

PERSONNEL SHIFTS IN KAZAKHSTAN: TRADITIONAL ROTATION OR A NEW POLITICAL COURSE?

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the personnel shifts in 2012 and during the first month of 2013 in the Republic of Kazakhstan to point out that despite the scope (the government, local executive structures, and central state security services received new people), the country's state administration bodies did not undergo any rejuvenation. Furthermore, the personnel shifts in the

defense and security structures (the police investigation departments in particular) show that the country's leaders attach particular importance to the processes going on inside the country and want to keep them under control.

Ten regions received new akims (heads of the administrative-territorial units) who, when appointed, were warned about

the possible repercussions of embezzlement and misuse of budget money. New instruments of control over what the akims are doing in their regions have been created in the hopes of reducing the still fairly widespread nepotism to a minimum.

There is another interesting side to the personnel shifts of 2012-2013: just as in Russia, the parliament of Kazakhstan is turning into a "waiting room" or "depot" of

sorts where deputies either await a new appointment or live out the remaining days of their political career.

The 2012-2013 rotations are described as the first steps toward implementing a new program called the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy. The political priorities and implementation methods, however, will never change: the president remains in charge of everything up to and including the choice of prime minister.

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, personnel policy, akims, defense and security structures, the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy.*

Introduction

A series of personnel shifts in the central and local executive structures took place in Kazakhstan in early 2013. Furthermore, some of the top figures (in the defense and security structures among others) were moved to new posts. The country went through something similar a year earlier, in January 2012; these changes turned out to be but the first step toward much more impressive shifts in the upper echelons of power. In September 2012, for example, Serik Akhmetov was promoted from the first vice premier (a post he had filled since January 2012) to the prime minister.

This means that it took almost an entire year for top officials to be shuffled, very like in a pack of cards, from one post to the next.

What is behind the latest appointments in the central and local structures of power? How will they affect the country's policies? I will try to answer these questions.

A Pack of Cards

A pack of cards called the Political Olympus of Kazakhstan was presented to the public as the curtain fell on 2012. The pack contained 54 cards each bearing an embellished image of one of the republic's political heavyweights.¹

This presented a relatively accurate picture of the country's political reality: for quite a long time personnel changes have remained limited to a fairly narrow circle of officials, who are moved from one post to another. Some people believe that by appointing new people with "fresh" approaches to the old problems, the president is attempting to add vigor to state policies. Others think the president is merely maintaining a balance among the elite groups.

The latter looks more justified: so far, the newcomers have produced no positive shifts in the way the president's instructions are carried out and the state programs implemented.

The next period of rotation took twelve months to be completed. It ended in January 2013 when Karim Masimov's premiership ran out. He had headed the government for over five years, so far, the

¹ See: T. Baytukenov, "Karty reshaiut vse," available at [<http://www.time.kz/index.php?module=news&newsid=30699>], 29 January, 2013.

longest time in office. In fact, the long political season of 2003-2006 ended in 2007 when Prime Minister Danial Akhmetov and Speaker of the Senate Nurtai Abykaev lost their posts.²

During Masimov's premiership, Rakhat Aliev was removed from his post; the country experienced rapid economic growth, lived through a financial and economic crisis, two parliamentary campaigns and a presidential election, and survived the riots in Zhanaozen, loud corruption scandals, mounting religious extremism, and outbursts of terror.

This stage, however, came to an end without political storms: the current regime is obviously resolved to keep the elite and people at the helm in comfortable living conditions. The elite, which controls the economic and political levers and, therefore, the financial flows, is free to act as it sees fit, which negatively affects the country's development. This explains why the never-ending reshuffling in the government, which is acquiring new departments, agencies, development institutions, and all sorts of funds, is not yielding the desired results.

In less than 22 years of its independent existence, the republic has seen eight cabinets.³ Sociologists B. Bekturganova and G. Abdykasymova have written that the "irremovability coefficient" has been steadily growing from one cabinet to the next.

For example, 21.8% of the members of the Tereshchenko Cabinet, which functioned from October 1991 to October 1994, came from the previous, Soviet, republican government.

The Kazhegeldin Cabinet (October 1994-October 1997) acquired 35.6% of its members from the previous cabinet.

More than half (53.6%) of the Balgimbaev Cabinet (October 1997-October 1999) came from the two previous cabinets.

The next cabinet of K. Tokaev (October 1999-January 2002) employed 45.5% of those who worked in the previous cabinets; their share in the I. Tasmagambetov Cabinet (January 2002-June 2003) reached the critical point of 68.2%.

Rotation of the cabinet members is nothing but an illusion created by restructuring of ministries and departments and purely formal redistribution of portfolios within a very narrow circle.⁴

This means that the cabinet members come from a very small group of the chosen ones and that the process is anything but transparent. Top officials are sought for among those closely connected with the leaders of the elite groups; kinship plays an important role, together with personal loyalty to the president and the recruiting elite group.

The strict screening criteria and the fact that the leaders of the elite groups do not trust newcomers and, on the whole, do not want to see new people at the top explains why there have been practically no new faces in the corridors of power in the last ten years.

Earlier, before the oppositional Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan Movement was set up in 2001, the president appointed quite a few young economists and lawyers with Western diplomas to high posts. An open demonstration by the Young Turks (the non-official name of the opposition movement) increased mistrust toward the newcomers in state administration system.

The author of this article has calculated that in the D. Akhmetov Cabinet (June 2003-January 2007), the irremovability coefficient reached a record 75%. In other words, two thirds of the ministerial positions went to those who had served in the Tasmagambetov Cabinet. The Masimov Cabinet, which started working on 10 January, 2007, employed 70.6% of those who came from the D. Akhmetov Cabinet. In the S. Akhmetov Cabinet, the coefficient reached its highest figure (80%); the president endorsed its composition in September 2012; there were 20 members and the prime minister; 16 out

² See: "Peregruppirovka sil," available at [<http://www.nomad.su/print.php?a=2-200702050233>], 29 January, 2013.

³ See: Official site of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan [URL: www.government.kz].

⁴ See: B. Bekturganova, G. Abdykasymova, "Smena pravitelstva: lyubopytnaya statistika," available at [URL: <http://www.zonakz.net/articles/3103>], 29 January, 2013.

of 20 (or 80%) had worked in the Masimov government. The shifts of January 2013 did nothing to reduce the number (16) of members from the previous cabinet in the S. Akhmetov government.

We should bear in mind, however, that some of the ministers were appointed a year earlier, in January 2012 (the present prime minister being appointed at that time the first deputy chairman of the government). In January 2012, President Nazarbaev threatened to disband the government⁵; Masimov and his ministers, however, survived for another six months.

Explanations can be found in the President's Address to the Nation presented late in 2012, in which Nazarbaev outlined the country's prospects until the year 2050. The Address, now known as the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy, posed ambitious tasks: a place among the thirty most developed states of the world; a greater role for the parliament; administrative reform; and a fundamentally new system for managing natural resources.⁶

The ambitious plan was well-timed: the country expected "big oil" from Kashagan (the country's largest oil and gas field) very soon; the country leaders were looking forward to a new stage of economic growth. This explains why the country needed a new prime minister who, having armed himself with the Strategy, would steer the country toward economic growth; furthermore, the new prime minister created the illusion of a new government.

This brings to mind 10 October, 1997 and the President's Address to the Nation "Strategy of Kazakhstan-2030," which is also when a new prime minister, Nurlan Balgimbaev, was appointed to replace Akedzhan Kazhegeldin, who had fallen into disgrace.

The new cabinet is a myth—the prime minister (S. Akhmetov) is new, but the ministers are the same. This means that the prime minister has nothing to do with appointments: the president has chosen loyal ministers.

This explains why there are no younger people in the top ministerial posts; Bauyrjan Baybek, a young man moved from his previous position of deputy head of the presidential administration to the post of the first deputy chairman of the ruling Nur Otan Party, is the exception rather than the rule.

The same people are merely shifted from one cabinet to another; economic reforms and changes in the law-enforcement structures, the social sphere, and elsewhere remain on paper: those who failed to carry them out remain in their posts.

None of the previous governments was punished for its mistakes; frequent rotations do not allow ministers to acquire too much weight. They are moved from one post to another in disregard of their special skills and knowledge. This means that reshuffling and rotations are nothing more than the "imitation of activity."

According to D. Ashimbaev, a well-known expert on the elite, the state machine will go on with administrative reforms to keep tens of thousands of civil servants occupied. In December 2012, the president signed the Law on Amendments and Addenda to Certain Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan Related to the Civil Service. It is designed to increase the efficiency of the state machine by introducing, in particular, a new mechanism of functioning and assessment of civil servants based on the principle of meritocracy to select and promote the best among them, add efficiency to the state machine, and make personnel appointments more objective and more transparent. Under the same law, Administrative Corps A was set up. The president pointed out that these measures would reduce the number of state servants eight-fold.⁷ It should be said that the "imitation of activi-

⁵ See: "N. Nazarbaev kritiku et pravitelstvo i grozit emu otstavkoy," available at [<http://www.kursiv.kz/novosti/v-kazakhstane/1195219286-nazarbaev-kritiku-et-pravitelstvo-i-grozit-emu-otstavkoj.html>], 29 January, 2013.

⁶ See: "Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan—Lidera natsii Nursultana Nazarbaeva narodu Kazakhstana "Strategia Kazakhstan-2050: novy politicheskii kurs sostoiavshegosia gosudarstva," available at [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/page/page_poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-lidera-natsii-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazakhstana], 29 January, 2013.

⁷ See: "Nazarbaev podpisal popravki v zakon o gosudarstvennoy sluzhbe," available at [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-podpisal-popravki-v-zakon-o-gosudarstvennoy-službe-225546], 29 January, 2013.

ty,” which is typical of central and local executive structures, creates the illusion of their diligence and dedication.

Andrey Riabov of the Moscow Carnegie Center believes that the ruling circles in the post-Soviet countries want to stretch out the transition period⁸ as long as possible for the following reasons.

- First, the new political elites realize that new institutions of power offer the shortest road to self-assertion and promotion. They provide the opportunity to resolve, in the shortest time possible, the key task of the transition period, i.e. conversion of power and its attributes into property or, rather, offer a chance to preserve both.
- Second, there is no long tradition of feeling responsible for the country they administer; the expert also pointed out that, very much like in Soviet times when top bureaucrats were deliberately made to feel the temporary and insecure nature of their exalted statuses, officials are still not sure of their positions, even in the new conditions where there is no need for such uncertainty.
- Third, the risk of losing the status of a high-ranking administrator is inevitably accompanied by the threat of losing certain positions inside the elite.

The anti-communist revolution produced what are called transitional classes resolved to perpetuate the present transitional state of society: this will allow them to combine the inflexible hierarchy, inflexible structures, limited competitiveness, and practically non-existent vertical mobility of the communist system with the boons created by the market economy.⁹

In Kazakhstan, prime ministers are changed fairly frequently because of the political system in which prime ministers are appointed by the president and endorsed by the parliament. The ruling Nur Otan Party is in the absolute majority (80% of the seats), which means that endorsement presents no problems.

Premiership in Kazakhstan is the pinnacle of a political career, after which downfall is inevitable. Once removed from power, all chairmen of the cabinet are pushed from the scene; their names disappear from the press. This happened to all the prime ministers of independent Kazakhstan: Tereshchenko, Kazhegeldin, Balgimbaev, Tokaev, Tasmagambetov, and D. Akhmetov; this is probably in store for Masimov.

Rotation among the Law-Enforcers

There is another hidden aspect of the current personnel rotations in Kazakhstan. Under the law, the president has the right to appoint the ministers of defense, internal affairs, justice, and foreign affairs; he also appoints heads of the National Security Committee, Border Guard Service, Presidential Guard, External Intelligence “Syrbar,” Republican Guard, Constitutional Council, Presidential Administration, Security Council, Procurator General, heads of local executive structures (akims of the regions and cities with the republican status), the financial police, and the National Bank.

These structures control all the key areas in state policy; this is especially true of the defense and security structures: in 2012-2013, the heads of nearly all them were changed.

⁸ See: A. Riabov, “Praviashchie klassy v postsovetskikh stranakh zainteresovany v sokhraneniі perekhodnogo perioda. Vystuplenie na federalnom klasse Moskovskoy shkoly politicheskikh issledovaniy,” available at [URL: www.zonakz.net/articles/26246], 29 January, 2013.

⁹ See: *Ibidem*.

In 2012, Berik Imashev was appointed Minister of Justice and Erlan Idrisov became Foreign Minister. In September 2012, former prime minister Masimov became head of the Presidential Administration.

In January 2012, Minister of Justice Rashid Tusupbekov was appointed Chairman of the Agency for Fighting Economic Crimes and Corruption (another name for the financial police) to replace Kayrat Kojamjarov (who had filled the post since 2008). On 23 January, Amangeldy Shabdarbaev was appointed Commander of the Republican Guard. In January 2013, Kayrat Kojamjarov was appointed presidential aide—Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan; more or less simultaneously, Nurlan Julamanov received the post of Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee and Director of the Border Guard Service. In January 2013, the president issued a decree appointing Ruslan Jaksylykov as Chief Commander of the Internal Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; by means of the same decree, Anuar Sadykulov received the post of Commander of Arystan (Special Forces within the National Security Committee).

It should be said that the heads of all the other state structures appointed by the head of state do not have long records at these posts. Askhat Daulbaev, for example, was appointed Procurator General on 15 April, 2011; Nurtay Abykaev has been in his post since 23 August, 2010. Igor Rogov was re-appointed for his second term as Chairman of the Constitutional Council on 15 June, 2010.

Amanjol Jankuliev, director of External Intelligence “Syrbar”, and Mukhtar Ayubaev, head of the Presidential Guard, are old-timers: they have filled their posts since 17 February, 2009 and March 2006, respectively.

The above suggests that the heads of external intelligence retained their posts for four years, while the heads of internal intelligence were frequently changed. I have already written that the processes going on inside the country receive a lot of attention from the top people.

Rotation of the Heads of Regions

There are 14 regions in Kazakhstan and two cities with a republican status: Astana, the country’s capital, and Almaty, the former capital and the country’s largest financial center.

Two akims—Imangali Tasmagambetov (Astana) and Akhmetjan Esimov (Almaty)—have remained in their posts since April 2008; two akims (the Southern Kazakhstan and Eastern Kazakhstan regions) have filled their posts since March 2009; the akim of the Jambyl Region appointed in November 2009 is one of the old-timers.

The akims of the Almaty and Aktobe regions were appointed to their posts in April and July 2011, respectively. In January 2012, four regions—Western Kazakhstan, Karaganda, Kostanay, and Pavlodar—received new akims. On 15 August, a new akim came to the Atyrau Region. In 2013, five newcomers replaced the old akims in the Akmola, Kyzylorda, Mangistau, Northern Kazakhstan, and Karaganda regions. In 2012-2013, ten out of 16 regions (over 50%) acquired new heads.

On 25 January, 2013, the president held a meeting with the akims of the regions of Kazakhstan, at which he instructed them to keep unemployment in check or even create more jobs and raise the standard of living of the ordinary people. He also deemed it necessary to remind them that the country’s social and economic development should receive due attention.

Whether deliberately or not, approval of the arrest of Bergey Ryskaliev, accused of grand larceny, was issued on the same day, probably as a warning to the newly appointed akims.

Starting in 2013, the republic's leaders have been taking measures to minimize or root out corruption altogether: with this aim in view, the akims will be accessed according to a rating of 45 points; the results of the previous year cost 12 akims their posts.¹⁰

Rotation and promotions of the akims at all levels will be geared toward rating and assessments; the same applies to all civil servants; this is done to rule out or at least minimize nepotism.

According to the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy, akims of villages and auls will be elected¹¹ to clearly delineate the responsibilities and powers between the center and the regions and increase public control over the local executive structures. This means that 2,533 akims (or 91.7% of the total number of regional heads at all levels) will be elected. Later, akims of a higher level will also be elected.

Conclusion

The personnel rotations of 2012-2013 were intended to facilitate the implementation of the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy; the very fact it was adopted means that the present regime is determined to survive until 2050.

Frequent rotations at the top level are carried out with the single aim of keeping the elites under control, not to add fresh impulse to the country's development. Indeed, 80% of the ministers retained their posts; the ruling classes want to prolong the transition period for as long as possible.

Rotation of prime ministers creates the illusion of renovation, largely thanks to the efforts of the pro-government media. In fact, this illusion is needed because the country will soon be receiving oil from the gigantic Kashagan oil fields.

The president appointed new/old people to top posts in the defense and security structures.

Rotation brought new akims to ten regions; much is being done to minimize corruption in order to start using budget money more efficiently.

I have already written that the parliament has become a "waiting room" of sorts for top officials. Nurgali Ashim, former Minister of the Environment, for example, was sent off to cool his heels in the parliament; the same happened to Onalsyn Jumabekov, former Chairman of the Supreme Court Council.

Sergey Kulagin and Sergey Dyachenko (former akims of the Kostanay and Akmola regions, respectively) supply another pertinent example: the former was moved to the Senate, while the latter was elected vice speaker of the Majilis.

Two more high-ranking officials—Serik Umbetov, former business manager in the Presidential Administration, and Omarkhan Oksikbaev, former head of the Auditing Committee—also ended up in the parliament.

This means that the prime minister of Kazakhstan has never been an independent political figure. The ministers are either approved by the president or directly appointed by him; state policy and the way it is carried out remain as immutable as ever.

¹⁰ See: "V Kazakhstane osvobozhdeny ot dolzhnosti 12 akimov," available at [http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/v-kazakhstane-osvobojudenyi-ot-doljnostey-12-akimov-224790], 29 January, 2013.

¹¹ See: "Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan—Lidera natsii Nursultana Nazarbaeva."