

**SOLACE** GLOBAL

# KAZAKHSTAN

RARE UNREST TRIGGERS STATE OF EMERGENCY

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## Rare Unrest Triggers State of Emergency

### Executive Summary

On 4 and 5 January, Kazakhstan saw significant unrest that was initially triggered by anger over the government lifting the price caps for Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). The unrest first erupted in the poorer west of the country; however, by 4 January protest action was being reported in the capital, Nur-Sultan, and largest city, Almaty. By Wednesday 5 January, the country's government had resigned, and a nationwide state of emergency was in place.

Whilst initially sparked by a hike in fuel prices, the unrest has been fuelled by deeper socio-economic issues. Many taking part in the protests are calling for widespread reform, including free elections, political representation and the removal of the governing elite.

Internationally, Russia will be viewing the unrest with concern. Moscow is sensitive to unrest in former Soviet states. With an important summit next week regarding Ukraine, the Kremlin will be eager for calm to be restored quickly. It has also led to Russia leaning commentators accusing "outside influences" of stoking the unrest. Despite this, it remains unlikely that calm will be restored quickly without a brutal crackdown or protesters achieving their aims.

### The Unrest

Unrest as a result of the LPG price increase broke out in the small town of Zhanaozen, in the western Mangistau region of Kazakhstan, on 2 January. Previous unrest in the region, in 2011, saw 16 people killed after security personnel opened fire on protesters. By 4 January, the unrest had quickly spread to the nearby city of Aktau, as well as the country's largest city, Almaty, the capital Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent. The rapid outbreak of unrest resulted in a quick reintroduction of fuel price caps in some areas by the country's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Despite the announcement of price reductions, the unrest quickly escalated and saw clashes and widespread looting in some areas. This resulted in reports of arrests in Almaty and Shymkent, as well as widespread internet and mobile data outages. Messenger apps Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp are all reportedly unavailable, or have access restricted. Clashes were also reported overnight with Zhanbolat Mamay, a prominent opposition figure, who was said to have been targeted by security personnel.

In response, Tokayev initially declared a state of emergency in all cities seeing unrest, however, this was later upgraded to a nationwide declaration due to the scale and intensity of the protests. The state of emergency was augmented by curfews in Almaty and the western Mangystau Province. The country's government also resigned early on 5 January as a result of the unrest with Tokayev appointing Alikhan Smailov as acting prime minister.

As of 6 January, dozens of people have reportedly been killed with more than 1,000 others injured nationwide amid the unrest thus far, according to some local media reports. Hundreds more are understood to have been detained although the exact number of arrests is still to be determined. On 5 January, protesters in cities across the country targeted government buildings, including the Akimat House in Almaty.

Protesters are also reported to have stormed Almaty International Airport on 5 January, with multiple flights being diverted or cancelled. As a result, police have begun to employ more robust crowd control measures with rubber bullets and tear gas being fired at crowds. Despite this, demonstrations, clashes and looting continued, with the narrative becoming increasingly political with calls for free elections and the ousting of top officials.

## In-Country Situation

The scale and intensity of the unrest in Kazakhstan are unprecedented. Many of the protesters have been heard shouting “old man out” in reference to former president Nazarbayev. Additionally, the quick backtracking on LPG prices, with the government moving to reduce prices, has been ineffective in calming the unrest as of yet. Demonstrators have also widely targeted security personnel and government buildings.

The country’s president blamed the protests on “destructive individuals who want to undermine the stability and unity of our society”. Some commentators have also laid the blame on opposition groups and “the West”. However, the unrest, and its rapid spread, highlights the deep socio-economic issues that run through Kazakh society. Many in the country struggle to make ends meet, especially in the country’s oil-rich west. Rare protests are usually put down, usually in a ruthless fashion.

Tokayev did add that the government would meet to discuss the demands being made by protesters. However, much of the country’s wealth is concentrated across the small elite, which Tokayev and his still influential predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev are part of. Ordinary Kazakhs also have little representation or say in how the country is run either. The regime faces no real opposition in parliament and any organised political dissent is usually targeted by security forces.

Whether the government will engage in meaningful dialogue with the protesters is unclear. The Kremlin will not be keen for such discussions, as it would set an example of a similar regime engaging in dialogue with opposition groups and conceding to their demands. A number of the protester’s demands have already been met, such as the reinstatement of the fuel cap for example. The former President Nazarbayev is also understood to have resigned as the Chairman of the Security Council of Kazakhstan, being replaced by Tokayev. It has also been reported that Nazarbayev has left the country, though this latter development has yet to be verified.

## International Significance

The speed with which the protests have spread has also taken the international community by surprise. Kazakhstan is a hugely significant country for Russia and an important nation in Central Asia with strong trade connections to both China and Europe, especially in natural resources. Italy, for example, imports around 20 percent of its crude petroleum from Kazakhstan.

Russia is especially sensitive to protests and sustained unrest in the former Soviet Union, with the Kremlin accusing the West of being behind past protests in Ukraine and Georgia. Russia will not want to see an example of a similar regime to that in Moscow begin to lose cohesion. As the leader of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) states, Russia is already set to deploy troops to assist Kazakhstan in “overcoming the terrorist threat”.

The importance of the Central Asian state has grown in recent decades with both large reserves of raw materials, namely oil, coal and uranium, and also a strategic position along the New Silk Road of China’s Belt and Road initiative. In December 2021, numerous international investment companies met with the country’s government to discuss increasing foreign investment into the country.

This importance has led to some commentators in Moscow accusing “outside forces” of being behind the unrest. Stating that these international forces are destabilising Kazakhstan, an important country to Russia and on its southern border, ahead of vital talks between Moscow and NATO on Ukraine. The Kremlin also added that Kazakhstan could solve its own problems and it was important that no one interfered from the outside.

Putin in particular has long been wary of what have been termed “colour revolutions” occurring in the Russian near-abroad. These are pro-democratic protest movements or revolutions which have often occurred in former Soviet States such as Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Russia sees these as a form of “foreign-sponsored regime change”. Already, the Russian government and analysts are warning that Kazakhstan is experiencing a colour revolution, and the Kazakh government needs to do all it can to stop it. It is within this framework, of seeing the protests as a destabilising revolution in its near abroad, that Russia is likely to intervene.

## What Next?

The situation remains volatile. However, the replacement of the country's government and robust crowd control measures may see the unrest calm in the coming days. The deployment of CSTO peacekeepers will also likely help calm the situation. However, protests over the weekend and into the coming months remain highly likely. Additionally, the underlying issues present in the country have not been addressed by the government, despite the reimposition of the fuel price cap and other political developments.

This anger and underlying discontent will not be resolved by a cut to fuel prices and heavy-handed security personnel. As such, the situation in the country is likely to remain fragile, with sustained or periodic periods of unrest likely. It also increases the likelihood of a robust crackdown by the government in an effort to restore order as a capitulation to the protesters' demands is unlikely.

There will also be concerns regionally. Kazakhstan is seen as a fairly stable country in Central Asia. Its government has long had a steady hand on the population and any previous periods of unrest have been dealt with swiftly, usually by robust measures but also by economic incentives. Should the Kazakh government fail to calm the unrest, other regional leaders will worry that their populace will begin to take inspiration. As seen in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, there could be ripple effects throughout central Asia.

As a result, sustained unrest in Kazakhstan, one of the most stable Turkic nations in central Asia, could spark similar protest action in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Unrest could also impact other regional countries, especially those suffering from similar discontent over living standards, such as Iran and Pakistan. Even Russia, where discontent over political representation has long been an issue, may experience some degree of unrest.

## Solace Global Advice

- Be aware that demonstrations are currently widespread and may lead to further deterioration in the security environment.
- Large gatherings can and have escalated into violence with little or no warning. As such, avoid all gatherings or immediately vacate the area if caught in unrest.
- It is likely security forces will continue to use aggressive measures against demonstrators, which has an incidental risk to bystanders.
- Additionally, ensure contingency measures are in place in case of a sustained period of instability occurs or if violence escalates. This includes evacuation plans and up to date intelligence to include real time trigger monitoring.
- Allow for additional time when conducting journeys, protest action and the increased police presence may result in closed or blocked roads.
- If travelling to or currently in Kazakhstan, ensure that you monitor for the latest news for the progress of protests as well as monitoring any political developments.
- Be aware of the increased security presence, notably in the capital Nur-Sultan and Almaty. Adhere to any and all instructions issued by the security forces; opposition may result in a forceful response.
- Be aware that foreigners may be deliberately targeted by security personnel.
- Do not film protest action, gathering or security personnel, such actions are likely to result in arbitrary detention.
- Travellers are also advised to use travel-tracking technology with an intelligence feed. This should enable a traveller to be alerted of any security updates within their vicinity and to update others of their movements in case of an emergency.
- Be prepared for periods of limited access to internet and telecommunication services as access has been, and is likely to continue to be, blocked.



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