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# How Kazakhstan's mothers formed a protest movement - and what they want

Monday 5 September 2022, by [SHAPAGAT Aigerim](#) (Date first published: 14 June 2022).

**The mothers claim they were first on the streets during the January protests, the largest and most violent in the country's post-Soviet history**

It's evening in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, and a long queue of women and children is standing outside an elite residential complex. They're waiting for the glass doors of an office to open. The office is unusual. It has no furniture but contains an assortment of children's scooters, bicycles and toys. A dozen sewing machines line the walls.

"This is our Centre for Adaptation and Resocialisation for Large Families," activist Botagoz Shynykulova tells me as she unlocks the door. "We only recently opened it."

Eight families live in the centre. Some lost their homes in fires, others moved from the countryside. What unites these women is their part in a militant new protest movement in Kazakhstan. They are mothers with large families and are fighting to get decent housing and social benefits from the state.

"For three years we have been going against the whole system," says Shynykulova. The premises are the gift of a "sponsor" whose name cannot be made public. She adds: "And we don't trust anyone anymore, because during all this time we have been betrayed and sold out so many times, and our words have been distorted."

Shynykulova goes on to say that she "doesn't know what kind of person" I am. "After our interview, a KNB officer [an employee of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee] could come up to you and offer you 100,000 dollars to not publish the article."

As it happens, I am not approached by the KNB, but Shynykulova's caution is understandable.

Both long-time president Nursultan Nazarbayev and his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev have marginalised dissenting voices in Kazakhstan. In January, [widespread public protests](#) over the price of gas ended in a [bloody crackdown](#).

## Tragedy

It all began three years ago, with a tragedy on the outskirts of Nur-Sultan. Five daughters of the Siter family died in a fire in their home, a coal-fired temporary shelter, while their parents were at work. The oldest was 12, the youngest nine months. The funeral drew hundreds of people, while thousands turned out to protest against a system that fails to provide adequate housing and child benefits for large families in need. Several thousand Kazakhstani mothers united in rage and grief on Telegram and WhatsApp.

Since then, large families have been holding regular protest rallies, which are almost always

unsanctioned and generally end with the involvement of riot police. When the women refuse to leave the protests, the police carry them away. The protesters have also besieged government offices and picketed official events. Once, they even occupied the Kazakhstani capital's animal shelter.

The fierce resistance marks out the "mothers of many children", as they are called, among Kazakhstan's protest movements.

"We have a way of doing things: when they try to detain one of us, we all run to her together, and [the security forces] also run in a crowd to protect their people," says Bayan Miras, an entrepreneur and mother of six.

"You wait, hope, believe these promises that you are about to be offered a job. Resentment begins to ripen, then anger and hatred. It all accumulates, and then emotions take over"

Lyazzat Karakoyshina, a single mother of seven, says she moved with her children to the centre after asking Nur-Sultan's mayor Altai Kulginov for work. She needed the money to pay her mortgage, but no assistance has materialised in the year since Kulginov promised help.

"You ask why we are constantly arguing?" says Karakoyshina, tears in her eyes. "You wait, hope, believe these promises that you are about to be offered a job. Resentment begins to ripen, then anger and hatred. It all accumulates, and then emotions take over, and the person explodes."

Miras adds that she never leaves a protest on her feet. "Seven or eight people have to lift me up. I fight and resist to the last."

### **Benefit payments**

One of the main points of contention for these women is child benefit payments. In 2019, the final year of Nazarbayev's presidency, the authorities introduced targeted social assistance. This provided 21,000 tenge (£45 at the 2019 exchange rate) for each child in a large family. But when Tokayev took over, the allowance was restricted to families below the poverty line and the amounts varied by the beneficiaries' income.

The change has hit large families hard. Several "mothers of many children" say that for the 10 months that the state paid them a flat sum of 21,000 tenge, families were able to move out of the dachas, shipping containers, basements and dormitories where they lived in terrible conditions. They were able to rent decent housing, and some even decided to apply for mortgages. But when the child benefit began to be means-tested, families above the poverty threshold were forced to return the money they had received.

Karakoyshina says she had to give 340,000 tenge (£632) back to the state after Kazakhstan's ministry of labour and social protection filed a court case against her. Shynykulova, who runs the centre, adds: "The state has money for the celebration of anniversaries, for expensive official cars and grandiose construction projects, but it doesn't pay normal benefits to large families."

Sociologist Tatyana Rezvushkina says Kazakhstan's political elite is too far removed from the lives of ordinary citizens to understand their problems.

### **Co-optation**

There are signs that the state is trying to co-opt the protesters.

Miras, the feisty mother of six, points to the special foundation for mothers opened by the Nur-Sultan mayor's office after the 2019 protests. The foundation provides money and some humanitarian assistance to women. She calls this an attempt to "pay off" the mothers, and says there is anecdotal evidence that the movement may be splintering in the years since the fire killed the Siter sisters. According to activists, the six associations of mothers in Kazakhstan have a combined membership of just 123.

Miras says her organisation, Otan-Ana Birliigi, which means unity of the motherland, has refused to cooperate with the mayor's office because of the official portrayal of the mothers' request for assistance "as if we are asking for special privileges". The result is the "mothers of many children" have gained a reputation as needy and demanding.

"After going through all this and realising that it is useless to ask the state for something, we created a public association, but we do not have the goal of making money off large families; we want them to get on their feet," she says.."

"The authorities don't say it directly, but they hint every time: do not go too far, otherwise you will be left with nothing"

Zulfiya Baysakova, who as head of the Union of Crisis Centres NGO has worked for the rights of women and children for more than 20 years, believes that the state is encouraging problematic behaviour with benefit payments.

"When they distribute money, what happens? Of course, people get used to it and think: today they gave 300,000, but tomorrow I want 200,000 and the day after tomorrow another 50,000 - all you have to do is shout loud enough," Baysakova comments.

She notes that the state is setting up family support centres - with lawyers, psychologists and social workers. Rezvushkina says that the state should offer support to families by providing services, rather than money.

The "mothers of many children" movement has clear ideological differences with Kazakhstan's [feminist movement](#). Miras says that "[feminists] have completely different goals - LGBT and stuff like that. We don't approve of gay parades.

### **First to protest**

The activist mothers I spoke to believe that their fight is not political. Shynykulova says: "Our concerns relate only to social policy."

Even so, they claim they were the first ones to "come out" on 4 January, when the [largest and most violent protests](#) in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history began.

"We were the first to protest in the capital," says Miras, recalling that she was outside the mayor's office in Nur-Sultan at 11am on 4 January. The mothers were immediately detained, she added.

The next day, the mothers protested at a shopping centre and were detained again alongside activists of the anti-Nazarbayev political party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, which the authorities have designated as extremist.

The conversation with the group of mothers has gone on for more than two hours. Now, the women have to leave to look after their families. They are at the door when I remember a key question: after the January events, do they think that large families could become the core of the next protest?

One speaks up: “Many women are afraid because we are fined for every word spoken.”

She adds: “The authorities don’t say it directly, but they hint every time: do not go too far, otherwise you will be left with nothing.”

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Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kazakhstan-mothers-large-families-protest-movement/>