

ON THE BOIL: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON KAZAKHSTAN UNREST

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The protests that broke out in Kazakhstan on January 2 over a fuel price hike have snowballed into the biggest political crisis the oil-rich Central Asian country's leadership has faced in over three decades. Kazakhstan, which broke away from the Soviet Union to become an independent republic in 1991, has been tightly ruled by "strong men" ever since. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's powerful leader, stepped down as President in 2019, but retained an outsized influence over the government of his cherry-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The capital city was named after Mr. Nazarbayev as Nur-Sultan and his statues erected across the country. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Nazarbayev, who embodies the old regime, was the centre of public anger. The protesters, chanting slogans, such as "old man out", burned his statues. Shaken by the mass gatherings and violence, Mr. Tokayev took a series of swift measures to quell the unrest. He reversed the fuel price hike, sacked his Cabinet and replaced Mr. Nazarbayev as the Security Council's chair with himself. He has also requested the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization for help. A willing Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, quickly despatched troops.

Not many had foreseen a crisis of this proportion coming. But Kazakhstan has witnessed growing labour and ethnic unrest in recent years. Despite its oil wealth, low salaries and poor working conditions have always been issues. Many hoped that Mr. Tokayev would bring in change. But they saw Mr. Nazarbayev continuing to pull the strings. The pandemic-induced economic slowdown and soaring inflation made matters worse. Public resentment was building up against the ruling elite over the years, and the fuel price hike did just light the fuse, triggering protests first in Zhanaozen, a city in the western Mangystau Region that had seen unrest in the recent past. It spread to other parts of the country quickly, especially to Almaty, the largest city where the mob stormed the Mayor's office. The protesters, emboldened by the concessions the regime has made, now demand political reforms. For Mr. Tokayev, this is the biggest crisis of his presidency, but also an opportunity. It is a crisis because in a country where the public was taught to adulate their rulers, the violent clashes raise both political and security challenges to the ruling elite. On the other side, it is an opportunity for the President to come out of the shadows of the old regime. The outcome of the current crisis would largely depend on the choices he would make. Dealing with the protests only through force, including with help from Russia — the Belarus model — would not resolve the underlying issues. The other option, the most sensible one, is to reach out to the angry public, hold consultations and build consensus to enter a new social contract with the people of Kazakhstan.

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