

Unrest in Kazakhstan

In the first week of January 2022, unrest gripped Central Asian Republic of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is the oil and gas rich and uranium producing country with a population of 19 million people. In the past it was a part and parcel of USSR. After the dissolution of Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (Soviet Russia), Kazakhstan became an independent republic in 1991.

From its inception as an independent republic it was ruled under the presidency of Nursultan Nazarbayev. He ruled as a 'strong man' cultivating a personality cult and regularly "winning" elections with more than 95% of popular vote and became the country's powerful leader. He stepped down in 2019. His handpicked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became the president.

Nazarbayev embraced the neoliberal capitalism and implemented its economic policies in the country during his rule of 30 years. The country's substantial natural resources were thrown open to exploitation by the transnational corporations like Chevron and ExxonMobil. It was not only the profits of the multinational that went to Westwards. But also the investments of the emerging Kazakh Kleptocracy to Westwards.

The Nazarbayev family and its cronies are heavily invested in the luxury properties. Only 162 individuals are estimated to control almost half of Kazakhstan's wealth.

As a consequence to the neoliberal capitalist economic policies, Kazakhstan had witnessed growing labour and ethnic unrest in recent years. Despite its wealth, low salaries and poor working conditions have always been issues.

When the price of liquefied natural gas (LPG), which serves as the main fuel, being doubled overnight spontaneous protest erupted in the town Zhanaozen, the unrest gathered momentum and evolved into demands for reform. Though the protests remained peaceful until they reached Almaty, the former capital, the demonstrations there appear to have been invaded by criminal elements and a spate of burning and looting followed. The protesters chanting slogans such as "old man out", burned the statues of Nursultan Nazarbayev. The unrest is changed into power struggle of the ruling elite pitted against Nazarbayev and his allies.

On the allegation of treason former Prime Minister Karim Massimov was arrested and sidelined from his role as the head of the National Security Council and several of Nazarbayev associates and relatives were arrested.

The present Tokayev with the help of Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) which sent troops immediately, put down the unrest- He criticised that Nazarbayev's rule had created a layer of wealthy people, even by international standards. Nazarbayev and establish himself as a leader of the country. He announced a 180 day cap on prices.

In the unrest 164 of people were killed, more than thousand people wounded and thousands of people were arrested.

This has unsettled the West. The US and its allies which are attempting to expand and consolidate their own sphere of influence began pushing panic buttons at this first hint of outreach or over reach by Moscow and Beijing.

But whatever may be geopolitical implications involved in this incident, the crucial issues like Kazakhstan's disparities of wealth or its democratic deficit are left unsolved.

The workers and the poor of Kazakhstan have yet to fight against disparities and democratic deficits and achieve their democratic demands!