

IS TURKEY FALLING IN STEPPE WITH KAZAKHSTAN?

BY MICHAEL MESQUITA AND JACK KENNEDY

Kazakhstan and Turkey are two very different countries. But, at the helm of each, is a leader with political ambitions that dominate the state. While Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev have different levels of authority and control, their political success has largely come through manipulating their countries' constitutions, consolidating elite political networks, and using the states' resource wealth to reward and punish allies and opponents.

Contrasting the political strategies of these two figures reveals much about how ambitious, dictatorial leaders in the Middle East and Central Asia maintain and entrench their power.

Manipulating a Constitution

At the age of seventy-six, Nazarbayev has served as president and dictator of Kazakhstan since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout his rule, Nazarbayev has used constitutional amendments to entrench his position and influence.

A constitutional referendum in 1995 considerably expanded Nazarbayev's power by giving him control over appointing the prime minister, ministers, heads of regional administrations, as well as the ability to dissolve parliament. In 2007, [constitutional amendments](#), which gave some powers to parliament, also lifted the term limits for Nazarbayev to serve as president. In 2010, parliament passed a law that gave Nazarbayev special status as '[leader of the nation](#),' while extending life-long immunity from prosecution to both him and his family members.

Taken as a whole, these measures have given Nazarbayev a great deal of influence over domestic and foreign policy, and made both him and his family virtually unaccountable for their actions.

Adopting a similar strategy, Erdoğan has tried to use his country's constitution to consolidate his own power. Since assuming the presidency in 2014, he has made [no secret of his desire to change the constitution](#) in favor of an executive system that centralizes authority in his hands.

Historically, Turkey has been a parliamentary system, with institutional checks to prevent accumulations of power in a single executive figure. As history has demonstrated, however, whenever there have been formal barriers to his ambition, Erdoğan has simply changed the rules of the game.

In 2007, the AKP, Erdoğan's party, called for a referendum aimed at changing the constitution so that the president would no longer be nominated and elected by parliament and, instead, selected by popular vote. The amendment limited the president to a term of five years instead of the previous seven, but allowed all presidents who were elected after the amendment's implementation to stand for a second term.

In retrospect, these changes were intended to position Erdoğan for a seamless transition from prime minister to president, at the expense of his political rivals, and to shift Turkey away from a parliamentary system.

Another constitutional referendum was held in 2010, which was even more important. This referendum was a power play by the AKP, aimed at removing the military's outsized influence on Turkish politics. Since the military coup of 1980, the Turkish army had served as the ultimate guardian of the country's political order. Under Turkey's 1982 constitution, it was insulated from political pressure and prosecution.

The referendum was successful and, as a result, members of the armed forces were stripped of their immunity from civilian prosecution. Mass trials of the military's high command quickly followed, allowing Erdoğan to remove the most potent challenge to his power.

“MASS TRIALS OF THE MILITARY'S HIGH COMMAND ALLOWED ERDOĞAN TO REMOVE THE MOST POTENT CHALLENGE TO HIS POWER.”

The 2010 referendum brought reforms to the judiciary that also benefitted Erdoğan. Turkey's Constitutional Court was increased in size from eleven to seventeen permanent justices. While superficially the move was intended to comply with EU standards, in reality, it was used to stack the court with allies of Erdoğan and the AKP. The pool of available judges for promotion to the Constitutional Court was widened to include an additional five lower courts, as well as senior administrative officers and lawyers. This gave the president, who can appoint four of the Court's members, even more of a chance to select someone to his liking.

Still unsatisfied, Erdoğan began maneuvering for further constitutional amendments that would give the president legally binding executive powers and the authority to potentially disband parliament. After the AKP failed to secure a majority in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, it seemed these changes would not materialize. But, after the newly seated parliament failed to form a coalition government, snap elections were called in November. The AKP won this contest, thanks to a sustained media campaign intended to maximize fears over instability in the country.

“TURKEY'S OPPOSITION FOUND COMMON GROUND IN AN ABSOLUTE REFUSAL TO ENDORSE ERDOĞAN'S AMBITIONS FOR A THIRD CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM – SIMILAR BARRIERS HAVE BEEN VIRTUALLY NON-EXISTENT IN KAZAKHSTAN”

Though this result seemed to bode well for Erdoğan's political ambitions, the Turkish opposition has, so far, prevented him from securing his position as the country's de facto dictator. While members of Turkey's opposition are known for their mutual antipathy, they found a degree of common ground in an absolute refusal to endorse Erdoğan's ambitions for a third constitutional referendum; similar barriers have been virtually non-existent in Kazakhstan, where no meaningful political opposition exists.

Nurturing Elite Networks

For both Nazarbayev and Erdoğan, consolidating power has required more than just passing laws. It has also demanded networks of loyal, elite business and political allies.

“NAZARBAYEV HAS DEVELOPED AN INNER CIRCLE THAT REPRESENTS HIS INTERESTS IN THE GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY”

In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev has developed an inner circle that represents his interests in the government and economy. This elite's top tier is composed of the president's family. His eldest daughter, [Dariga Nazarbayeva](#), became deputy prime minister in September 2015. Her son, Nurali Aliyev, is deputy mayor of the capital, Astana.

Nazarbayev's family members are also among the [wealthiest individuals](#) in the country. His middle daughter, Dinara, and her husband, Timur Kulibayev, hold stakes in important sectors, such as finance, oil, and gas.

For his part, Erdoğan has developed an elite network that is specifically aimed at circumventing his political opponents, and exerting his control and influence over the state. Figures like Ethem Sancak and Mehmet Cengiz have become notorious for allegedly contributing millions of dollars to purchase media outlets that have been converted into pro-government mouthpieces. In return for their loyalty, these men have obtained preferential access to tenders for massive state infrastructure projects that have driven the growth of the AKP's economy.

“ERDOĞAN HAS DEVELOPED AN ELITE NETWORK SPECIFICALLY AIMED AT CIRCUMVENTING HIS POLITICAL OPPONENTS”

In September 2015, Erdoğan manipulated elections for the AKP's main policy-making unit, the Central Decision and Administrative Board, to secure places for his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, and other political allies. At least [34 percent](#) of the appointees elected in September had a direct personal relationship with Erdoğan.

The [brother of Erdoğan's lawyer](#) has also been appointed head of the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, effectively giving Erdoğan oversight over political and judicial decision-making. In November 2015, when Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu announced his new cabinet, it included [key positions](#) for Erdoğan's son-in-law and several of his long-term personal advisors.

Maintaining Loyalty

In both Kazakhstan and Turkey, the president has maintained political loyalty through the distribution of resource wealth. While the intentions are the same, the type of resources available for distribution in the two countries differs.

“IN BOTH COUNTRIES THE PRESIDENT HAS MAINTAINED POLITICAL LOYALTY THROUGH THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH”

In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev has rewarded his elite network with wealth from the country's vast oil reserves. He has also distributed positions in government and valuable, state-run enterprise to his allies. With his close connections to Nazarbayev and his family, Karim Massimov, Kazakhstan's longest serving prime minister, heads the state's Sovereign Wealth Fund, Samruk-Kazyna, and has allegedly [secured interests](#) in the telecoms industry.

Lacking access to the same kind of natural resources, Erdoğan has distributed valuable [state procurement contracts](#) to his business allies, in exchange for public displays of loyalty and contributions to NGOs run by his family members. As president, Erdoğan has managed to secure a private discretionary fund estimated at \$700 million, which he has leveraged to finance his political agenda, as well as legislation establishing a parallel court system he has used to [seize his opponents' business assets](#).

A Contested Path to Regime Consolidation

The perennial concern for any dictator is what the future holds, if and when he is no longer in power. Over more than twenty-five years as Kazakhstan's unchallenged ruler, Nazarbayev has relied on informal tools of influence to create a political system that has ensured his family's wealth and legacy will remain secure when he leaves office. This approach has fundamentally undermined democratic development in Kazakhstan and limited the state's economic potential.

Undeniably, the Turkish political environment is far less dysfunctional and retains democratic institutions. But, despite its tradition of multi-party politics and a history of checks to authoritarianism, Turkey's democracy is under threat from Erdoğan's ambitions. With a single-minded approach to personal power, Erdoğan has undermined the country's political institutions.

Comparing Kazakhstan and Turkey reveals the pressures and incentives for capturing state power in the Middle East and Central Asia. It suggests that a vibrant opposition is key to preventing authoritarianism. At the same time, even in a country like Turkey, where party politics is vibrant, elite networks and control over resource wealth can go a long way toward chipping away at the institutional obstacles that prevent a dictator from rising to power.

“COMPARING KAZAKHSTAN AND TURKEY REVEALS THE PRESSURES AND INCENTIVES FOR CAPTURING STATE POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA”

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