“The authorities can use force to at best delay a period of massive public protest in the short to mid term. Limitations on civil and political participation within the system in the end will lead to the appearance of non-systemic and radical means of political expression,” – Political Scientist Talgat Mamyraiymov attempts to clarify and expand on the potential, perspectives, and risks for the Kazakhstani protest movement in this cabar.asia exclusive.

The Factors and Social Context of Protests

Recently in Kazakhstan there were a series of rather resonant events including protests and a terrorist attack in Aktobe, which have caused many to consider the risk of large-scale, bloody protests erupting in the country. Past protests have shown that there is high-level of dissent in Kazakhstan due mainly to social problems. Land reforms became the catalyst for these protests, a sort of final frontier for some ordinary Kazakhs and a sign of solidarity with peasants. For many of our villagers with relatives in the cities, land rented from the government is the primary source of subsistence due to lack of employment opportunities in the villages and widespread dependence on state assistance. In short, the land issue exposed the terrifying nature of social inequality in the poorest segments of Kazakhstani society, representatives of which actively participated in the protests. Our peasants know firsthand that social inequality in Kazakhstan is fostered by corruption in the state apparatus. Economist Jaras Akhmetov has shown that slightly more than 700,000 people on private farms comprising .3% of all farmlands produce 45.75% of the gross agricultural output. Meanwhile, on the remaining 99.7% of agricultural land, large landowners provide the rest of the gross agricultural output with the help of significant government subsidies.

The Kazakhstani Government often talks about the high GDP per capita in the country (e.g. $13,611.5 in 2013 and $12,601.7 in 2014). In reality, not all Kazakhstanis earn such high incomes. According to the findings of independent experts, the GINI coefficient in Kazakhstan is several times higher than official data suggests. To illustrate this with statistics, from 2010-2014, the per capita nominal monthly income of the population was 38,779 tenge, 45,936 tenge, 51,594 tenge, 56,235 tenge, and 62,007 tenge respectively. In
the third quarter of 2015 the figure was 67,918 tenge (roughly $252 according to the exchange rates at that time). Against a backdrop of rising prices of across all products, the real incomes of Kazakhstanis in December 2015 were 7.8% lower than in December 2014. During the 2009 crisis, the real incomes of Kazakhstanis decreased by only 3.1%.

Currently in Kazakhstan, particularly in some rural districts of a few oblasts, no less than 75% of the population have a below average income, are in extreme poverty or close to it. On a separate note, there has been a significant deterioration in the standard of living of many Kazakhstani internal labor migrants, of whom there is an impressive amount (1 to 2 million people depending on the season). As international practice has shown, if the cost of rent rises above 30-35% of all expenses, then there is very little left for proper nutrition, education or recreation. The majority of internal migrants spend much more than half of their salaries on rent.

The horizontal mobility of young Kazakhstanis in search of better employment opportunities is often limited by the government itself. In particular, fines can be levied for lacking a residence permit that reflects a place of employment in the larger cities, and in some cases the police are able to take people into custody to “determine their identity”. In fact, the government is not trying to provide for the labor migration from the villages to the cities. Finally, false urbanization (with its excessive demand for labor) not only creates a burden on the social services of the cities but is also one of the leading causes of the impoverishment of a significant number of Kazakhstani citizens. In this way the main limitation on both vertical and horizontal mobility in Kazakhstan is the closed nature of the upper echelons of Kazakhstani society, which rarely allows representatives of other social groups to enter the elite or participate in elite projects. In addition, the overwhelming majority of young Kazakhstanis lack the necessary resources to climb the social ladder (social capital as a combination of useful connections, time and the resources for high-quality professional development). The majority of Kazakhstanis suffer, often latently, from the impossibility of self-realization due to a lack of resources and opportunity.

As a result, absolute and relative deprivation is developing among these citizens in relation to the members of the ruling elite and those affiliated with them. Modern Kazakhstani society is undergoing its first social stratification in its short history. Thus, there is a high level of deprivation among those who witness how some become rich through government corruption without any outstanding qualities to recommend them let alone morals or ethics. It is therefore not surprising that demands for socio-economic and political change were heard during the recent protests. Many ordinary Kazakhs often said, “kôterilis bolyp jatyr
Protest potential and the LaPierre Paradox

Protests are often successful, i.e. lead to radical changes, mainly by having a significant collection of organized groups at their core as well as financial and informational resources. It is doubtful that those protesting in our country today have this. Most ordinary Kazakhstanis have become used to enduring a low standard of living and are satisfied with the bare minimum. Our people are peace loving, patient, and are used to following the old Kazakh formula for stability – “el aman, tynsh bolsyn (may there be peace and health among the people).” Due to this nearly all modern protests in Kazakhstan have been small scale and without well-organized groups at their core. Sociological surveys speak of a large potential for protest movements in the country and of a significant number of Kazakhstanis ready to participate in open protests, but in practice the number of protesters is many times less than these surveys seem to indicate. In this we have a perfect example of the LaPierre Paradox and the general rule that “there is a rather considerable distance from discontent to protest and from protest to organized political action.”

However, the current protests differ in character from earlier demonstrations, because they reflect a sustainable, national, social discontent and opposition to the existing social order. In this context the protests that took place are an appearance of collective behavior emerging “from efforts undertaken by people to achieve a common goal – the elimination of existing injustice in society.” Under these circumstances, a further deterioration in the socio-economic climate (e.g. drastic price hikes on basic goods, in particular groceries; an increase in tariffs on utilities, etc.) could lead to the appearance of radical dissent within Kazakhstani society. The socio-economic situation in our country in the near future will only deteriorate. According to official statistics, Kazakhstan is currently in a recession with a 0.2% decrease in the GDP in the first quarter, inflation at 15.4%, and retail turnover falling by 2.3%. Furthermore, some economists suggest that our economy faces stagnation.

Perspectives and levels of the protest movement

Discontent in our society is often based on socio-psychological issues. The social turmoil of Kazakhstanis in most cases leads to the appearance of various psychological disorders (nervousness, depression, etc.), crime, drug abuse, and alcoholism (a desire “to lose oneself”). Currently about 25-30% of Kazakhstanis live at the edge of suicidal ideation, due
to the fact that they have lost practically all hope in the future. Aleksandr Asmolov, a leading psychologist, believes that a person frames and experiences the present as the realization of a future image. Consequently, losing hope in a positive future leads to a loss of interest in life, an inability to find meaning in it, a high level of social pessimism, and openness to extreme forms of protest. Despite the rational motives stemming from a fear of losing land, a socio-psychological phenomenon appeared, for example, as young people in Kyzylorda began throwing rocks at security forces. This reflects a decent level of irritation with and unarticulated dissent against the activities of the government. This fact shows the large potential for revolution in the spirit of the writings of Gustave Le Bon, who felt that revolution, as the most destructive form of mass protest, is the appearance of mass hysteria and the triumph of irrationality.

With their disproportionate use of force, the Kazakhstani authorities contributed to an increase in the number of protestors and people inclined to protest. Segregation and the infringement of the rights of villagers and internal migrants in large cities has for all intents and purposes already caused many to view the government and law enforcement as being the primary source of their social problems. In this context, the new land reforms could seem to be a symbol or indirect assault on the part of the government on traditional village life. It is necessary to note that among Kazakhstani experts there is a widely held belief that peasants cannot be the driving force of a protest or radical social movement in Kazakhstan. Lenin himself and his associates would disagree, considering that peasants in the last century played a key role in most revolutions. Conditions are now forming in our country particularly for peasants and village transplants to become the core of protest actions.

American sociologist Daniel Yankelovich has proven the existence of two levels or gradations of protest. At the first level, the people’s demonstrations at their core are aimed against certain, defined aspects of government policy with an expectation of a remedy of the situation by the government. The second stage is the manifestation of an absolute loss of faith in the current government’s ability to improve that leads to large-scale riots, arson and pogroms. Following the theories of Yankelovich, we can assume that the vast majority of protesters in Kazakhstan still currently expect concessions from the government and ruling elites in favor of the people’s demands, wishes, and aspirations. Additionally, most protestors in our country are still afraid of engaging in open conflict with the security forces. In some places there already are small groups prepared for a confrontation with the authorities as has already happened to some extent in Zhanaozen and Kyzylorda, but these groups are not yet ready to move to large-scale clashes with the security forces. Some Kazakh peasants already feel that they may be left without land, but
they are not yet motivated to fiercely resist the government. They are prepared to survive this period of crisis like many peasants have before them by moving to the cities as labor migrants. In other words, the loss of land is not yet a decisive motivation for them to join the angry protests in spite of the government’s use of force. To cap it all off, a large number of Kazakhstani work in state-funded organizations and are completely dependent on the government.

**Conclusions**

Nevertheless, it seems that the authorities can use force to at best delay a period of massive public protest in the short to mid term. The limitations for civil and political participation within the system in the end will lead to the appearance of non-systemic and radical means of political expression. Charles Tilly once wrote that protests and social movements blossom and gain needed momentum “when people have no institutional forms of expression or when the authorities respond with direct repression.”

Now in Kazakhstan a situation is unfolding where people are joining the protests in spite of prohibitions and threats. We may yet become witnesses to mass protests, but this will require serious motivation, which could appear due to the bloody suppression of peaceful protests or society’s inability to further endure unbearable living conditions. If we consider the intrinsic nature of the Kazakh people, then a bloody end of any protest or demonstration may include a nervous, violent response from the protestors themselves. Kazakhs rarely resort to extreme violence especially against their own relatives, many of whom work for the security services, but if those same security services spill Kazakh blood, then there is a high probability of a large-scale, bloody uprising breaking out.

The actions of the Akorda (Presidential Administration) are doomed to fail in the mid-term. According to Charles Johnson, an imbalance in society eventually leads to the emergence of a revolution. These conditions are visible in Kazakhstani society. In these circumstances, people begin to “listen to new leaders that promise social change.” The April protests in Atyrau demonstrate that these independent, popular leaders have begun to appear in Kazakhstan. The limitations for civil and political participation within the system in the end will lead to the appearance of non-systemic and radical means of political expression. Because many average Kazakhstanis have lost faith in the future, they are showing a subconscious readiness to participate in possibly bloody and violent protests. In any closed society, limited resources, limited opportunities, and limited social mobility for certain groups sooner or later lead to these people attempting to change the unjust social order through violent means.

**References:**
Talgat Mamyraiymov: Protest Potential in Kazakhstan: Risks and Prognoses


Talgat Mamyraiymov: Protest Potential in Kazakhstan: Risks and Prognoses

[12] ibid, p 574

[13] ibid, p 575

Author: Talgat Mamyraiymov, Political Scientist (Kazakhstan, Astana)

The views of the author may not coincide with the position of cabar.asia

If you have found a spelling error, please, notify us by selecting that text and pressing Ctrl+Enter.