

Kazakhstan mobilizes military, kills dozens in attempt to suppress mass protests

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The Central Asian country of Kazakhstan has been hit by a wave of mass protests over hikes in the price of liquified petroleum gas (LPG), presenting a major challenge to the continued rule of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

On Thursday, the Kazakh government mobilized the military against protesters. In an “anti-terrorist operation” to “cleanse the streets” of Almaty, the country’s largest city, dozens of people were reportedly killed, hundreds injured and over 2,000 arrested. Channels on the social media app Telegram indicate that the state’s action has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators in recent days and the hospitalization in critical condition of dozens more.

Earlier attempts by the president to stem the protests, which began on January 2, by announcing the resignation of his cabinet and the possible dissolution of parliament failed. Starting on Tuesday, a state of emergency, including a ban on all strikes, was imposed across the country.

The government has also shut down the internet and various telecommunications services and social media, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram and the Chinese app WeChat. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has begun sending troops to the country to help quell the protests. Most countries have cancelled air travel to Kazakhstan, as airports remain shut.

The protests erupted on January 2 in the industrial town of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan when the government refused to continue providing subsidies to contain the price of LPG, which is used by many Kazakhs as car fuel rather than gasoline. According to the government, the elimination of subsidized prices was intended to attract foreign investment and increase

the profits of local gas producers who claimed to be operating at a loss. As a result, the price quickly doubled from US\$.14 per liter to \$.28 per liter. From Zhanaozen, protests spread quickly to other areas, soon engulfing virtually the entire country.

Speaking to Radio Azattyq, a protester in Zhanaozen gave vent to the social anger felt by masses of people over three decades of social decline and misery. “The authorities say there is not enough gas, that a plant built 50 years ago is decrepit and outdated. So, what have they been doing for the last 30 years?” he asked. “Sleeping?”

Almost a decade ago, Zhanaozen was the site of a police massacre of 16 striking oil workers. It is one of many industrial monotowns, created around a single industry, that emerged as a product of Soviet industrialization in the 1930s and 1940s. Many such cities throughout the former Soviet Union, most notably in Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine, are still population centers of the industrial working class.

Attempts by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to deflect responsibility for the crisis by blaming gas stations for price-fixing and making promises to “introduce a set of measures in order to regulate the price of gas” have failed to stem the social unrest. The government’s statement that it had instructed gas station owners to reduce the price of LPG to 21 cents per liter has also not contained the situation.

Protest have drawn in both the Russian- and Kazakh-speaking populations. Many demonstrators have raised demands for the government to resign and for the creation of a new system for the election of regional governments. One of the most popular slogans reportedly has been, “Old man go away” (“starikh ikhodi”), a reference to the 81-year-old Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose family has dominated Kazakh

politics for the past three decades.

Nazarbayev, a former Stalinist bureaucrat who oversaw the restoration of capitalism in Kazakhstan and served as the country's president from 1991 to 2019, epitomizes the post-Soviet oligarchy that has enriched itself on the sale of oil, metals and other natural resources for 30 years. While the average Kazakh salary is just \$570 a month and many earn the minimum wage of just \$97 a month, Nazarbayev reportedly has a net worth of \$1 billion and owns more than \$107 million of luxury properties in London.

After his resignation as president in 2019, Nazarbayev continued to retain significant influence as head of the country's Security Council. It was only in December 2021 that he handed over the reins of the ruling party to Tokayev. On Wednesday, Tokayev removed Nazarbaev and his nephew from the State Security Committee in another failed attempt to quell the protests.

While demonstrations in Zhanaozen and most of the country have remained peaceful, protesters in Almaty have increasingly clashed with authorities. The Kazakh government claims that police and national guard troops have been killed. On one day, some protesters seized control of Almaty's airport and its main government buildings, smashing bank windows and overturning police cars in the process. The presidential palace was also set on fire. Video on social media shows protesters distributing rifles. The exact circumstances and forces involved in the events in Almaty remain unclear.

Tokayev blamed foreign trained "terrorist" gangs for the street clashes and claimed that five aircraft had been stolen from Almaty's airport. He called the events "an undermining of the integrity of the state." Some reports indicate that the government is no longer certain of the loyalty of its armed forces.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday endorsed the measures taken by the Kazakh government to quell the protests, called for the fastest possible "normalisation" of the situation and warned against any "outside" intervention.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, who brutally cracked down on protests and a strike movement in his country in 2020, called upon Kazakh demonstrators "to get on your knees and apologize before the military."

The oligarchies that have emerged out of the restoration of capitalism 30 years ago are united by their fear that events in Kazakhstan are the harbinger and potential starting point of a much broader movement by the working class across the entire region. Western media reports also have stressed the threat of "instability" in Kazakhstan.

In the absence of an independent socialist political leadership, the danger facing the working masses of Kazakhstan is that the protests will be both brutally suppressed by the government and exploited by reactionary political forces. Russian media reports already indicate that the country's main political opposition party, the right-wing "Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan," has begun to play a role in the demonstrations.

Kazakhstan is of major economic and geostrategic significance, bordering both on China's Western Xinjiang region and Russia. It has vast resources of oil, gas, uranium and wheat, and is a hub for various gas and oil pipelines in Central Asia.

While the Kazakh government has historically aligned itself with the other oligarchies of the former Soviet Union, including Russia, it has also opened its doors to the US. The *New York Times* reports that Exxon Mobil and Chevron have invested tens of billions of dollars in the western part of the country. Chevron is the more heavily invested of the two oil giants, holding a 50 percent stake in the country's largest oilfield, Tengiz. Kazakhstan has also recently forged closer ties with Turkey, another NATO member.

Over the past decade, Kazakhstan has developed close economic relations with China, which have become the focal point of tensions within the country's ruling elites.



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