



The Riots of Kazakhstan in 2022 and its Implications

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Abstract. In January 2022, the riots in Kazakhstan became striking news. Many people are convinced that the riots were the continuation of the 2011 riots which asked for better working conditions. However, the themes of this unrest are far beyond that. Generally, two levels of reason can be concluded by analyzing the riots. The superficial reason for the unrest is public discontent with the unlimited price cap of liquefied petroleum gas and the totalitarian super-presidency. The deep roots of the riots are racial and regional tensions lurking in Kazakhstan and the ideological conflicts between the elders and the younger generation who are deeply influenced by western democratic thoughts. After the outbreak of the riots, the Kazakh government sent the military forces and police to suppress the riots and asked for CSTO's intervention. Additionally, President Tokayev initialized an amendment to revise more than one-third of the content of the Kazakh Constitution. Despite the amended Constitution's effect hasn't apparently appeared now, it may successfully address the conflicts in Kazakhstan that cause the riots.

Keywords: Riots, Super-Presidency, Former Soviet Union, CSTO, Nazarbayev

1 Introduction

On January 5, 2022, large-scaled mass riots erupted in Kazakhstan's former capital city of Almaty, and Mangos. Almaty Airport, Republic Square, and government buildings were attacked by protesters who claimed they were fighting against natural gas price increments, and some protesters shouted slogans against Kazakhstan's former President Nazarbayev. Kazakhstan is an essential country in Central Asia and a big exporter of many natural resources. Accordingly, the study on how the riots happened and their impacts becomes an important research topic. Previous studies on Kazakhstan riots are mainly focused on some specific realms such as economic corruption or the political injustice of the nation. Many researchers showed an optimistic attitude towards this unique country since this country is an unprecedented case to study when it broke off from the Soviet Union. Other studies pointed out that the structure of Kazakhstan might lead to potential danger. This thesis, will summarize and combine the studies conducted by previous scholars to connect them to the cause of the unrest from superficial reasons to the deep historical origins, and analyze the impact it may have on international society.

2 The Immediate Cause of the Riots

The cause of the riots can be identified as a combination of two reasons: the first reason is anger towards economic inequality, and the next one is disagreement over the domestic political system: super-presidency.

Firstly, the most direct cause of these riots is the lifted price cap for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) which caused the increase in the price of LPG, the deformed wealth distribution, and notorious corruption. After the riots in Zhanaozen in 2011 over seeking better working conditions, the price of the LPG rose from an average of 30 tenge per liter (\$0.063) to 120 tenge per liter (\$1.06) on 1 January 2022.[1] During the protest, the authority gave some contradictory explanations about the protest. Local officials stated that the gas price increased because of high demand. At the same time, the Energy Ministry stated that the price of LPG rose because of the shift from the real-person and offline-contracted trade to electronic trading on the international market. This in turn was contradicted by Energy Minister Magzum Mirzagaliyev claiming the gas station was controlling the LPG's price which the cost was roughly 80 tenge.[2] Though some gas stations reduced the price of LPG to 80 tenge per liter, the high price became a symbol or theme that reflects people's discontent about the inequality of the economic system, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19. According to the statistics from the Kazakh government, the average salary for 2022 is \$100 per month which is not gained by many ordinary citizens.[3] The deformed distribution of wealth is caused by the unique economic system of Kazakhstan and corruption. Kazakhstan is rich in many natural resources and it owns 40% of the world's uranium supply. Energy trading takes up a large portion of the national economy of Kazakhstan, but over half of the money went to the wallet of a few people: "By 2022, 162 rich Kazakhs held 55% of the nation's wealth." (this quote needs a direct source). The reason for this is after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some rich individuals who had a link with the former Soviet government gained preferential treatment and obtained ownership of lands that are rich in natural resources through the privatization process.[4] Also, corruption contributes to unfair distribution. In 2012, the World Economic Forum listed corruption as the biggest problem in doing business in the country, while in 2005 the World Bank listed Kazakhstan as a corruption hotspot.[5]

Another obvious contradiction of the riots was the protesters' dissatisfaction with the 29-year-long rule of former Kazakh President Nazarbayev. Dissatisfaction, during which Kazakhstan amended and re-amended its constitution four times, each time related to the term of office and re-election limits of the president, clearly stirred up suspicion and discontent among the masses, especially those who have been exposed to more Western ideologies through the internet.[6]

Nazarbayev was appointed president of the country by the Supreme Soviet in the former communism period in 1990, and later, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he continued to serve as president with 98.76% vote in a new democratic election on December 1, 1991, and presided over the introduction of Kazakhstan's Constitution, after the establishment of the first parliament, which passed a distrust bill against the government and dissolved it, causing economic losses and social instability. Nazarbayev used the Supreme Court's ruling on the unconstitutionality of the first parlia-

mentary elections in reorganizing the government and restoring the consequences of its dissolution to dissolve the parliament and used his authority to arrest the predecessor (i.e. the first) governor of the National Bank and other important officials and to promote the election of the second parliament, casting a shadow over the democratization process in Kazakhstan. Since then, the system of Separation of Powers in Kazakhstan began to be deformed, with the president's power over the other two pillars (i.e., the parliament and the courts) and began to have an impact on the judicial and legislative process.[7]

3 Deep Roots of the Bloody January

More than the dissatisfaction with the economic distribution and the political system, the internal situation such as ideologies and race is a deeper cause of the riots. If politicians in Kazakhstan ignore the invisible root of the riots, the interest conflict will cause the next riots despite a few reforms having been implemented.

Kazakhstan has roughly 131 different races. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ethnic contradictions were not significant due to the unity of goals and similar interests, but after the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, the ethnic contradictions within Kazakhstan gradually became evident, and Kazakhstan decided to establish a state of the "majority nation", but this is very different from the composition of the population of the country, where the Kazakh race accounts for only about 40% of the population (in 1991). If they insist on establishing a sovereign state with Kazakh as the main ethnic group and pursue the so-called de-Russification policy, it will undoubtedly harm the interests of minority ethnic groups represented by Russian Kazakhs, and the emigration of a large number of non-major ethnic groups will also have a huge impact on the economy and demography of the emigrating regions. Secondly, the demand of Kazakhs to return to their "historical homeland", coupled with the historical nomadic nature of Kazakhs, will undoubtedly have an impact on countries and regions in East Asia and Central Asia where Kazakhs have settled. Also, the influx of Kazakhs who have largely belonged to other countries will bring political uncertainty and instability to the newly independent Kazakhstan. Politically, the Kazakh race demanded the nationalization of government officials, requiring that the president of Kazakhstan be a Kazakh, i.e., that more Kazakhs be chosen to serve as government officials, and the proportion of non-Kazakh race officials among all races in Kazakhstan has been declining, with only 42.5% of non-Kazakh officials in 1995 and only 33.3% in 1999. [8]

Table 1. Racial Composition of Kazakhstan

Racial Composition of Kazakhstan				Unit: Thousand
subjects	Jan 1, 2004		Jan 1, 2005	
	Population	Percentage among all	Population	Percentage among all
Total population	14951.2	100	15074.8	100
Kazak	8551.0	57.2	8725.2	57.9
Russian	4072.3	27.2	4024.4	26.7

Ukrainians	469.4	3.1	459.0	3.0
Uzbeks	409.8	2.7	419.5	2.8
German	237.7	1.6	228.1	1.5
Tatar	232.7	1.6	231.2	1.5
Uyghur	223.1	1.5	226.5	1.5
Belorussians	96.2	0.6	94.2	0.6
Korean	100.2	0.7	101.0	0.7
Azerbaijanians	84.4	0.6	86.2	0.6
Turks	83.0	0.6	84.0	0.6
Others	391.4	2.6	395.5	2.6
Source: State Revenue Committee of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan, http://www.kgd.gov.kz/				

Economically, most Kazakh descendants live in the south of the country and the backward countryside, while many Russian Kazakhs congregate in the north and the industrially developed cities, precisely because Kazakhs were historically nomadic and their main form of the industry was agriculture, while Russian Kazakhs, out of the need for the industrial development of the Soviet Union, invested most of the energy developed manufacture. For a long time, there was a clear gap between the economic level and structure of the two races which led to a psychological gap between the Kazakhs and created grounds for ethnic problems.[9]

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic country, which has a cultural nature of ethnic problems, and its cultural conflicts also gathered in the issues of religious beliefs, history and culture, and values. In terms of history and culture, after independence, Kazakhstan pursued the traditional culture of the major race and national pride in historical memory, and Kazakhs racialized famous historical figures and used them to promote the long history of the country, which also led to the sense of rebellion of minority races combat Kazakhstan's history and culture. In terms of religious culture, influenced by Islamic culture, the Kazakhs retain Islamic religion. In addition, the Pan-Turkism and Islamic revival movements took advantage of the ideological vacuum since Kazakhstan's independence to propagandize their ideas.

In addition to internal ethnic problems, there are also many conflicts between the three “Juzes” tribes within Kazakhstan. Juz means a region in Kazakh, and in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Kazakhs formed three Juzes (Senior Juz, Middle Juz, and Junior Juz), which are essentially tribal alliances of clans and tribes. Due to the nomadic nature of the Kazakhs, the three Juzes settles in different regions and became increasingly independent, eventually leading to a split within the Kazakhs. The riots originated in the region governed by the Junior Juz, which clearly indicated the impact of race on the riots.

During the rule of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, the unification of the three Kazakh Juzes was achieved for a short time. They used national strength to combat the enemies of unity. During the Brezhnev era, Kunayev became the secretary of the Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan and began to re-emphasize the distinction between the three Juzes, moving the capital to Almaty, which was the origin of the Senior Juz. At this time, three Juzes created a pattern of power contention among themselves, and the selection of cadres was based not only on individual talent but also on race and regional origin. During Nazarbayev's rule, to establish the state of the major race, Nazarbayev

started a trend of seeking to revive cultural traditions, and the Middle Juz, which represents the symbol of traditional culture and traditional way of life, developed and grew in the political arena. He sought to form a balance between the three Juzes and showed an attitude favoring the Middle Juz, and regularly promoted the Middle Juz to become government officials, which in turn intensified ethnic conflicts.

At this stage, there are three main conflicts among the Juzes:

1. The conflicts between the Upper and the Junior Juz relate to the economic structure and cultural orientation. The Junior Juz identify themselves with Russian culture and advanced manufacturing industry, while the Senior Juz insists on being close to Islamic culture and advocates the development of traditional agriculture.

2. The political struggle between the Senior Juz and the Middle Juz. The Middle Juz cultivated for Kazakhstan a group of elites with modern European education background and democratic thoughts, but these elites were purged during the rule of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and at the same time, the strength of the Middle Juz experienced a blow.

3. The economic conflicts between the Junior and Middle Juz, the Junior Juz's region is rich in minerals and has a more developed economy, while the Middle Juz's region is deficient in resources and has a relatively backward economy.[10]

Moreover, the ideological conflicts contribute to dissatisfaction with the super-presidency. In the Stalin era, all the people in the Soviet Union were monitored by NKVD (a soviet internal affairs monitoring agency), and people who expressed their discontent with Communism and the rule of Stalin would be sent to a labor camp or executed. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union fell into economic stagnation and political unrest, so leaders sought reforms. Gorbachev, the ninth leader of the Soviet Union, made the market economy and democratic election possible. At this time, Western propaganda (radio stations such as VOA) officially entered the political sphere of the Soviet Union and spread the ideology of democracy and free speech, etc. In Kazakhstan, the situation was different. Kazakhstan, as mentioned earlier, had a large portion of Russian descent among the total population. And this phenomenon made the ideology of Kazakh pro-Soviet and made Kazakhstan the last republic to quit the Union. The president of Kazakhstan then inherited the totalitarian ideology to govern the country and took the steps detailed to control the power of the whole nation with the cover of the deformed Separation of Powers which was the compromise in the case of Kazakh exposure to Western ideologies. But with the development of technologies (the popularization of the internet, phones, and computers) and the process of globalization (increasing number of international students, global market, and global academia), the younger generation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union began to regard the super-presidency as a totalitarian rule and wished some opposing parties would exist to develop the authentic system of democracy which means the new ideas would conflict with the traditional ruling thoughts.

4 Impacts of the Unrest

The violent riots have occurred since the Kazakh government sent military and police to suppress and requested the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Russia. As of January 10, 2022, 164 people have died and more than 1,000 businesses have been affected, causing more than \$100 million in economic losses for Kazakhstan.[11] In response, president Tokayev declared a state of emergency in the Mangystau Region and Almaty, effective from 5 January 2022. The Cabinet resigned on the same day, and Nazarbayev himself was also removed from his position of chairman of the Security Council.[12] The state of emergency was extended to the whole country. In response to Tokayev's request, the CSTO agreed to deploy troops in Kazakhstan. CSTO troops were initially deployed to government buildings in the capital city, Nur-Sultan, and then guarded key infrastructures in Almaty.[13]

After the crackdown, president Tokayev initialized a referendum to amend the Constitution. In the amendment, the procedure of checks and balances and separation of powers will be authentically achieved and reinforced. Additionally, the relatives of the president will no longer be able to obtain a governmental position easily, and the parliament of Kazakhstan will be enlarged to include more representatives from every group. Tokayev has described the vote as a shift from "super-presidential" rule that will strengthen parliament and do away with Nazarbayev's privileges, including the constitutional title of Elbasy, or "Leader of the Nation". Critics, on the other hand, stated that the new Constitution has very few contents about limitations on presidential power, and the President can still appoint the Prime Minister, cabinet secretaries, and local officials without democratic oversight, and enjoy many other privileges that the predecessor had.[14]

Additionally, the unrest affected the global market. Since Kazakhstan is the source of over 40% of the world's uranium, the riots increased the price of uranium in the global market. The oil price also increased worldwide and may reach its peak since October 2021 and ever to three-digit price, largely because many oil plant owners and other entrepreneurs like railroad owners stopped businesses to support the riots.[15] Additionally, the cryptocurrency mining operations were affected by the riots by dropping 12% in the global cryptocurrency computational capacity because of the internet blackout.[16]

5 Conclusion

The unique position of Kazakhstan makes it a significant nation to study. With the outbreak of the riots, we can notice that the economic structure and the political system of this nation contain potential dangers. The rich resources that are coveted by many people and the historical factors contribute to the invisible cause of the riots. All in all, the conflicts came from the unfair distribution of interests between the upper class and average citizens, and among citizens, and tensions among races, Juzes, government and people, and ideologies. After the riots, the bloody suppression seems to mark the orientation of the nation might shift from balancing between great powers to a pro-Russia

stance. The suspension of the nation as the main resource exporter and potential consumer created turmoil in the global markets. And in the future, whether riots like the January one will happen again or not, largely depends on the effect of the Constitutional amendment.

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