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The Kazakh Spring: Digital Activism and the Challenge to Dictatorship

Diana T. KUDAIBERGEN
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Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan is considered one of the most stable countries in the region as a result of Nazarbayev's multi-vector foreign policy (p. 6). This stability, described by Diana Kudaibergen as an "illusion", has been perceived in the collective mindset of society as a consequence of the status quo established by Nazarbayev (p.20). However, the January 2022 protests, which began in the Zhanaozen region and spread nationwide, particularly to Almaty, have exposed the deep contradictions that undermine this illusion. As extensively emphasized by foreign media, the primary cause of the protests was often depicted as the sudden increase in liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices; however, this was merely a trigger. The real cause lay in the long-standing low living standards endured by the people of Kazakhstan, a country rich in oil and gas, and the arbitrary practices of the autocratic government that contributed to these conditions.

In her study The Kazakh Spring: Digital Activism and the Challenge to Dictatorship, Diana T. Kudaibergen examines the contradictions and lawlessness underlying Kazakhstan's political system. The author begins by outlining the political landscape shaped by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, centered around a narrow elite group. She highlights how Nazarbayev maintained this political order by cultivating and enriching elites who might pose a threat to his power. She argues that the protests of 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2019 paved the way for the January 2022 unrest, which culminated in the Kazakh Spring (*Qazaq Koktemi*). This uprising, she asserts, was the result of structural changes initiated by these earlier protests. The Kazakh Spring, however, introduced new dynamics, notably the strategic use of social media by a younger generation of activists, which was crucial to the movement's success. The protests targeted key features of authoritarian governance, such as non-competitive elections, laws that concentrated presidential power, and a one-party system, sparking a mass movement beyond the scope of traditional opposition.

Kudaibergen's eight-chaptered study makes a significant contribution to the literature by not only illustrating the political sphere controlled by authoritarian regimes but also revealing

how conflicts within this sphere create new spaces that transcend the limits imposed by these regimes. These emerging spaces, as demonstrated in Kazakhstan, introduce new actors and strategies. Bloggers, representatives of youth movements, LGBTQ activists, independent journalists, and other anti-regime actors have benefited from the power of the internet and social media to bypass government restrictions. Additionally, this book stands as the first comprehensive analysis of the Kazakh Spring, highlighting its role as a transformative event that reshaped Kazakhstan's political landscape. The Kazakh Spring created a novel political sphere where diverse groups—from pro-democracy movements to queer feminists—challenged the regime and its leader, transforming citizens' perceptions of the state, the regime, and their own positions within society. Despite their differences in gender, ethnicity, and education, these groups unified under the slogan "Go, old man", aimed at the authoritarian leader Nazarbayev. In Kudaibergen's work, it is evident that she employs a variety of methods together. In addition to qualitative and comparative methods, she also conducts a discourse analysis to examine how language is used in digital activism. She examines how activists shape their messages, the state's reaction to opposition, and how both activists and the government create narratives around political events. This analysis reveals how power, resistance, and control are expressed through language and communication.

In the first chapter, the author explores the events that led to the Kazakh Spring, with a particular focus on authoritarianism in Kazakhstan. The author examines the impact of the late 1980s perestroika (restructuring) process in Kazakhstan, describing it as a period of political opportunity marked by democratization, the rise of nationalist opposition, ecological movements, and alternative artistic communities. However, Kudaibergen notes that these forces were repressed by the authoritarian regime in the early 2000s, paving the way for the oppressive conditions that led to the Kazakh Spring. The second chapter analyzes the "Wake Up Kazakhstan" (*Oyan, Qazaqstan*) movement, which led to the June 2019 protests. The author includes interviews with young activists, highlighting how arrests and trials united the core group of protesters. For instance, activist Asia Tulesova reflects on the significance of these events, noting: "It was great not to be afraid, not to be afraid to shout, to say what we think" (p. 71). In the third chapter, the author examines the transformation in activists' perceptions of the state. Kudaibergen argues that within the Oyan, Qazaqstan movement, there is a growing belief that the state must be saved from the regime, seen as a harmful force. The protesters also engage in digital activism and solidarity through platforms like Masa, Umytra, and BatyrJamal. Each of these platforms, created by Assem Zhapisheva and Aisana Ashim, active members of Oyan, Qazaqstan, served a distinct function. Masa was a platform providing information on the rule of law, BatyrJamal focused on the feminist agenda, and Umytpa aimed to commemorate those who died during the COVID-19 pandemic but were excluded from official statistics.

The fourth chapter delves into the dynamics of the relationship between security forces and protesters. Kudaibergen contends that in authoritarian regimes, security forces are utilized primarily as tools for regime survival, tasked with enforcing control over the boundaries and norms that define social reality, rather than serving the interests of the state and society at large. In the fifth chapter, the author examines the Kazakh identity shaped by Nazarbayev's

"father of the nation" discourse. She explores how this constructed identity was contested by the Oyan, Qazaqstan movement and the Kazakh Spring, highlighting the shifting national identity in response to authoritarian rule.

In the sixth chapter, Kudaibergen analyzes authoritarian repression and police violence against civil society and protesters in Kazakhstan. She argues that the security forces' tactic of cordoning off the police highlights the regime's weakness, revealing its vulnerability in the face of rising dissent. The seventh chapter investigates the feminist and queer movements in Kazakhstan, where women's rights are traditionally framed within a patriarchal system. The author emphasizes that these movements became key elements of the Kazakh Spring, responding directly to the rigid family and gender roles upheld by the administrations of both Nazarbayev and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. In the final chapter, co-authored with Marlene Laruelle, the authors focus on the January 2022 Bloody January (*Qandy Qantar*) protests. They draw a direct connection between these protests and the 2011 Zhanaozen unrest[1], with Kudaibergen metaphorically describing it as the spark in a room full of gas, emphasizing the buildup of tensions and the cumulative impact of previous protests that led to the violent outbreak in 2022.

A key shortcoming of the study is that, while each chapter is coherent and detailed, the book lacks overall cohesion, with the chapters feeling disjointed and more like a collection of separate articles than a unified monograph. Additionally, the author overstates the transformative impact of the Kazakh Spring on Kazakhstan's political landscape. While the movement ended Nazarbayev's direct influence, the administration of his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, continues many aspects of the old regime, suggesting that the political transformation may not be as radical as claimed. Another significant limitation of the study is that, while it emphasizes how movements like the new opposition and civil activism mobilized mass support previously unseen by the traditional opposition, it overlooks the benefits these groups derive from the existing order and their ties to the government, especially in post-Soviet republics like Kazakhstan with strong Russian connections. Moreover, the study inadequately addresses the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, which played a crucial role in ending the Kazakh Spring. The lack of sufficient analysis of the international dimensions further weakens the study, as it neglects the broader geopolitical context and external factors that shaped the outcome of the protests.

Despite these gaps, Kudaibergen's work remains a significant contribution, offering a comprehensive analysis of the Kazakh Spring, a pivotal moment in the development of Kazakhstan's political landscape and the transformation of state-society relations. The book is essential for those interested in state-civil society dynamics in the post-Soviet context, especially in Kazakhstan, and for those exploring digital activism and emerging opposition movements. Additionally, the inclusion of interviews with active participants adds empirical depth, making the study a valuable reference for future research.

1 Between 16 and 17 December 2011, workers at the "OzenMunaiGaz" company in the western Kazakh city of Zhanaozen went on strike over wages and working conditions. The strike sparked clashes between protesters and the police. The police's firing on protesters resulted in 15 deaths and over 70 injuries.