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Social Change Unsettles Kazakhstan

ALIMA BISSENOVA

It is often noted that Kazakhstan was the last Soviet republic to declare its independence. Twenty-eight years later, it has become a very different society. To some extent, this has been missed by Western experts and media outlets, mainly because of their focus on the longevity of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule. This preoccupation with the workings of the regime has produced a kind of a freeze-frame image of Kazakhstan under unchanging and supposedly omnipotent leadership.

Beneath this seemingly still surface, tremendous changes have taken place, some of them brought about by the developmentalist policies of the state and others introduced by forces outside the regime's control. Most of these shifts can be grouped under four rubrics: migration, urbanization, Islamization, and globalization.

Even after his unexpected March 2019 announcement that he was resigning as president, Nazarbayev is still the elephant in the room, framing and influencing the country's path. He retains important positions as chair of the National Security Council and head of the ruling party Nur Otan; his status as “Leader of the Nation” is protected by legislation that gives him immunity from prosecution for life.

Nazarbayev's presence is also felt symbolically through the renaming of the capital, Astana, as Nur-Sultan, which was proclaimed soon after his resignation to honor one of the main achievements of his rule—building a new capital city to represent a new wave of Kazakh modernization. Prominent streets and sites, including the university where I work, are named in his honor as well.

Despite all of its symbolic continuity, Kazakhstan is a society in transition. First and foremost, it has changed demographically. Ethnic Kazakhs,

once a minority, now form an increasing majority of the growing population of 18.5 million. Twenty-one percent of the population comprises young people from the ages of 14 to 29. Most of them live in the cities and aspire to lead “modern” lives—with a good education, job, and housing—even if they embrace various and sometimes conflicting values and orientations.

STEPPE IN MOTION

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has experienced huge population movements. Although not directly comparable, these should be viewed against the backdrop of the catastrophes and population transfers that occurred in the same territory in the twentieth century. The disastrous impacts of collectivization and forced sedentarization—when the Soviets stopped people from practicing centuries-old forms of nomadic pastoralism and confiscated their livestock—led to a 1929–32 famine and the outmigration of Kazakhs to China, Mongolia, and neighboring Soviet republics. It was the greatest loss of life and culture in Kazakh memory.

In the post–World War II period, Kazakhstan was the only Soviet republic in which the “titular” ethnic group did not comprise a majority of the population. The demographic shift—the increase in ethnic Kazakhs and the parallel decrease in the European and Slavic populations—began in the late Soviet era, driven by a higher birth rate among Kazakhs and the Slavic people's greater disposition to migrate to other parts of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the USSR dramatically accelerated the process.

Some 3.4 million people, mainly of European and Slavic descent, have left Kazakhstan since the Soviet disintegration in 1991. Outmigration peaked in 1994, when nearly half a million people emigrated. The exodus continued until the middle of the 2000s, when more people were entering the coun-

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try (mainly ethnic Kazakhs from Mongolia, China, and the “near abroad” whose return to the homeland was subsidized by the state) than leaving, and higher birth rates guaranteed steady population growth. Due to these changes, the proportion of Russians in the population has dropped below 24 percent and continues to decrease, while the share of ethnic Kazakhs has reached 63 percent.

External migration is only half the story of demographic and territorial change in Kazakhstan. Another important factor is internal migration—from rural areas to regional cities, from small industrial towns and regional cities to the current and former capitals (Nur-Sultan and Almaty), and a general migration of the population from the south to the north. This northward movement was precipitated by the relocation of the capital to Astana in 1998. It has also been supported by programs that encourage people to move to the north from relatively overpopulated areas in the south. One such program subsidizes students from southern regions entering universities in the underpopulated northern regions and guarantees them employment after graduation.

As a result of these population movements, three big metropolitan areas have emerged—Almaty, with a population of about 1.9 million, followed by Astana (now Nur-Sultan) and Shymkent, both with over a million people. The state is also supporting the creation of metropolitan areas, or so-called agglomerations, in the western cities of Aktobe and Aktau.

POST-SOVIET CITIES

Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet urbanization is markedly different from its experience with Soviet-led development. Soviet urban planning aimed to create small and mid-level cities, clustered around industrial and sometimes military-industrial sites. Post-independence urbanization has been completely decoupled from industrialization.

Moreover, the continued expansion of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and a few other regional centers—like Shymkent and oil-rich Atyrau and Aktau—has been occurring at the expense of decline in many other places that once thrived under the logic of Soviet industrial expansion. The effects of post-Soviet deindustrialization and restructuring have been particularly devastating in smaller urban centers, especially in towns that sprang up around steel and copper factories and mines, or were part of the Soviet military complex. Many of them are mired in economic depression.

Post-Soviet urbanization has been qualitatively different from the Soviet era in that most of the growth has been in larger cities. In 1989, only 17 percent of urban residents lived in cities with populations larger than 500,000. In 2019, 60 percent of the urban population resides in cities of that size (in descending order: Almaty, Shymkent, Nur-Sultan, Karaganda, and Aktobe).

The largely uncontrolled nature of this urbanization is another big difference from Soviet times. The Soviet authorities controlled the populations of the central cities through employment and registration requirements. One could not live in the capital of the republic, Alma-Ata (the Soviet name for Almaty), without being officially employed or registered as a student.

The less-regulated process of recent years has created urban tensions often described, stereotypically, as either ethnic or class-based cultural conflict between the newly urbanized rural migrants and longer-established urbanites. These trends have also been viewed as part of the “Kazakhification” of the cities. Formerly Russian-dominated cities like Almaty, Karaganda, and even Aktobe and Kostanai in the north have been largely “Kazakhified,” now that ethnic Kazakhs account for the majority of their populations.

Views on the effects of Kazakhification sharply diverge. According to some nationalist accounts, these cities have received a healthy injection of Kazakh traditionalism, rectifying the imbalance of Soviet times, when Slavic and other European people lived in the cities while the Kazakh populace lived in the countryside. Even though it was often proclaimed that Soviet rule brought urbanization to the steppes of Kazakhstan, these cities, by and large, were not built for Kazakhs—to live in a city, one had to leave Kazakh culture and language behind.

In other accounts, by both Kazakh and foreign writers, Kazakh traditionalism is often held responsible for all the problems ailing society—from corruption, including scandals at the highest levels of power, to quotidian forms of urban disorder such as trash in the streets and public urination. In many such accounts, whether it is blamed for these problems or seen as a problem in itself, Kazakhification is associated with the increasing visibility of what are perceived as rural and even “oriental” cultural practices in the cities. Kazakh traditions are disparaged as archaic elements that drag the country backward rather than helping it move forward on the path of modernization.

Voices decrying the rural and southern Kazakh-speaking migrants and their allegedly uncivilized habits have been particularly loud in Almaty, a former stronghold of the elitist Soviet intelligentsia. Municipal and civil society institutions are actively trying to inculcate “urbane” qualities among migrants through “urban pedagogy”—cultural programming and events in the neighborhoods seen as lacking in proper urban culture. Similar urban pedagogy initiatives have been rolled out in other major cities.

One of the proverbial horrors most often cited in laments over the perceived ruralization and orientalizing of Kazakhstan’s cities is the ritual of slaughtering sheep on Kurban Ait (Eid al-Adha), Islam’s annual Festival of the Sacrifice. Bloggers and journalists commonly disparage this tradition as unsuitable for city life. Every year, one or two eyewitness reports of sheep being slaughtered publicly in the courtyards of Almaty stir up more criticism of such “ancient” and “oriental” traditions. In a curious way, these views echo anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe and the largest Russian cities.

During the latest Kurban Ait, in August 2019, the municipality of Nur-Sultan and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (an independent body) designated seven places within and just outside the city as official sheep slaughtering sites. They assigned 50 butchers and 30 clerics to these sites to make sure that the slaughtering was conducted in an orderly fashion and in accordance with Islamic law. The Spiritual Administration organized such slaughtering sites throughout the country, providing sanitary facilities even if they did not do much to soothe the tensions between secular and religious communities.

HOUSE-PROUD

Oil is commonly portrayed as the main source of Kazakhstan’s wealth. However, in recent years the oil industry has accounted for no more than a quarter of gross domestic product, and that share has been decreasing since 2011—it is now down to 17 percent. Except for in the western part of the country, oil infrastructure is not particularly noticeable.

The industry that benefited most from the oil boom and has had a more visible impact throughout the country, creating jobs and leaving its im-

print on the cities and even the countryside, is construction. It is one of the fastest growing sectors in Kazakhstan, and in many ways has replaced former Soviet production sites in terms of its significance for the country. One could say that construction is responsible for changing not only the landscape but also people’s values—their aspirations and expectations for what normal, modern life should be like.

Among the most conspicuous changes introduced by new construction are expectations about comfortable housing and homeownership. More than two million people in Kazakhstan are now registered as owning detached family houses. Half of these houses have three or more bedrooms. Many more millions of Kazakhstanis own their apartments. This marks a notable shift from Soviet times, when most housing was assigned by the state through the workplace or distributed based on need.

With the rise of viable housing markets in booming cities, people are compelled to participate—to have their property appraised, put it on the market, and make decisions about investing, renovating, and taking out loans. When thinking about their housing options (to own or to rent, where, and how?), people constantly must make choices about their lifestyles and try to find their own balance between mobility and stability in changing economic conditions.

Many Kazakhstanis have eagerly taken to home improvement projects. In contemporary Russian, the word *remont* no longer means just “repair” or “renovation.” *Remont* is the finishing work, the decoration that is done to a house or an apartment to personalize it. Anyone with modest savings is keen to get started. The home has become a miniature but full-fledged building site, a reflection of the large-scale construction developments in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Shymkent, and other cities—on a unit-by-unit, individual level.

HALAL CONSUMPTION

Two other processes are happening simultaneously in Kazakhstan’s cities: Islamization and the emergence of a new bourgeoisie. Both are characterized by a disciplined style of consumption, which they contrast with the reckless consumption associated with Kazakhs or Russians who have gotten rich quickly, and in the eyes of many,

Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most globalized countries in Central Asia.

undeservingly. Muslim entrepreneurs have found a niche offering fellow Muslims the means to enjoy consumption with propriety—and avoid excess.

A notable example can be found among the fashionable coffeeshops that have proliferated in Nur-Sultan's glittering downtown. While there is a variety of international franchises—including Starbucks, of course—Café Rafe is the most successful locally owned chain. Its branches compete not just as coffeeshops but also as casual restaurants and upscale pizzerias.

There are six branches in the city, all in prime locations. The chain is owned by a family that is close to the Nazarbaevs and has long been part of the establishment. Unlike some other elites, this family has gained respectability through scrupulously legal business conduct—making sure that workers are legally employed, all taxes are paid, and all deals are transparent. They have also cultivated a reputation for responsible citizenship with charitable giving and social activism on behalf of children with disabilities from underprivileged backgrounds.

There is nothing explicitly Muslim about Café Rafe. The interior is decorated in a modern, minimalist style, with bookshelves featuring bestsellers in Russian and English. The menu consists mostly of Italian dishes and pizza, interspersed with a few other options like local chicken-noodle soup, Turkish lentil soup, and a Mongolian beef special. No alcohol is served, nor is pork on the menu.

All the branches of the café cater to a broad clientele ranging from high school students to families with children, young people and couples, and groups of men and women. Lunchtimes are always booked in advance; in the evening, it is hard to get a booth or a table near the window. The Café Rafe across from the central Keruen shopping mall downtown also houses on its second floor a women-only spa and salon that was initially established as a franchise of a salon in Dubai.

While outsiders might not notice the understated halal nature of the café until they order drinks, many Nur-Sultan citizens deliberately choose Café Rafe over other options as a “safe,” “ethical,” and inexpensive place for dining and socializing that suits their lifestyle. It projects an aura of ci-

vility, modernity, and cosmopolitanism without promoting “undesirable” habits like drinking and smoking.

Such activities are permitted in more “hipster”-style places—some upscale and others much less so—frequented by a different kind of clientele for whom casual drinking is a part of the lifestyle. For them, Nur-Sultan offers a wide variety of pubs and restaurants where alcohol is served, from nightclubs with outrageously expensive cocktails to Uzbek eateries offering cheaper vodka and beer.

These divisions between more observant Muslims and more Westernized circles in Kazakhstani society are now somewhat dimmed by the common bourgeois aspirations and consumerist lifestyles of a liberalized economy. But they still represent different visions of the role that religion should play in the public sphere and conflicting opinions on how Islamic beliefs and Kazakh traditions should manifest themselves.

In the past decade, Ramadan has again become ritually important for a significant part of the population. It is difficult to estimate even the approximate share of observant Muslims within the general, nominally Muslim population, since religious practices such as fasting and praying belong to the private domain. However,

judging by the crowds in the halal restaurants during Ramadan, more and more people have started fasting even if they do not observe other required practices of Islam, such as praying.

The growing Islamization of public places becomes particularly visible during Ramadan because of the commercialization of ritual consumption. This is one time of the year when the Muslimness of Café Rafe comes to the fore. Even many restaurants that ordinarily are not known for being halal cater to those breaking the fast every evening during Ramadan, drawn by popular demand to this segment of the market.

Previously, in the tradition of Central Asian hospitality, people who observed the fast as well as those who did not would take turns inviting friends and relatives to break the fast at their homes with the evening meal known as *auzashar*. Today, *auzashars* are often outsourced to restaurants. During Ramadan, they make up a major portion of restaurants' business. Even “not so Muslim” establishments like the Hilton and Marriot hotels try to tap into this market by offering *auzashar* buffets.

Even after his unexpected resignation, Nazarbayev is still the elephant in the room.

GLOBALIZATION FATIGUE

Toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most globalized countries in Central Asia. According to UNESCO data, 89,505 students from Kazakhstan studied abroad in 2017. The state sponsors English-language education programs and many other initiatives that are meant to make Kazakhstan a part of the global knowledge economy.

Foreign investment has flowed into the country, and has been used with varying degrees of wisdom. The border and immigration regime remains relatively open to foreign specialists and migrants, which occasionally provokes local discontent.

The benefits of a globalized economy have not been equally distributed throughout the country. Globalization has met with resistance from more traditional quarters of society—such as teachers who don't like to teach in English, or parents who are weary of their children's constant mobility and wish to see them settled nearby rather than studying or working abroad. Many more people are also wary of foreign investment and resistant to the idea of working for foreigners, particularly the Chinese.

A wave of anti-Chinese protests swept the country in 2016 in response to rumors that Chinese investors might take over tracts of agricultural land. In September 2019, protests erupted against Chinese involvement in the oil sector. Despite widespread sinophobia, the country's inclusion in Chinese-led infrastructure projects has had some positive effects. A road project linking western China with Western Europe passes through Kazakhstan and has finally connected formerly isolated parts of the country, opening up vast territories for tourism and agriculture. The Chinese have also helped improve Kazakh oil-processing capacity.

Nonetheless, one could say that there is a degree of globalization fatigue in Kazakhstan, and growing conflict over different varieties of globalization—Islamic, Western, Eurasian, Chinese, and so on. So far, Kazakhstan's relative openness under a long-entrenched authoritarian regime has allowed its fast-changing society to maintain equilibrium in a fast-changing world. The question is whether the new post-Nazarbayev regime will be able to keep this balance among global forces and conflicting sectors of a more open society. ■