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Editorial

Turmoil in Kazakhstan

azakhstan has recently been rocked by internal turmoil that is characterized by a wave of protests and riots. And these uneasy developments have brought this former Soviet Republic into the international media spotlight. The sudden occurrence of violent incidents on the streets of a country on the eve of the inauguration of 2022 - in a country that has almost remained a huge terra incognito or an unknown region for many decades – such uneasy developments were bound to arouse curiosity around the world to know as to what brought the people on the streets of Kazakhstan, a relatively well-off country economically as compared to other Central Asian Republics.

What triggered these protests was the fact of the sharp increase in the prices of liquefied gas – from 60 to 120 tenge (Kazakh currency) – on the eve of the inauguration of 2022 and the paucity of any official measure to assuage the ire of the people. On 2 January this year, people thronged the streets of Zhanaozen, a city in the southwest of Kazakhstan, protesting against the hike in gas prices. Instead of addressing the grievances of the protesting public, local authorities resorted to clamping down the protest by force that reportedly claimed the lives of dozens of people and over 80 people sustaining injuries. The rapid spread of protests to other towns forced the authorities to promise a reduction in gas prices.

Assurances by the officials to reduce gas prices failed to calm down the protestors and the latter started demanding the ouster of former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been at the helm for three decades and he has not held the same post since March 2019. Thus, protestors' demands turned from socioeconomic to political ones, and the most common protest slogan across the country was "Old man, leave!" This sudden overnight change in the demands of the protestors from socio-economic to political ones has taken many experts by surprise.

According to media reports, in March 2019, Nazarbayev reportedly transferred the presidential office to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, while retaining unto himself for life a position as the head of the Security Council of Kazakhstan. And many experts termed this transit of power to Tokayev as a mere formality because Kazakhstan has continued to be ruled by Nazarbayev and his coterie, and over the years the authoritarian rule of Nazarbayev has been instrumental in creating a personality cult of Nazarbayev, assuming the title of Elbassy – the leader of the nation – erection of monuments of Nazarbayev throughout Kazakhstan, and even renaming the Kazakh capital Astana as Nur-Sultan.

Endowed with plenty of raw materials, the economy of Kazakhstan is massively based on the exports of oil, natural gas, uranium, coal, lead, and other basic commodities. And many multinational corporations (MNCs) have made huge investments in Kazakhstan. Earnings from exports make Kazakhstan a well-off economy with a GDP per capita of about \$ 9,700, which is relatively much higher to other Central Asian republics. Uneven distribution of the country's income along with the concentration of nation's wealth in just a few hands, too much dependence on income from exports and lack of means to create jobs for a substantial young population, etc., are some of the factors that have contributed to simmering discontent among the people of Kazakhstan. As one expert has opined, this simmering discontent eventually resulted in protests, triggered by a sharp hike in gas prices in early January.

The prevailing unease in Kazakhstan entails geopolitical and geostrategic implications for the region, with Russia, China, and the West vying for a 'sphere of influence' in Central Asia. During his three-decade rule, Nazarbayev sought the membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and this de facto meant dependence on Russia. Nevertheless, this period also saw improved relations with China and the West, while maintaining cordial relations with Moscow. However, recent protests have afforded a golden opportunity for Russia to send its troops to Kazakhstan to quell the protests, an opportunity that has been seized by Kremlin to regain its influence in this Central Asian country.

Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity are threatened, especially in the wake of Russian strategy that needs to be construed in light of Russian President Putin's recent demands to the West to return the post-Soviet space into the sphere of its influence.