

The veteran leader is in no rush to give up real authority.

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*Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev (right) is the interim Kazak president until 2020. Photo: akorda.kz*

Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbayev's surprise resignation does not signal a complete departure from the business of government, according to analysts.

The 78-year-old has led the country since the fall of the Soviet Union and there has been much speculation in recent years over how he would arrange a possible transfer of power. However, his announcement during a March 19 prime-time television broadcast was unexpected.

"I have made a tough decision to resign as the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan," he

announced.

The next presidential election in Kazakhstan is scheduled for 2020, and many are questioning why he chose to resign instead of waiting for the end of his presidency. John MacLeod, a senior analyst with Oxford Analytica and former IWPR managing editor, said that he believed stability was at the heart of Nazarbayev's strategy.

"He wants a managed transition, to get the right person elected, to give that person visibility - they might not be very well known to the public- and to make sure the whole governing elite cooperates," MacLeod said. "Surprises are Nazarbayev's style, so the announcement is not a complete shock - it is still a big shock. But it is a lot better than waiting until 2020. That option would have created elite instability, possibly, with no one knowing what was going on. This way, we have a plan."

Nazarbayev has declared that his powers, as the constitution dictates, have been transferred to senate chairman Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, who will be interim president until a new head of state is elected.

"Everything will remain as usual and I don't expect any serious changes," said Astana-based analyst Askar Mukashev. "Nursultan Nazarbayev is still the Yelbassy [leader of the nation] and the chairman of the Security Council, which gives him an opportunity to influence the country's domestic and foreign policy."

Indeed, Nazarbayev used his resignation speech to emphasise that he had not withdrawn from the business of government.

"I am still the chair of the Security Council with serious powers. I am still the chair of Nur Otan party, the member of the Constitutional Council," he said. "In other words, I'm staying with you. The problems of the country and the people are still my problems."

According to MacLeod, Tokayev and Karim Massimov, the chair of the National Security Committee (NSC), will now act as agents to preserve both the power and influence of Nazarbayev, his family and his close associates.

He said that neither Tokayev nor Massimov were likely to run for the presidency, as their current privileged position would give them more real power than the elected head of state. "The longer-term issue...is that [Nazarbayev] stops being president, and as time goes on, that matters. He keeps all those other jobs but he still needs the elite and the new president to cooperate if he wants things to happen," MacLeod said.

"At the same time, assuming the new administration does not bring radical change (or instability) he can maybe begin to step away from day-to-day power. That's a bit of an experiment - he also needs to be 100 per sure his family is safe," he added.

**PRESERVING HIS LEGACY**



*Nazarbayev has been running Kazakhstan since 1989.  
Photo: ru.sputniknews.kz*

Nazarbayev has been the unchallenged leader of Kazakhstan since 1989, when he was appointed first secretary of the Kazak Communist Party, and subsequently the country's president in 1990. He was re-elected five times.

Many figures among his wide circle of relatives, including his children, their spouses and even his grandchildren, hold executive offices in government-run or affiliated institutions. Kazakhstan has substantial resources of oil and gas, which have helped Nazarbayev attract foreign investors, build the new capital city of Astana and ensure a relatively high level of income compared to other countries in the region.

The average salary in the country is nearly 430 dollars, which is almost twice as much as the salary in neighbouring countries of Central Asia.

"If not for oil, the country would have developed differently," said Central Asia analyst Sheradil Baktygulov.

"Kazakhstan-based experts say that 'Kazakhstan equals Kyrgyzstan plus oil.' Without oil, Kazakhstan would have the same [much poorer economic] situation as Kyrgyzstan."

Last spring, the head of the National Bank of Kazakhstan Daniyar Akishev **reported** that the Kazakh economy is 85 per cent dependent on oil and metal exports.

But Kazakhstan remains highly corrupt, placed 124 out of 180 countries by Transparency International in their annual **Corruption Perceptions Index**.

Its heavy dependence on global hydrocarbon prices also leaves its economy vulnerable.

"The challenges are as before: running a resource-based economy that is quite vulnerable to global oil and metals price changes and also to Russian economic cycles," said MacLeod.

"Trying to diversify into other areas of economic activity; dealing with difficult Russia and economically powerful China; managing an essentially undemocratic system in which you need good personnel as well as balancing elite interests and even taking care of some grassroots interests - although there is no opposition."

Nonetheless, analysts said that Nazarbayev has repeatedly demonstrated political wisdom and maturity by skilfully balancing his relations with Russia and China as well as Western and Arab countries.

Kazakhstan has benefited from these relationships while managing to avoid getting sucked

into disputes between the countries.

“The big challenge for a new president is that no one has done this [transfer of power] before: Nazarbayev is the first and so far only leader,” MacLeod continued. “Managing this big operation – Kazakhstan, with its domestic and foreign policy complexities – is a tough task simply because that role is so completely identified with Nazarbayev personally.”

**IWPR’s Natalia Lee contributed to this report**

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