakhstan could find another leader as capable as Nazarbayev to continue this trend is unpredictable.

In this sense, Kazakhstan stands at a critical crossroads in its history—one that will likely determine its future development trajectory. While the political reforms suggested above would indeed be radical for the country, as well as for the former Soviet Union more generally, Nazarbayev presently has the political capital to carry them out. The remaining question is whether he has the leadership qualities to do so, thus securing his legacy as the true “father of the nation” he aspires to be. If not, there is a strong likelihood that Kazakhstan’s substantial developmental success to date could be squandered and become merely a part of the historical memory. In turn, Nazarbayev’s legacy would likely resemble those of Ben Ali and Suharto, who will be more remembered for their inability to let go of control over their countries than for their developmental achievements.

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