

# Mitigation, Recovery and Response: Democracy in Post-Covid Central Asia

Anita Sengupta\*

The ineffectiveness of state response in the face of a crisis, excessive bureaucracy, and lack of public confidence in the state leading to narratives around the theme ‘when governments fail’ continue to dominate Central Asia in the backdrop of a harsh winter and chronic energy crisis, in a region that was once projected as an alternative energy reserve to the Middle East. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing issues of lack of health infrastructure, an unstable economy unduly reliant on remittances based on fluctuations in oil prices, and restrictive human rights bringing into question citizens’ rights to justice and democracy. Temporary security measures put in place to handle the crisis mostly remain in place while the possibility of the emergence of civil society remains nascent in urban settings and practically non-existent in traditional rural locations. However, there was some change in the perception of sections of the youth in Kazakhstan, for instance, who for the first time questioned the results of the Parliamentary elections forcing the ruling *Nur-Otan* Party to form a coalition. The loss of a super majority was significant in itself as was the realisation of exaggerations in the stereotypical understanding of centralised governments as being most effective during times of crisis. Recovery inevitably involved emerging vectors of foreign assistance, consequent foreign influence and disputes about intrusions into national sovereignty. China, for instance, packaged aid as ‘gifts’ reflecting the Chinese nation’s tradition of internationalism and its ideal of universal harmony. Projected in terms of South-South cooperation, these have been accompanied by a narrative and an evolving set of practices that stress on a parity of relationships that beguiles reality and aims at creating influence. Challenging universal principles of democracy and human rights as western it has also supported local interpretations of democracy that converge with her own understanding and serves Chinese interests. The post-pandemic context was also affected by global concerns around the withdrawal of American troops from the neighbourhood and apprehensions about increasing Russian influence, followed by the fallouts of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict impacting the region as a whole but also bilateral relations among individual states. All of these contributed to a maelstrom of domestic and international conundrums including the January 2022 street protests in Kazakhstan, where spiralling public violence was firmly controlled by a combination of domestic and Russian troops garnered under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO]. It is significant that this was the first time in thirty years that the CSTO led by Russia had been called to action at the request of the Kazakh President who then publicly acknowledged its role in restoring order, immediately evoking questions both about Kazakh sovereignty and whether civil unrest in one part of a country, fuelled by rising energy prices actually warranted action that could be called upon only in case of armed external aggression. The protests were interesting in that there was no political party or platform behind the mobilization of the people who gathered to protest fuel and commodity prices, to begin with, and then moved on to demand the removal of the corrupt government. There were no banners, no leaders leading the protests, no symbol of resistance and as spontaneous heterogeneous street activism closer to the Gezi Park protests than the Colour Revolutions familiar to the region. Anti-elitist and anti-establishment to begin with they suddenly became violent and a target for harsh reprisals. Following the restoration of order President Tokayev called for the installation of a revamped political system for what he termed *Jana Kazakhstan* or New Kazakhstan which would reflect the voices of the people more effectively. The first anniversary of the clashes coincided with the realisation that the proposed changes were largely on paper and in reality, any individual or group critical of the government stood a very slim chance of entry into the political space. Despite changes in leadership and relative progress towards greater responsiveness to public concerns in some states like Kyrgyzstan, authoritarian tendencies remained in place. This research paper is an attempt to analyse the implications of these domestic and international dynamics on the protection of citizen rights in the region with a view to understanding the extent to which a combination of factors shaped domestic responses.

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\* Anita Sengupta, Director, Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata, India  
E-mail: anitasengupta@hotmail.com