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Kazakhstan

Protests in Kazakhstan: A Color Revolution or a Working-Class Uprising?

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Today all post-Soviet mass-media and TV channels are riveted to the protests that suddenly engulfed Kazakhstan. To some they arouse hope, to others – horror and rejection. There are contradictions and different interpretations of what is happening: righteous people’s protest, clan wrangling, conspiracy of pro-Western and pro-Turkish forces or even “Islamist reaction”. But what is really happening? A Zanovo-media correspondent interviewed Ainur Kurmanov – one of the leaders of Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan.

A model republic

Kazakhstan is one of the biggest post-Soviet countries, which is only second to the Russian Federation in that system of political and economical relations, which was built after Soviet collapse. And this is not just because Nursultan Nazarbayev was one of the architects of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). The Kazakh model of smooth transformation of former party and Soviet nomenclature into a capitalist oligarchy with “an Asian face” was seen by many as a model. Indeed, this model had superficially attractive features not only for the ruling elites in other republics, but also for the average citizen: a high economic level, the presence of formal attributes of democracy, and few restrictions on Western culture. Large reserves of natural resources, including oil, and the industrial potential inherited from the socialist period proved a good launching pad for the young state. At the same time, the official propaganda of the Russian Federation and the CIS channels liked to set Kazakhstan as an example of preserving “the union traditions”, honoring the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the absence of nationalism, and so on.

Mass protests broke out immediately after the New Year holidays, on January 2. The reason for protests was the rise in price of liquefied gas for cars, from 60 tenge to 120 tenge per liter. The first unsanctioned demonstrations began in the west of Kazakhstan, in the Mangistau region, the heartland of large oil-producing enterprises. It is here that the notorious Zhanaozen is located, where ten years ago a workers’ strike was brutally suppressed: 15 strikers were killed and hundreds injured in Zhanaozen.

On the next day – January 3 – the protesters in the Mangistau Province added new social and political points to their initial demands: reduction of food prices, taking measures against unemployment, solution to the drinking water shortage, resignation of the government and local authorities. On this day, the protesters also began to gather in the squares and streets of Almaty, the capital city Nursultan and other cities. In a number of places, roads were blocked and protesters did not disperse even at night.

On Tuesday, January 4, protesters clashed with police. In Alma-Ata, security forces used stun grenades to disperse protesters. In turn, protesters overturned police cars. In the evening of the same day, mobile Internet, messengers and social networks stopped working.

Kazakhstani authorities tried to explain the gas price increase by the fact that its price is now determined by electronic bidding. As they say, “the market has decided”. The administration of the Mangistau Region firmly stated that everything was within the frames of the modern market economy, and the previous price was not coming back.

But on January 4, under pressure from the protesters, the government was forced to lower the price of gas in the Mangistau region to 50 tenge per liter. The President of Kazakhstan Kasim-Jomart Tokayev said that the rest of the demands of the population would be considered separately. And then on January 5, the current Cabinet of Ministers was dismissed. The director of the gas processing plant in Zhanaozen was detained.

Region of total poverty

The co-chairman of the [Socialist Movement of Kazakhstan](#) Aynur Kurmanov described the situation in the following terms:

The workers of Zhanaozen were the first to rise. An increase in the gas price served only as a trigger for the popular protests. After all, the mountain of social problems has been accumulating for years. Last fall, Kazakhstan was hit by a wave of inflation. It should be taken into account that products are imported to the Mangistau region and they have always been 2-3 times more expensive there. But on a wave of rising prices at the end of 2021, the cost of food rose even more, and substantially. We must also take into account that the West of the country is a region of solid unemployment. In the course of neoliberal reforms and privatization, most of the businesses there were shut down. The only sector that still works here are the oil producers. But for the most part, they are owned by foreign capital. Up to 70 percent of Kazakhstan oil are exported to western markets, most of the profits also go to foreign owners.

There is practically no investment in the development of the region: it is an area of total poverty and poverty. And last year these enterprises began to undergo large-scale optimization. Jobs were cut, workers began to lose their salaries, bonuses, many enterprises have turned into just service companies. When in Atyrau region the company Tengiz Oil fired 40 thousand workers at once, it became the real shock for the whole Western Kazakhstan. The state did nothing to prevent such mass layoffs. And it should be understood, that one oil worker feeds 5-10 family members. Dismissal of a worker automatically condemns the whole family to starvation. There are no jobs here except for the oil sector and sectors that service its needs.

Kazakhstan has actually built a raw-material model of capitalism. The population has accumulated a lot of social problems, there is a huge social stratification. The "middle class" is ruined, the real sector is destroyed. The uneven distribution of the national product has a considerable corruption component. Neoliberal reforms have all but eliminated the social safety net. And most likely, the owners of transnational corporations calculated – 5 million people are needed for servicing the "pipe"; the whole 18+ million of Kazakh population is too much. And that's why this revolt is anti-colonial in many ways. The causes the current protests are rooted in the workings of capitalism: price of liquefied gas really rose on electronic trades. There was a conspiracy of monopolists who benefited from exporting gas abroad, creating a shortage of it and an increase in gas prices on the domestic market. So they themselves provoked the riots. However, it should be noted that the current social explosion is directed against the whole policy of capitalist reforms that have been carried out over the last 30 years and their destructive results.

Traditions of Workers' Struggle. Spontaneous Strike

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The form of protest initially was a classic “proletarian” strike. On the night of 3 to 4 January, a wildcat strike began at the Tengiz Oil enterprises. Soon the strike spread to neighboring regions. Today, the strike movement has two main focus points – Zhanaozen and Aktau.

As conspiracy theorists write today, the unrest in Kazakhstan was carefully prepared in the West, as evidenced by the careful organization and coordination of the protesters. In Kurmanov’s words:

This is not a Maidan, although many political analysts are trying to present it this way. Where did such amazing self-organization come from? This is the experience and tradition of the workers. Strikes have been shaking the Mangistau region since 2008, and the strike movement began back in the 2000s. Even without any input from the Communist Party or other leftist groups, there were constant demands to nationalize the oil companies. The workers simply saw with their own eyes what privatization and foreign capitalist takeover was leading to. In the course of these earlier demonstrations, they gained enormous experience in struggle and solidarity. The very life in the wilderness made people stick together. It was against this background that the working class and the rest of the population came together. The protests of the workers in Zhanaozen and Aktau then set the tone for other regions of the country. Yurts and tents, which protesters began to put up in the main squares of the cities, were not at all taken from the “Euromaidan” experience: they stood in the Mangistau Region during the local strikes last year. The population itself brought water and food for the protesters.

In Kazakhstan today there is no legal opposition, the entire political field has been cleared. The Communist Party of Kazakhstan was the last to be liquidated in 2015. Only 7 pro-governmental parties remained. But there are plenty of NGOs working in the country, which actively cooperate with the authorities in promoting a pro-Western agenda. Their favorite topics: the famine of the 1930s, the rehabilitation of participants of the Basmachi movement and collaborators of World War II, and so on. NGOs also work on the development of nationalist movement, which in Kazakhstan is completely pro-government. Nationalists hold rallies against China and Russia which are sanctioned by the authorities.

According to our interlocutor, the sinister Islamists allegedly behind the recent events are also extremely weak and poorly organized in Kazakhstan. As he assured us, in fact, modern Kazakhstan is committed to building a mono-ethnic state, and nationalism is its official ideology. All reports of “pro-Soviet” Kazakhstan by the likes of Mir TV channel are a myth:

Back in 2017, a monument was erected in Kyzyl-Orda to Mustafa Chokai, the inspirer of the Turkestan legion of the Wehrmacht. Today, the state is radically revising history. The process has especially intensified after Nursultan Nazarbayev’s visit to the USA a few years ago. The pan-Turkic movement is also becoming more and more active. More recently, i[on the initiative of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Union of Turkic States was established in Istanbul on Nov. 12, 2021. Kazakhstan’s elite keeps its main assets in the West. That’s why the imperialistic states are absolutely not interested in the downfall of the present regime; it is already completely on their side.

But perhaps not everything is so unambiguous with the geopolitical priorities of Kazakhstan? It seems that its leadership all the same tends to conduct notorious multi-vector policy, maneuvering between Russia, the West, China and Turkey. But one condition suits all foreign partners here – the local “loyal” legislation allows foreign companies to take the profits out of the country. However, if possible, none of the global players will stop at changing

the government into an even more obedient one. And, of course, the liberal opposition will try to establish and is already establishing its control over the mass protest movement.

Nazarbayev's resignation as president to head the Security Council was motivated by the desire to create the appearance of democracy, including to the West. In reality, he maintains full control over all the branches of power and only increased his power while at the same time completely avoiding responsibility. President Tokayev is a decorative figure, a pawn within the ruling family. Undoubtedly, the current protests can lead to some factions attempting a palace coup or similar actions. You can't reduce everything to conspiracy theories. You shouldn't idealize the current protest movement either. Yes, it is a grassroots social movement, with a pioneering role for workers, supported by the unemployed and other social groups. But there are very different forces at work in it, especially as workers do not have their own party, class trade unions, a clear program that fully meets their interests. The existing left-wing groups in Kazakhstan are more like circles and cannot seriously influence the course of events. Oligarchic and outside forces will try to appropriate and or at least use this movement for their own purposes. If it wins, the redistribution of property and open confrontation between various groups of the bourgeoisie, a "war of all against all," will begin. But, in any case, the workers will be able to win certain freedoms and get new opportunities, including the creation of their own parties and independent trade unions, which will facilitate their struggle for their rights in the future.

Kazakhstan's armed forces try to confront the protesters

P.S. After the article was published, it became known that in Almaty and some other cities there are heavy clashes, the protesters have seized many key infrastructure buildings in Almaty and other cities. Under pressure from the protests, President Tokayev made unprecedented social concessions – he promised state regulation of gas, gasoline and socially important goods, a moratorium on raising utility bills, subsidized rents for housing for the poor, and the creation of a public fund to support health care and children. Protesters also demanded a return to the 1993 Constitution and a government made up of people outside the system. And they still demand lower food prices and a reduction of the retirement age to 58-60, higher wages, pensions, child benefits, and so on.

Liberal opposition activists hastened to declare that it is they who coordinate the movement.

By the evening of January 5, it was reported that Nursultan Nazarbayev was no longer the chairman of the SB. President Tokayev took his place and stated his intention to act "as tough as possible. At the same time, it was promised that "consistent political reforms" would soon be carried out.

Later on that day Takayev called for a "peace-keeping" (in fact, police) operation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization countries (Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) to suppress the protests, which the Kazakh were now declaring an attempt of intervention from outside. By the morning of January 6, CSTO council had approved of the request and there are already reports of Russian troops in Kazakhstan.

PS:

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