



## The Eurasia Center's Central Asian Program

February 9, 2022

# Protests in Kazakhstan Rock the Nation



*Protests in Kazakhstan reach a high point as demonstrators chant “Old Man Go Away” referring to former President Nazarbayev, who lost his advisory post as a result.  
Photo Credit: Petr Trotsenko (RFE/RL)*

**The Eurasia Center**

[www.EurasiaCenter.org](http://www.EurasiaCenter.org)

**Eurasia Brief**

Eurasia Business Coalition

[www.usebc.org](http://www.usebc.org)

# Protests in Kazakhstan Rock the Nation



Unrest in Kazakhstan Photo Credit: MARIYA GORDEYEVA, REUTERS

The 2022 Kazakhstan protests were triggered by a sudden increase in gas prices that were announced at the beginning of the year, resulting in the first series of protests occurring January 2, 2022. At the time, it seemed like regular protests as a result of the discontent public, which had happened before and did not foreshadow the mass unrest that was to follow. The initial protests occurred in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan, an oil-producing city, which was ironic, as its residents were extremely dissatisfied specifically with the rising oil prices. Other oil-producing cities began having protests too and then spread to all areas of Kazakhstan including Almaty and Nur-Sultan. As the number of people protesting increased it seemed that the mass protests would morph into a movement. The events that followed were labeled as mass unrest and became one of the most intense protest events in not just Kazakhstan, but neighboring countries too.

After spreading quickly, the initial peaceful protests turned much more extreme with violence exhibited by both the protestors and Government agents, including law enforcement. While international, local media, and commentators, had varying perceptions of what had occurred, many reached the conclusion that more violent protestors, criminals, and terrorists took advantage of the initial peaceful demonstrations. This unfortunately put the “violent” or “terrorist” label on all protestors. However, even both the President Tokayev and other political officials described the events as having been initiated by peaceful citizens that were hijacked by “terrorists.” During this time period, both citizens and police experienced casualties. Cities, including Almaty, were physically damaged. Luxury stores, shops, and supermarkets were looted. Social media, as well as phone service, were shut down by the Government.



Kazakhstan declared a nationwide state of emergency after protests over a fuel price hike erupted into clashes and saw demonstrators storm government buildings, Jan. 5, 2022. Photo Credit: AFP

It does seem, however, that the oil price increase was only a trigger for protests. General dissatisfaction with the Government had increased over the past years due to lack of democratic practices in Kazakhstan. With more media attention on political corruption, lack of transparent elections and an extreme social class divide, public discontent had been blossoming for some time

in Kazakhstan. The time was ripe in January 2022 for citizens to express their discontent and the rising oil prices triggered their discontent enough to start a multiplicity of mass street protests to express their unhappiness. There is no one clear description of what occurred. There are varying explanations - that this was an extremely planned attack on Kazakhstan and its well-being by foreign agents, it was the actions of highly-equipped terrorists, or it was just unhappy citizens with a portion of them turning violent. It is important to not forget about the demands of the public. Citizens demanded a lowering of the oil prices, Tokayev to step down as it is believed he is just the puppet of Nazarbayev, control of corruption, and for the 'democratic' facade to be taken down, so that Kazakhstan can actually make real democratic changes. It is also important to note that it is only within the last few years, citizens were allowed to even hold peaceful protests. This is the first time that citizens voiced their opinions to this extent.

On January 7, Tokayev issued "shoot to kill without warning" against the protesters in order to crush the riots that had gone on for nearly a week. His police force ended up imprisoning over four thousand people and of the 225 people who perished, eighteen were police officers. Russia sent in a force of 2,500 paratroopers to help reclaim the airport in Almaty and restore order in other areas, as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the CSTO's current chair, announced the deployment of forces invoking Article 4 of the CSTO Agreement in which members may come to each other's protection in the event of an external threat. Pashinyan noted that there were external forces driving the protests. However, the peaceful protestors in the city of Zhanaozen asked for a change in power, freedom for civil rights activists, and a return to a 1993 Kazakh State Constitution, which is considered to have a more democratic and a clearer division of power than the current one.

The international media has seemed to have a different interpretation of the protests. They focused their reporting on the actions of the Kazakh Government, on the fact that police and law-

enforcement agents turned violent when protestors were still peaceful, stripping them of their democratic rights, and not upholding the law which allowed protests. The international media noted that it was the Government's autocratic practices and long-term rejection of Government's opposition that furthered the protests into massive unrest. Tokayev's latest interview and local media outlets focused on the fact that it was certain that citizens labelled as "terrorists" and "criminals" began shooting at police and other citizens, which meant that police officers had to react violently to prevent more citizens from being hurt. Tokayev also mentioned that the last thing on his mind were the perceptions of his actions in the West, as he thinks of his country first. When asked in an interview on January 29 about his relationship with the past-President, Tokayev mentioned that he is an individual actor and that new things are coming for the country.

Certain changes did come from this mass unrest but only the future will show whether this is a part of the democratic facade or if the country's largest unrest has made a difference. At the time, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) deployed collective troops to Kazakhstan, following criticism that foreign agents were intervening in local affairs. These forces included Russian troops, which did not seem appropriate, as it showed the Government to be weak. However, Tokayev stated that Russia (and the security organization) are long-term friends and need to uphold joint treaties that were signed, and that there is no shame in this intervention. The mass unrest did proceed for a week, with an official mourning day on the 10th, and some events still happening in the country, followed by complete troop withdrawal on the January 19, with international flights resuming.



**Tokayev addressing the Kazakh Nation in an effort to restore order.**

Photo Credit: China Global Television (CGTN)

Nazarbayev was removed as the Chairman of the Security Council, a new Prime Minister, Alihan Smayilov, was named and the defense minister was fired, with the continuation of more firings and changes to Government structure. Tokayev has acknowledged the public's concerns regarding discontent with wealth division and issues of a lack of democracy, portraying some hope for Kazakh citizens. Is a new future for Kazakhstan coming? Only time will tell but it is important to note that this mass unrest was one of its kind and of the 225 lives lost should be remembered. The beginning of 2022 was, and will be, an important event in the history of Kazakhstan, especially as it has been a wake-up call for the Government to either ignore or address this widespread discontent.

