

Revolt and repression in Kazakhstan

Monday 10 January 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2022).

The Kazakh government has unleashed ferocious repression against the uprising that exploded last week.

Security forces opened fire on demonstrators. “Dozens” died, according to media reports, but on 7 January president Kasym-Jomart Tokaev let slip that “hundreds” had been killed. Tokaev also said he gave the order to “shoot to kill without warning” to suppress protests.

There are no accurate figures, because the government has cut off internet access for almost the whole country and imposed an information blockade.

The internal affairs ministry has said that more than 4400 people have been arrested, and warned that sentences of between eight years and life will be imposed. The Kazakh regime has used torture against worker activists before: its forces may be emboldened by the 3000 Russian and other troops flown in to support them.

It’s difficult, in the midst of this nightmare, to try to analyse the wave of protest and its consequences. Anyway, here are four points, based on what I can see from a distance.

1. The uprising began as a working-class revolt against inequality and political repression.

The protests started in Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan, an oil-producing city with a long history of struggle for union organisation. They were sparked by a doubling of the price of liquefied petroleum gas, used for home heating and transport, to 120 tenge (about £0.21) per litre from 60 tenge. (See note.)

But this economic demand was very rapidly joined to political demands.

On Tuesday 4 January, before the internet was blocked, the human rights activist [Galym Ageleuov](#) wrote on social media:

The Zhanaozen people’s demands, that could well be taken up in Aktau [the largest city in the Mangystau region] tomorrow, are:

1. Gas for 50 tenge.
2. The resignation of the government.
3. [Former president Nursultan] Nazarbayev to get out of political life.
4. The release of political prisoners ([Erzhan Elshibayev](#) and others).
5. The return of the stolen money. [Surely a reference to the Kazakh elite’s ill-gotten gains.]

In making these demands, working people in Zhanaozen no doubt had in mind their own recent history. In 2011, the city was the scene of [the most significant workers' struggle](#) of the post-Soviet period – an eight-month strike by oil workers, that ended with a police massacre in which at least 16 died and 60 were wounded.

After that strike, the state used repression on the one hand, and substantial regional investment and pay rises in the state-owned oil companies on the other, to fashion a new social compromise. But the effect of the pandemic on the oil industry has effectively wrecked that arrangement.

Ainur Kurmanov of the Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan, who is in political exile in Russia, in [an interview with News.Ru](#) on 7 January described the triggers for last week's revolt as follows:

This was in the first instance a social explosion, that is, an initiative by workers from the oil industry in Mangystau region. That's where the whole popular movement against the doubling of the gas price started. But the price rise was just the final straw that broke the camel's back: it was where people's patience ran out and the dissatisfaction that was bubbling up in society boiled over. That region is cursed by high unemployment. The only place to work is in oil production. So the struggle to defend jobs, the struggle for every penny – these are conditions for survival in the harsh desert and semi-desert conditions out there. Add to that the wave of inflation at the end of last year, as a result of which the price of every type of foodstuffs and necessities rose. Mangystau is a “dead end” geographically, into which all products have to be imported. So prices are higher there than in the rest of Kazakhstan.

Apart from that, in Atyrau, the next-door region, in December 2021, there were 40,000 redundancies from Tengizchevroil, 75% of which is owned by American companies. Those sort of lay-offs are expected elsewhere too. Workers understand that they could soon be out on the streets.

There were other reasons for dissatisfaction too. All of last year there were strikes, the main demands of which were not met. A big issue was to review the results of rationalisation of production, on account of which hundreds of thousands of workers had their pay cut, lost various social benefits, bonuses and other increments.

This whole complex of causes added up to an explosive mixture, which was then set light by the spark of higher gas prices. (See also an earlier interview with Kurmanov, published in English on LeftEast.)

2. The movement swept across Kazakhstan like wildfire and for a short time, on 5 January, threatened the power of the state.

By Wednesday 5 January, protesters in Kazakhstan had occupied government buildings in a number of cities, and airports. They had blocked roads and railways. There were (unconfirmed) reports from Mangystau that police units have gone over to the side of the protesters. In Almaty, the largest city and commercial centre, a huge demonstration took over the city centre before security forces began to fire on it. (Please read this linked post: [An eyewitness to the uprising in Almaty.](#))

On that same day, the former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was sacked as the head of the national security council, the government resigned, president Tokayev appealed to the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) headed by Russia to come to his aid, and 3000 mainly Russian troops flew in. (The absurd fiction that the demonstrators were “terrorists” was needed in part because the CSTO has no mandate to intervene in domestic law-and-order issues, as far as I understand.)

In my view it's important to keep in mind that *the state was, however briefly, in danger of collapse*. Popular movements create that danger.

Commentators have pointed out that many other things were going on. In particular:

- a. There was/is an intra-elite battle, apparently between Tokayev on one side and the clique around Nazarbayev and his family on the other. After Nazarbayev was dismissed, [his close ally Karim Masimov](#) was also removed from a senior security position, and by 8 January was [under arrest](#).
- b. In Almaty – but not to my knowledge e.g. in Zhanaozen or Atyrau – there is a growing body of evidence that provocateurs were employed (see e.g. [comments by the knowledgeable analyst Nargis Kassenova](#)). Other unconfirmed reports suggested the security forces had deliberately entrapped demonstrators e.g. by [removing the security cordon](#) around Almaty airport.

Time and good journalism will tell the extent of such machinations. But power and wealth always tries to distract from the potential of popular movements, and all this information must be interpreted in that context.

3. The ruthless character of the state's reaction says something about the nature of 21st century capitalism.

It was the very fact that power was seriously threatened by the popular movement that made the crackdown so swift and so bloody.

On 6 January, the Ukrainian socialist Volodia Artiukh wrote on social media:

Already, the year before last, in discussions about the Belarussian protest movement, I wrote that, while the leftists were battling with the ghosts of [the] Maidan [uprising in Ukraine in 2013-14], in reality it was necessary to deal with the great big anti-Maidan in to which post-Soviet politics had turned. Many of us came in to the left-wing movement, ready to struggle against liberal cultural hegemony, against the weakening of the state to the market's advantage, and against the demonisation of the Soviet legacy. But now it seems that what we have to deal with in the foreseeable future is naked, violent compulsion, without any pretence at hegemony, with capital being accumulated under the state's protection, and the instrumentalisation of the Soviet legacy. I do not believe that I can yet see a language adequate to describe this situation, or to articulate a strategy to counteract it.

Yes: naked, violent compulsion, without any pretence at hegemony. That is what has resulted from the breakdown of the precarious social contract struck between the Kazakh state and working people during the oil boom of 2007-10, and pieced together again after the 2011 Zhanaozen massacre. We also see it in Belarus.

In my view, Artiukh's argument may also be relevant to the greatest defeat of a revolutionary uprising in the 21st century, in Syria. The regime there, which had long relied heavily on ideology – very different, in my understanding, to that prevalent in former Soviet countries – in the end had to resort to coercion, on a terrifying scale, to control its own citizens.

Of course there is nothing new about capitalism using coercion and violence. But in my view the combination of such blunt, crude violence against such large numbers of people, with globalised capital – dominant in Kazakhstan in the form of oil and metals companies – may be something new that we need to understand about the world we live in.

4. Many of us feel the need to express solidarity with the protest movement, but collectively we could well rethink what is effective.

On Saturday, in Trafalgar Square in London, Kazakh migrant workers demonstrated their solidarity with the movement in their home country. They were joined by a small group of British labour movement activists ([Anticapitalist Resistance](#) and others) who had gathered at the Kazakh embassy nearby.

Such gestures of solidarity are vital. But I think that to form meaningful links between social and labour movements in the UK, or other European countries, with our counterparts in Kazakhstan, Russia, and other former Soviet countries, we need to go further than the traditional methods we have got used to – and, it could be argued, satisfied ourselves with.

I don't have any fully-formed ideas on this, but I would like to see discussion about:

- Prisoner support. In 2019, a [demonstration](#) was held in London to support Russian anti-fascists who were arrested, tortured in detention, and sentenced to long jail terms for crimes they did not commit. But since then, the number of political prisoners across the former Soviet space has multiplied drastically. The jails in Belarus have been filled. Now we face the grim prospect of the Kazakh regime taking revenge on those who participated in last week's events. To my mind, we will never have a labour or socialist movement worthy of the name in Europe without well-organised support for these prisoners.
- Better direct links between labour and social movement activists at grass roots level, built up patiently over time.
- More effective ways of tracking, understanding and explaining the myriad links between the Kazakh, Russian and other elites and their support system in the City of London, in the UK's ruling class more generally, and in the offshore tax havens, many of which are UK-controlled. In Kazakhstan's case, the lavish investments in London property – explained [in this article](#) – are just the start of it. The Kazakh-controlled oil and metals companies are financed through the City; the western oil companies have myriad investments in the Kazakh economy. SP, 9 January 2022.

Note about liquefied petroleum gas prices. If you are sitting there thinking that LPG prices in the UK are [about three times](#) the levels mentioned, you are right. Retail petroleum products prices vary widely from country to country, because taxes often make up a large part of them. Cheap fuel, along with relatively low rents, has been a concession to working-class people in Russia, Kazakhstan and other former Soviet countries – which are oil producers, and where oil is seen as “ours” – throughout the post-Soviet period.

Simon Pirani

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Labour Hub

<https://labourhub.org.uk/2022/01/09/revolt-and-repression-in-kazakhstan/>