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Kazakhstan: End of an Era?

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The resignation of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev on 19 March 2019, after almost 30 years in power, is unlikely to lead to a power struggle or political instability. If anything, it heralds the start of a planned process of power transition.

COMMENTARY

IN A surprise move, President Nazarbayev announced on 19 March 2019 that he was stepping down from his post. He also announced that the Chairman of the Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, would take over as head of state until presidential elections are held. The polls are scheduled to be held in December 2020.

Tokayev, who is said to be close to the former president, has always been seen as a possible successor. He has impeccable credentials, having been prime minister and foreign minister. Nazarbayev and Tokayev appeared together in a public event on 21 March 2019, as shown on the nation-wide Russian TV channel, Rossia 24, in a probably calculated show of unity at the top. But whether Tokayev would prevail in the December 2020 elections remains to be seen.

Contenders for Presidency

Other possible contenders include Karim Massimov, also a former premier; Imangali Tasmagambetov, another former premier, mayor of Almaty and Astana (the former and current capitals of the country), deputy premier and minister of defence and the current Kazakh Ambassador to Russia; and even Nazarbayev's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, according to various well-placed sources and media reports.

Who will step forward and declare his/her candidacy for the presidency will become clear in the course of the year and will need Nazarbayev's endorsement to ensure

success at the polls. Dariga's political ambition is well known but her father has not shown a particular preference for the daughter as she is politically controversial and not seen as a consensus builder.

Indeed, Nazarbayev remains powerful; his resignation does not portend the end of his political career or powerful political influence. Rather, it marks the start of a planned transition of power transfer. That was made clear in his resignation speech when he stressed that he would continue playing a role in determining the future of the nation.

Leader of the Nation for Life

Furthermore, Nazarbayev is widely considered the father of the nation, having run the country since 1989 when it was still a Soviet Republic. However, in resigning while he was at the peak of his power, it is clear that Nazarbayev does not want to be associated with other Central Asian power-holders.

The presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Islam Karimov and Saparmurat Niyazov, both died in office and had ascended to power during the Soviet period too, like Nazarbayev. His legacy will not be allowed to be tainted with allegations of power abuse.

The fact that Nazarbayev continues to lead the powerful Security Council, which he is entitled to do for life and remains Chairman of the dominant political party, Nur Otan, ensures that his political influence will remain uncontested.

He also holds the title of Leader of the Nation for life, a position which gives him immunity from prosecution and a supervisory role over policy-making, according to an article dated 19 March 2019 by Leonid Bershidsky, a well-informed Russian observer who is Bloomberg Opinion's Europe columnist.

Foreign Relations

As his massive country (the ninth largest in the world) occupies an important geographic position between China and Russia, Nazarbayev has carefully maintained good relations with both powers, for economic gain and political stability. Kazakhstan's top import and export destinations are China, followed by Russia.

Politically and geostrategically however, Russia looms large in Kazakhstan since ethnic Russians constitute a large minority (about 23%) and both countries are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). For Russia, Kazakhstan is also a key player in Russia's efforts to strengthen the integration of the former Soviet space into a Greater Eurasia. The EAEU is part of this policy.

Given China's need for energy, Kazakhstan, whose main exports are oil and gas related, cannot afford to ignore the Chinese market. Kazakhstan is expected to double its gas exports to China in 2019, to 10 billion cubic metres from 5 billion cubic metres in 2018. It is also a crucial partner of China's Belt and Road Initiative, given its key geographic position.

Hence, Nazarbayev's successor can be expected not to alter the entrenched

dynamics built up and consolidated by him with respect to maintaining good, strong and balanced links with Kazakhstan's powerful neighbours.

Implications for Singapore

Singapore has always enjoyed a good image in the eyes of Nazarbayev, who was also an open admirer of the late Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew. Singapore could expect to retain its good reputation in a Tokayev presidency, should he prevail in the elections. He himself has some links with Singapore, having served in the Soviet Embassy in Singapore in the 1970s and is fluent in English and Mandarin as well as Russian.

Tokayev is also familiar with ASEAN as he had interacted with ASEAN foreign ministers during the 2003-2007 period on the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly in New York under the ASEAN-ECO (Economic Cooperation Organisation) dialogue. Kazakhstan is a leading member of ECO which comprises the five Central Asian republics, as well as Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey.

Overall, continuity will be the key factor going forward. Nazarbayev has only stepped sideways and no dramatic change is in the offing.

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