

Too little has changed in Kazakhstan in the year since 'Bloody January'

Monday 9 January 2023, by [MAZORENKO Dmitriy](#), [SORBELLO Paolo](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2023).

A 'New Kazakhstan' was promised after last January's deadly protests. It looks a lot like the old oligarchic order

The January 2022 [police crackdown on protesters in Kazakhstan](#), which left at least 238 people dead, is the most violent episode in the Central Asian country's recent history. One year on, little has changed – despite the widespread anger and desperation that prompted the unprecedented demonstrations.

Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has not delivered on the people's demands for a fairer society, one in which the ruling class no longer monopolises wealth and power as it did with impunity during the 30 years of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule.

In fact, in the year since '[Bloody January](#)' (*Qandy Qantar*, in Kazakh), Tokayev's promised reforms have frustrated expectations and, in some cases, proved counterproductive.

No space for opposition

For years, people in Kazakhstan shouted '*Shal, ket!*' (Old man, leave!) as they grew frustrated with Nazarbayev's rule.

Although Nazarbayev had formally resigned in 2019, his influence and that of his family and the clique that surrounded him could still be felt everywhere.

The discontent came to a head at the start of last year. On 5 January 2022, the fourth day of nationwide demonstrations, protesters in one of the central avenues of the southern town of Taldykorgan took down a statue of Nazarbayev, which had been erected just five years before. Their action came to symbolise the anti-regime, anti-Nazarbayev protests.

In the aftermath of Bloody January, Tokayev made veiled references to the need to "break with the old regime" and solve Kazakhstan's social and civic problems. That would involve, the president said, providing new forms of political participation and addressing the socio-economic issues that led Kazakhstanis to take to the streets.

Phrases like the 'demonopolisation of political power' and 'de-Nazarbayevisation' began to circulate in Kazakhstan's media, and Tokayev promised a fairer redistribution of the country's vast wealth from its natural resources.

In his first post-protest address to the nation in March, Tokayev announced plans to limit presidential powers and delegate more power to Parliament. This was meant to empower ordinary citizens, both in formal structures of representation and on budgetary decisions.

This was the reasoning behind the creation of the National Kurultai, or council, which combined institutional and grassroots politics. Representatives of civil society, such as the heads of non-governmental organisations or celebrities, are appointed to the council, which has only consultative powers. In setting it up in June, Tokayev essentially downgraded a similar consultative body, the National Council of Public Trust, established in 2019 to enhance public participation.

In April, Tokayev also announced he would leave the ranks of Amanat, the new name for the Nur Otan political party, one of Nazarbayev's power bases since the late 1990s. (With its compulsory membership for national and local politicians, and even low-ranking public sector chiefs, Nur Otan came to supplant public politics itself in Kazakhstan.)

"In effect, the government promised the Kazakh people political choice but they received a system still run by the old guard"

Tokayev's move was supposed to create some distance between the president and the ruling party. Even so, [Amanat still endorsed Tokayev](#) in the November presidential election and helped to organise his campaign. And Amanat has also kept a firm hold on regional seats – most elected heads of local councils across the country [are party functionaries](#), while local assembly members and mayors are also members.

Tokayev also claimed that the intensely bureaucratic procedures to register new political parties had been eased. But the new rules have still prevented a handful of parties from registering, including the Democratic Party, whose leader is now on trial after spending 10 months in pre-trial detention in 2022 for organising an illegal rally. So far only Baytaq, which describes itself as an environmentalist party, has been able to register under the new rules. Its leader, who has no previous ties with environmentalism, was a manager in state-owned companies, such as KazakhTelecom, where he was also a board member, Kazakhstan Railways, and KazAgro.

To give the people [the semblance of political participation](#), Tokayev called a constitutional referendum in June, early presidential elections in November, and planned a parliamentary election for the first half of 2023. To complete the 'electoral circus', a phrase oft-used by the Kazakh media, he also announced that the indirect election of half the roster of senators would be held early for the first time.

The June referendum presented Kazakhstanis with a tough choice. They were simply asked to agree or disagree in bulk with the government's proposed amendments to the constitution. By labeling it a choice between 'new' and 'old' Kazakhstan, the people who voted 'yes' to the changes simply accepted the new normal, while those who disagreed, even on merit, were deemed 'pro-Nazarbayev'.

This series of electoral events served to legitimise Tokayev and his administration, rather than as a process of reform. By [stifling popular protests](#) and cracking down on [workers' strikes](#), as well as selectively uprooting pro-Nazarbayev elites, Tokayev is trying to carve out a new but familiar, populist platform of support.

In effect, the government promised the Kazakh people political choice but they received a system still run by the old guard.

Out with Nazarbayev

Tokayev's 'New Kazakhstan' was supposed to mean a clean break with the old regime – and the ousting of elites close to Nazarbayev became a popular talking point for many in the wake of Bloody January.

Several members of the Nazarbayev family and affiliated oligarchs have since come under scrutiny.

A company linked to Aliya Nazarbayeva, Nazarbayev's youngest daughter, was investigated for misappropriation of public funds. Assets under the control of Bolat Nazarbayev, the former president's brother, came under financial investigators' microscope. Nazarbayev's nephew, Kairat Satibaldy, was convicted of embezzlement in relation to state-owned telecoms and railway companies and sent to prison. Kairat Boranbayev, a former father-in-law to Nazarbayev's grandson, was also arrested and is currently being tried for embezzling public funds in relation to natural gas supplies, which he denies.

In another symbolic blow to the former president, Tokayev has instructed Parliament to [strike down a law](#) that gives family members living with Nazarbayev immunity from prosecution and protects its assets. Nazarbayev's personal immunity from prosecution would remain protected by the constitution.

Nazarbayev, meanwhile, has been stripped of the chairmanship of Kazakhstan's National Security Council, a position he had [assumed](#) the year before resigning as president. Tokayev has also reversed his decision, made soon after entering office, to rename the country's capital 'Nur-Sultan' in honour of Nazarbayev. Astana, Kazakh for 'capital', was reinstated as the city's name in September 2022.

But Tokayev's measures were selective. They tackled only some of the riches the Nazarbayev family accrued over the decades, failing to target some of the most important business interests in the country.

"The combined wealth of Kazakhstan's 50 richest people on the Forbes' list actually increased by \$1.2bn in 2022."

- Forbes Kazakhstan

The Nazarbayev Fund, an endowment for Nazarbayev University and Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, is still protected by a special law, which gives absolute autonomy and prohibits state intervention in its activities.

Timur Kulibayev, Nazarbayev's son-in-law, remains co-owner of the country's largest bank, Halyk Bank, and one of the key players in the energy sector. Bolat Akchulakov, his former aide at the Atameken business association, which Kulibayev led until January, is the country's energy minister.

Two of Nazarbayev's daughters and grandson are still [on the Forbes' list of Kazakhstan's richest](#) people. His nephew Nurbol became the country's 41st richest person in 2022, according to Forbes.

Protecting oligarchs

A year ago, Tokayev acknowledged that the system built in Kazakhstan since independence had relied on extreme inequality. He even quoted a 2021 KPMG study that had found that just 162 people own half of the country's wealth.

At the time, he proposed to establish a commission to repatriate offshored assets. According to a General Prosecutor's Office's press release in September, the government recovered \$1.2bn in assets in 2022. The process of recovering and re-channeling public funds, however, [remains opaque](#).

Tokayev also established the [Kazakhstan Khalkyna](#) fund, which literally means 'for the people of

Kazakhstan'. It was designed, the president said, to enable the wealthiest to give back to society through healthcare and education projects. The fund has built up reserves of roughly \$280m from donations from some of Kazakhstan's largest companies and richest businessmen.

But support for Kazakhstan Khalkyna has lost momentum since April, with large contributions slowing to a trickle and its management failing to provide transparent accounting of how the funds have been allocated.

This is typical of Tokayev's measures, which might seem like radical moves towards the redistribution of wealth, but are merely [instruments of legitimisation](#) that allow the president to appear as though he is tackling inequality. In reality, the combined wealth of Kazakhstan's 50 richest people on the Forbes' list actually [increased](#) by \$1.2bn in 2022.

State wealth in Kazakhstan also remains concentrated. Samruk-Kazyna, the country's sovereign wealth fund, controls major extractive and industrial enterprises. [Nearly half of Kazakhstan's GDP](#) is in the fund's hands. Tokayev, like Nazarbayev before him, pledged to privatise these assets but the process has been slow. In 2018, Samruk-Kazyna agreed to list 25% of KazAtomProm, the world's largest producer of natural uranium, on a new local stock exchange. In December, the government gave the green light to the listing of a meagre 3% of oil and gas giant KazMunaiGas.

'If not now, when?'

The government's delay in adopting promised reforms has left the Kazakhstani public restless, especially as inequality grows and purchasing power shrinks. But pandemic-induced restrictions on public gatherings and a new policing strategy have limited protests and, as in the Nazarbayev era, it has become impossible for people to speak out.

Sporadic protests, which characterised the early months of Tokayev's tenure, have waned, stifled by authorities in the wake of Bloody January. Like his predecessor, Tokayev allows people to gather only in specific 'protest areas' and even then, only after approval from the local administration. The president branded this system a step towards 'civilised politics' but it has, of course, continued to throw up the same old obstacles to public assembly that international observers often criticise.

"In pretending to forge institutions, parties and policies 'for the people', Tokayev's 'New Kazakhstan' is disturbingly like the old"

What is missing from Tokayev's plan is the people. The president's top-down platform treats citizens as external, not as constitutive elements of the social order. They serve as a plebiscite, only useful insofar as it reinforces decisions already behind closed doors. Rather than empowering people, the plan is to depoliticise them.

And instead of abolishing the oligarchic system, Tokayev wants to make business and political elites dependent on his new framework. Should his strategy work, the new elite will accrue riches only if they are loyal.

In the spring of 2019, when Nazarbayev resigned, it felt as if change was in the air in Kazakhstan. But Tokayev's tenure has proved that the regime is not ready to allow grassroots movements and popular political parties to flourish. In pretending to forge institutions, parties and policies 'for the people', Tokayev's 'New Kazakhstan' is disturbingly like the old.

Dmitriy Mazorenko
Paolo Sorbello

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

P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kazakhstan-one-year-bloody-january-no-change/>