

# Kazakhstan: The Nazarbaev Story: More 'Tragedy' Than Triumph

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**TEMIRTAU, Kazakhstan — It takes about two hours to travel by road from the Kazakh city of Temirtau to the national capital, Astana. Sometimes less.**

Nursultan Nazarbaev's journey from the place where his career began to the one where it ended was a more circuitous one.

It was in Temirtau's steel works that Nazarbaev gained his first job, the shepherd's son sent like thousands of his peers to the front lines of the Soviet Union's breakneck industrialization drive.

Astana, in turn, was his crowning achievement, a shining city of the steppe created in the image of the man who turned 83 on July 6 — the same day that the shiny, modern Astana was officially presented to the world 25 years ago.

A large painting in a Temirtau museum dedicated to Nazarbaev — an outpost of a once powerful personality cult now firmly in retreat — captures this central theme of state propaganda.

The painting shows a blue-skied and peaceful Astana emerging from Temirtau's fiery steel furnaces, with Nazarbaev bridging the divide between the past and the future.

The idea of Kazakhstan and its most famous son since independence in 1991 moving from one era to the next in lockstep similarly underpins a six-part biopic covering Nazarbaev's life and times.

All the films in the series Path Of The Leader were produced while the cult was still approaching its ill-fated climax — the renaming of Astana to Nur-Sultan, a decision that was reversed last year following the most deadly unrest since the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

And they all ignore elements of the Nazarbaev story that, if included, would probably make it an even more compelling candidate for the silver screen — the secret power struggles, the periodic crackdowns, political assassinations, the eye-popping corruption, and the many scandals of a fabulously wealthy ruling family.

For many Kazakhs, the second half of his three decade-reign proved particularly difficult to watch, as the gulf between a monied elite and a population struggling to make ends meet grew ever wider.

"I can't say anything bad about him, but I can't say anything good about him either," said Yerikibulan, a 38-year-old Astana resident, who toiled in the same steelworks as Nazarbaev — now owned by the Indian multinational ArcelorMittal — before deciding to take up taxi driving and other irregular work.

"Astana is developing rapidly, which is all very well, but if we look at Temirtau, it isn't developing at all," the driver, who preferred to use only his first name, said of his hometown.

## A Controversial Legacy

Nazarbaev remained all-powerful in Kazakhstan, even after stepping down in 2019 and allowing his protege, Qasym-Zhomart Toqaev, to succeed him as president.

He retained key roles such as the constitutional “leader of the nation” title that afforded him and his family unique protections and privileges, and the chairmanship of the Security Council, which fatefully blurred the chain of command over Kazakhstan’s armed forces and law enforcement.

That all changed after the events of January 2022, when nationwide unrest precipitated lethal violence on the streets of many Kazakh cities, most notably the one that Astana replaced as capital, Almaty.

The exact details of the power struggle that ensued may never be known, but the end result was that Toqaev, seemingly backed by Russia, emerged from the bloodshed as a president in more than just name.

Nazarbaev and key members of his clan, in contrast, would shed their remaining positions, influence, and in one case freedom in the weeks that followed.

It was Toqaev, moreover, who got to issue the official verdict on the former president’s time in power, as the dust settled on violence that left at least 238 people dead.

Speaking on January 28, Toqaev called on Kazakhs to “pay tribute to the historical merits of the first president, highlight his undoubted successes and achievements, and leave his possible miscalculations as a warning to the future leaders of our country.”

That reference to “possible miscalculations” would have been galling to hear for a man who was used to unqualified praise and sycophancy from his underlings.

But somehow, somewhere along the line, the man who was once the Kazakh regime’s *raison d’être* became its biggest liability, his popularity plummeting from one economic or political crisis to the next.

“I think the Nazarbaev story is one of great hubris, of an authoritarian leader who began to believe his own propaganda until it all blew up in his face in January 2022,” said Joanna Lillis, a journalist and the author of *Dark Shadows: Inside The Secret World Of Kazakhstan*, a book in which Nazarbaev features prominently.

The January 2022 violence began with peaceful protests over a spike in the cost of a popular type of car fuel in Kazakhstan’s oil-rich Mangystau Province.

Yet they soon became more about Nazarbaev and his family’s persistent grip on public life, with footage of a Nazarbaev statue being torn down by demonstrators in the southern city of Taldyqorghan becoming one of the unrest’s defining images.

But Lillis, who has covered the country since 2003, said that there had long been reasons to doubt the twin Nazarbaev claims of economic success and political stability, with a fatal crackdown on striking oil workers in Zhanaozen in 2011 representing another turning point in his rule.

“What he has bequeathed his people is a country that in many ways is not stable,” Lillis said. “And this a kind of tragedy for Kazakhstan.”

## 'The Era Of Nazarbaev Has Ended'

July 6 and Astana's quarter-century should have been a great day for Nazarbaev.

As it was, it passed with near silence from public figures and a barrage of mocking birthday greetings on social media to the "shal" — "old man" in Kazakh.

On July 5, the day before the public holiday, Toqaev addressed diplomats on the occasion of Astana's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday and praised Nazarbaev's decision to move the capital to the country's chilly northern steppes, offering "a powerful impetus to the prosperity of independent Kazakhstan."

But in many other ways he has looked to distance himself from his former patron by championing a New Kazakhstan and a Fair Kazakhstan, overseeing constitutional changes that will, in theory, limit future Kazakh presidents to a single seven-year term.

To be sure, much of Toqaev's rhetoric has been greeted with cynicism, with the political system that he has tweaked still closed to real competition and intolerant of dissent.

But Yerbol Zhumagulov, an Almaty-based poet and filmmaker, says there is sufficient evidence to say that the "era of Nazarbaev has ended."

"Sometimes the efforts are slow, sometimes not very convincing or impressive, but we can already observe attempts to change the system that Kazakhstan inherited from Nazarbaev," he said.

A core part of that system, Zhumagulov said, was the impunity enjoyed by Nazarbaev's relatives, who are alleged to have raked in millions — even billions — via private enrichment schemes protected by the state.

In September, Nazarbaev's businessman nephew, Qairat Satybaldy, became the first and so far only direct relative of the strongman to receive a jail sentence.

Before that, Nazarbaev's eldest daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva, lost her powerful seat in parliament, while his youngest daughter, Aliya Nazarbaeva, lost a lucrative recycling monopoly that had helped distort the market for new and imported cars.

And Zhumagulov noted the ongoing return of commercial assets and land apparently illegally privatized by the family over the years as an indisputably positive development.

"One example: they have only recently finished building the road close to the market owned by Nazarbaev's brother, Bolat," Zhumagulov said.

"All that time, because of him, they couldn't complete the road. Now they have finished it and right now I am just about to get in my car and drive down that road," the filmmaker told RFE/RL.

"If you have unlimited power, it needs to be used to the maximum extent possible for the good [of the country]. We didn't see that maximum with Nazarbaev. We can say objectively that he had some achievements, but there was more negative than positive," Zhumagulov argued.

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**Chris Rickleton** is a journalist living in Almaty. Before joining RFE/RL he was Central Asia bureau

chief for Agence France-Presse, where his reports were regularly republished by major outlets such as MSN, Euronews, Yahoo News, and The Guardian. He is a graduate of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

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