

The elite-level demonstration effect of the Arab Spring in Kazakhstan: 2005 to 2015

What impact has the “Arab Spring” had upon authoritarian Central Asian regimes? Scholars and journalists have raised the possibility of a “Central Asian Spring,” uprisings across the region ousting the incumbent authoritarian regimes. However, short of the possibility of an outright revolution, how the Arab Spring has reshaped the region has not been addressed. An examination of elite discourse and fieldwork interviews in Kazakhstan revealed a discursive and behavioural response to the Arab Spring brought about by an elite-level demonstration effect. This suggests that uprisings elsewhere, including those outside of the region, affect authoritarian regimes, even in the absence of widespread unrest at home.

Keywords: Arab Spring; Kazakhstan; demonstration effect; learning; regime security; authoritarianism

Introduction

Is democracy in terminal decline? Do the waves of populism across Europe and North America represent a threat to democracy? Across the world political rights and civil liberties reached their lowest level in 2017 in over a decade (Abramowitz 2018, 1). Apart from Uzbekistan’s historic liberalization, Central Asia was no exception to this trend. Kyrgyzstan became increasingly autocratic and the authoritarian regimes in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan have endured (Schenkkan 2018, 4). Scholars of the post-Soviet space have responded to the region’s

deepening authoritarianism in various ways. For example, Gel'man (2018) called for a re-examination of the role of actors in post-Soviet regime dynamics. Ambrosio and Hall (2017, 144–45) observed that authoritarian governments have successfully learned to thwart democratic pressures and called for an improved understanding of authoritarian learning and its relationship to authoritarian stability. I address both of these calls by examining if the “Arab Spring” uprisings impacted Kazakhstan’s approach to regime security and gave rise to elite learning.¹

The impact of the Arab Spring on Kazakhstan has most often been addressed in terms of a Central Asian Spring. In a Central Asian Spring, popular uprisings across the region would oust the incumbent governments like the 2010 Arab Spring uprisings, which toppled the regimes of Tunisia and Egypt and sparked protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Ultimately, academics and analysts rightly concluded that Central Asia would not see its own Spring (Zikibayeva 2011; Radnitz 2011; De Cordier 2012; Kendzior 2012; Blank 2012, 152). However, this does not mean that the Arab Spring has had no impact on Central Asia. The reason why these predictions of a ‘Central Asian Spring’ have missed the mark is because they have focused narrowly on the possibility of outright revolution. But prediction of outright unrest is only half of the picture. The other half is how uprising affects ruling authorities. Academic literature has addressed how uprising affects ruling elites in terms of the counter measures illiberal regimes have employed to thwart the possibility of unrest or revolution. The majority of

¹ The author acknowledges that the Arab Spring uprisings were heterogeneous. Each country which saw uprising experienced a different trajectory, with leadership ousted in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. For the purpose of this article, the Arab Spring is treated homogeneously as protest elsewhere. It is thus the fact that widespread mobilization occurred and rapidly spread across the MENA, and not its end result, that is of interest to the argument at hand.

this scholarship has centred on the impact of domestic and regional uprisings on ruling authorities. To illustrate this point, multiple studies have examined how former Soviet states responded to the post-Soviet colour revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Herd 2005; Ambrosio 2009; Ostrowski 2009; Wilson 2009; Silitski 2010a, 2010b; Stoner-Weiss 2010; Horvath 2011; Finkel and Brudny 2013; Vanderhill and Aleprete Jr. 2013; Spector 2015). Fewer researchers have examined ruling elite's perception of uprisings external to their region (Wilson 2009; Koesel and Bunce 2013). As a result, what Whitehead (2001, 6) termed "mechanisms of transmission," remain under-theorized on a transregional elite level. In other words, while the above cases have focused on *if* an impact has been felt and the *nature* of the impact, *how* the impact has been transmitted on a transregional elite level has received less attention.

While cross-regional influence has extended to predications of regional instability in Central Asia, as evidenced by speculation of a Central Asian Spring, existing assessments of the Arab Spring uprisings on Central Asian elites have been limited to their immediate impact (Radnitz 2011; Blank 2011). For example, Radnitz (2011) identified three reasons why Central Asian leaders were "Yawning Through the Arab Spring." Firstly, as a result of weak social ties linking the Arab world and Central Asia, Central Asians did not draw inspiration from the MENA events (Radnitz 2011, 4). Secondly, Central Asian leaders learned how to become more resilient in the face of challenges following the colour revolutions by banning Western NGOs, creating pro-government youth groups, and strengthening ruling parties (Radnitz 2011, 4). Finally, Radnitz (2011, 5) identified differences in the structure of civil society between the MENA and Central Asia. Protestors in the MENA were able to act through established civil society organizations, trade unions, student groups, Islamic movements, and some political

parties, but similar structures were not in place in Central Asia because of its Soviet legacy (Radnitz 2011, 5).

Because the impact of the Arab Spring uprisings on Central Asian ruling authorities has been largely overlooked, questions remain as to how they have been perceived over time. In particular, have the Arab Spring uprisings impacted Central Asian leaders' perceptions of regime security? Have they acted as a catalyst of political change in Central Asia, despite the absence of a Central Asian spring? More widely, what are the effects of uprisings elsewhere on authoritarian regimes in the absence of large-scale demonstrations at home? What theoretical mechanism can account for any effects felt? I address these questions by gauging the Kazakh regime's understanding and response to the Arab Spring uprisings as expressed through narrative, behaviour and policy. This approach goes beyond conventional emphasis on structural conditions and focuses on the agency of the regime. I pay particular attention to what I term "elite-level" demonstration effects. Patel, Bunce and Wolchick (2014, 59) have defined the demonstration effect as "the power of precedent." In its conventional sense, the demonstration effect is commonly used to explain the onset and spread of popular mobilization (Huntington 1991; Whitehead 2001; Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). For example, the demonstration effect of Tunisia's uprising in 2011, which ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, inspired subsequent protest in Egypt.

I apply the demonstration effect to the elite level where regimes may be influenced by events elsewhere as they seek to prevent challenges to their leadership. An elite-level demonstration effect may be expressed in three ways. Firstly, it can be expressed through changes in the ruling authorities' narrative. In other words, are specific events discussed? How are these events framed in elite discourse? How does this framing differ or reiterate established

elite framing of similar events? Secondly, an elite-level demonstration effect may be expressed through changes in behaviour. Have the ruling authorities changed their behaviour from an established precedent or implemented a new behaviour? Finally, an elite-level demonstration effect may be expressed through a change in policy. Changes in the ruling authorities' rhetoric, behaviour or policy which suggest that the Arab Spring was perceived as a threat would evidence an elite-level demonstration effect. Changes in narrative, behaviour, and policy may therefore occur independently of each other, or simultaneously, as evidence of an elite-level demonstration effect. The elite-level demonstration effect is therefore a mark of political change which is not limited to conventional focus on regime shifts, and may be expressed through narrative, behaviour or policy.

Because an elite-level demonstration effect extends the “power of precedent” from the popular to an elite level, it acts as a mechanism which opens the possibility of authoritarian learning, defined by Hall and Ambrosio (2017, 143) as “a process by which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based on the prior successes and failures of other governments.” Traditional approaches to learning under illiberal contexts have measured learning through the adoption of policies or behaviour to thwart uprising or to maintain power (Beissinger 2007; Kubicek 2011; Hall and Ambrosio 2017). However, this approach risks failing to capture learning evidenced by changes in rhetoric or behaviour that are not translated into policy. Because changes in narrative, behaviour and policy evidence an elite-level demonstration effect, and hence an indication of the effect felt on a regime from uprising elsewhere, an elite-level demonstration effect indicates learning from events elsewhere. In other words, elites learn from events elsewhere and the elite-level demonstration effect is found in how they respond in

terms of rhetoric, behaviour or policy. Learning can therefore occur prior to, or parallel to the elite-level demonstration effect.

Because political change is often accompanied by a transformation in elite discourse, narrative analysis is well-suited to uncover whether the Arab Spring uprisings impacted Kazakhstan's approach to regime security, any resulting policies, and how its responses were framed and legitimized. Through an examination of primary sources, specifically President Nursultan Nazarbayev's speeches from 2005 to 2015, and fieldwork interviews conducted between September and December 2016, I identified a representative understanding of the political, economic, social and demographic factors which the Kazakh regime perceived conducive to uprising. I then examined how the Kazakh regime framed the causes and consequences of upheaval in relation to selected domestic, regional and international conflicts, including the Arab Spring. This approach identified changes over time to gauge the nature of the impact, if any, of the Arab Spring events on Kazakhstan's regime. In other words, did the Arab Spring bring about an elite-level demonstration effect on Kazakhstan? And if so, does an elite-level demonstration effect give rise to learning? An evolution in the ruling authorities' rhetorical treatment of the Arab Spring uprisings which suggested that they were perceived as a threat, compared to treatment of conflict in general and in relation to national and regional examples, would evidence an elite-level demonstration effect brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings. Behaviour or policy changes would further evidence an elite-level demonstration effect. Because an elite-level demonstration effect is a measure of political change, its presence is indicative of a change in a regime's perception of regime security, while its absence indicates continuity in a regime's perception of its own security.

While the examination centres around the ruling authorities' discourse, key policy documents and laws from 2005 to 2015 were also taken into consideration. Analysis of elite speeches in Russian and English enabled consideration of discourse directed at local, regional, and international audiences.² Elite speeches in English and Russian were collected from the Official Site of the Government of Kazakhstan and the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 98 speeches given by President Nazarbayev yielded relevant data. Elite speeches were supplemented utilizing a Nexis search for worldwide and domestic media articles which contained the President's name and the year of interest, or the President's name, year of interest, and the Arab Spring. Approximately 37 worldwide and domestic media articles contained relevant data and supplemented presidential speeches in Kazakhstan.

In order to determine the independent impact of the Arab Spring on the ruling authorities, and to distinguish its impact from other events, I utilize direct references or clear allusions to the causes and consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings. In this way any discursive changes brought about by other events were not attributed to the critical juncture of the Arab Spring uprisings. To overcome the limitations associated with identifying an elite-level demonstration effect under an authoritarian regime, I supplemented narrative analysis with twenty-three fieldwork interviews with local scholars and experts. The purpose of fieldwork interviews was twofold. Firstly, to validate my understanding of policies, their implementation in practice, and their concrete outcomes. Secondly, interviews bridged the gap between elites' public and private

² All translations from Russian to English are by the author. All transliterations utilize the Library of Congress system. The presidents' names do not correspond to this system but use the established transliteration.

reaction. I am therefore conscious and critical of the motivation of elite narrative and behaviour as opposed to accepting it at face value. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Clearly, not every manoeuvre made by Central Asian leaders was a reaction to the Arab Spring (Radnitz 2011; Kendzior 2012). I argue that when taken together, the Kazakh regime's rhetorical, behavioural and policy responses in the wake of the Arab Spring indicated that concerns over the spread of anti-regime activities impacted perceptions of Kazakh regime security through an elite-level demonstration effect. This finding is significant because it suggests that uprisings elsewhere, including those outside of a region, affect authoritarian regimes through an elite-level demonstration effect even in the absence of widespread unrest at home. This has important implications for understanding the nature of political change and its relationship to authoritarian stability and learning. The wider implications of Kazakhstan's response to the Arab Spring uprisings challenge understanding of "stable" authoritarian regimes and necessitate examination of the internal dynamics of transformation even in the absence of widespread unrest at home. The occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect reveals that authoritarian elites learn from events elsewhere. Moreover, it illustrates that political change and learning can be evaluated via changes in narrative and behaviour, changes which are not necessarily captured by conventional emphasis on regime shifts and policy implementation. This article therefore offers a framework to identify political change and evaluate learning in illiberal contexts.

The discussion unfolds in three sections. Firstly, it opens by establishing the regime's understanding of the political, economic, social and demographic causes and consequences of the Arab Spring events, which evidence an elite-level demonstration effect. Having established the presence of an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan brought about by the Arab Spring

uprisings, the discussion then tests whether an elite-level demonstration effect indicates learning from events elsewhere. This is carried out through an examination of the regime's response to the December 2011 unrest between oil workers and police in Zhanaozen, which occurred in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. Finally, the theoretical implications of an elite-level demonstration effect are discussed.

Perceived causes and consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings

Perceived political causes of the Arab Spring uprisings

The Kazakh regime's perception of the political causes of instability in relation to regional events and at large shared two similarities with its understanding of the political causes of the Arab Spring uprisings. These shared causes included the pace of reform as either evolutionary or revolutionary, and revolution as a form of externally imposed democratization. Prior to the colour revolutions, both strands of this narrative are evident in President Nazarbayev's (2007a) statement that, 'We specifically chose the evolutionary path. We are against the forced implementation of democracy, especially from outside.' This framing is significant for two principal reasons. Firstly, it enabled the Kazakh regime to portray the pace of reform as contingent on its positive or negative outcome. This is clear in Nazarbayev's (2012d) statement that, 'The success of the modernization process in many ways depends on the principles on which it is implemented. Firstly, the principle of evolutionary. There should be no "running ahead."' Secondly, this framing reflects how after the colour revolutions, Central Asian regimes treated democratization as simultaneous with regime change led by external actors in order to justify shutdowns of organizations engaged in democracy promotion (Cooley 2012, 98). In

particular, the regime targeted NGOs as instruments that furthered external interference. For example, Nazarbayev's (2005a) statement, 'We know examples when foreign NGOs "pumped" money into political associations and destabilized society. How this ends, we are seeing now in some states,' represented NGOs as facilitating premediated interference and alluded to subsequent negative outcomes.

The Kazakh regime's narrative remained consistent in its political causes of the Arab Spring, as it reiterated its established emphasis on the pace of reform and external interference. For example, on one occasion Nazarbayev (2011b) portrayed the Arab Spring uprisings as the inevitable consequence of an overly conservative pace of political development. The Kazakh regime also continued to reiterate its established emphasis on the relationship between the pace of reform and external interference in domestic affairs. However, this strand of Astana's discourse appears to demonstrate a different tone in relation to the Arab Spring in two ways. Firstly, the regime's narrative of external involvement in the Arab Spring focused less on juxtaposing an evolutionary path to development with forced democratization, but instead placed greater emphasis on international intervention in the MENA. The regime discredited international intervention in Libya by describing it as a violation of international law (Nazarbayev 2011d; Interfax Kazakhstan 2012) and of the norms of territorial integrity and state sovereignty (Nazarbayev 2011d). Nazarbayev also stated that the Libyan model should not be applied to other states, such as Syria (Nazarbayev 2011d). An interviewee (Anonymous 1 2016) confirmed the presence of this discursive trend, stating 'the Arab Spring actually strengthened this kind of attitude that an external force could be behind these negative processes happening in the Middle East. It strengthened the suspicion against Western powers.'

Notably, although the regime delegitimized international society's response to the Arab Spring, it also framed the Arab Spring as an international security threat that demanded a regional and international response. Nazarbayev (2012f) stated:

There is a giant arc of instability from Northern Africa and the Middle East to North-East Asia. Given these changes that the role of the regional security mechanisms has increased. Organizations such as the UN, OSCE, NATO, CSTO, SCO, CICA and others gain greater importance.

Nazarbayev also stressed multilateral action when he urged the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to pre-empt politically motivated uprising. During a meeting between the Council of the Heads of the Member States of the SCO held from the 14 to 15 June 2011 in Astana, Nazarbayev called for the creation of an SCO council to resolve and pre-empt territorial and regional conflicts, and supported his proposal with the SCO's inability to intervene in Kyrgyzstan's 2005 and 2010 revolutions (Satayeva 2011). In a statement to the heads of the CSTO member states at the 12 August 2011 informal summit in Astana, Nazarbayev reiterated his concern over regional uprising when he cautioned against the onset of future colour revolutions in former Soviet states (Kucera 2011). Nazarbayev's framing of the Arab Spring as a security threat that demanded collective action, followed by his call to pre-empt future political uprising in SCO and CSTO member states, suggested that the Kazakh regime was concerned about a future popular level demonstration effect in which the example of upheaval in the MENA would serve as precedent for the population of Central Asia. As a result of this unease, the Kazakh regime attempted to pre-emptively legitimize a response to potential domestic unrest. This suggests the occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect on the Kazakh ruling authorities brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings.

At the time of Nazarbayev's 2012 call on regional security mechanisms, the Eurasian Economic Union, now the Eurasian Customs Union, was not yet active. However, according to an anonymous interviewee, the Arab Spring uprisings affected Kazakhstan's regional economic engagement. The interviewee (Anonymous 1 2016) stated, 'I think the Arab Spring has affected the policy of the president. It has forced, let's say it pushed, Astana to establish even closer cooperation with Russia, with Moscow, not only in the security sphere but also even in the economic sphere.' This interviewee's statement therefore substantiated Beissinger's (2007, 270) finding that authoritarian regimes established closer relations with Russia for support against future colour revolutions as part of the "elite learning model." In the "elite learning model," elites learn from the successes and shortcomings of models of modular collective action and implement institutional constraints and repression to prevent it from succeeding again (Beissinger 2007, 269).

A second way in which the regime's narrative of interference also appeared to demonstrate a different tone in relation to the Arab Spring uprisings was the transference of its established emphasis from NGOs, as instruments of external interference, to Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This is evident in Nazarbayev's (2012a) statement that:

Information technologies and opportunities encourage almost all countries to move towards progress. However, one cannot fail to notice that the methods of 'encouraging modernization', especially when it is about 'external encouragement' of unprepared political changes in some societies, are not productive. History has provided numerous examples of this in recent years.

While Nazarbayev did not name the Arab Spring in this statement, he established a relationship between ICT and political change, which is significant in light of the role attributed to ICT in the Arab Spring—that of overcoming the collective action problem. On another occasion

Nazarbayev (Interfax Kazakhstan 2012) associated the negative consequences of ICT with the Arab Spring uprisings:

There is a rapid process of expanding the range of global information society. Today it is necessary to see not only the advantages for development, but it is also a serious challenge. As the “Arab Spring” showed, this concerns societies which are not ready for the reception of the values guiding western mass media culture.

The regime’s portrayal of the media as a destabilizing factor was not new in 2012. Mentions began in official discourse as early as 2007 (Nazarbayev 2007a), followed by a warning a year later of the ability of global communications networks, satellite television and the Internet to manipulate people and potentially incite conflict (Nazarbayev 2008a). This strand of Nazarbayev’s (2012c) narrative continued with his assertion that ICT is often not used to fulfil its original purpose of uniting people but ‘for the separation of people, raising new barriers inside societies and between countries.’ In the regime’s discourse there is thus a continuation of the media’s ability to influence conflict, but the new element of ICT’s contribution to forced democratization. The regime’s narrative of ICT following the Arab Spring therefore exhibits both a continuation and an evolution of its pre-Arab Spring framing process. This evolution in the regime’s discourse suggests the occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect brought about by the Arab Spring uprisings.

Perceived economic causes of the Arab Spring uprisings

While the regime’s narrative of political causes of unrest appears to demonstrate a different tone following the Arab Spring, the regime has not differentiated between economic causes of

instability and the economic causes of the Arab Spring uprisings. For example, Nazarbayev (2010a) identified the cause of the 2010 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan as ‘An unsolved pressing social and economic challenge poses the main reason of the present situation in Kyrgyzstan.’ Nazarbayev issued a nearly identical statement in relation to the Arab Spring uprisings. Nazarbayev (2011c) stated, ‘The events in the Middle East and North Africa show that the main cause of upheavals were unsolved social and economic problems of these states.’ Because statements were released in English their similarity cannot be attributed to translation; rather, they point to a similar understanding of both events.

The regime’s understanding of the economic causes of the Arab Spring uprisings also reiterated its established emphasis on the order of reform, economic before political, and that vertical inequalities can drive unrest. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Kazakh regime’s emphasis on prioritizing economic reform is visible through its principle of ‘democracy through economic growth’ (Nazarbayev 2005b), or ‘first economy, then politics’ (Nazarbayev 2007c). The regime has used Kazakhstan’s lack of widespread upheaval to legitimize this approach (Nazarbayev 2007c). Nazarbayev has also pointed out the consequences of alternative trajectories in post-Soviet states. For example, Nazarbayev (2007c) observed that “examples of countries who acted on the contrary, they are well known to all of us, we see what results similar policy brought in a number of countries of the post-Soviet space.” In relation to the Arab Spring, Nazarbayev reiterated that elite failure to prioritize economic development contributed to its onset. This is visible in an article Nazarbayev authored for the *Washington Post*. Nazarbayev (2011a) wrote that ‘The unrest that has gripped North Africa and the Middle East has been driven by a potent mixture of economics and politics. Citizens have taken to the streets to protest falling living standards, a lack of political power and an absence of opportunities.’ In the same article,

Nazarbayev continued to utilize Kazakhstan's absence of domestic unrest to legitimize its prioritization of economic development. Nazarbayev (2011a) wrote, 'Our focus on economic strength and increased prosperity for our citizens is well justified and easily explained. Without such strength, as we have seen repeatedly around the world, stability is put at risk and democratic reform can founder.'

Perpetuation between the regime's established and Arab Spring framing processes, is also evident in its emphasis on the role that inequalities play in driving conflict. In relation to general and in relation to regional conflicts, the regime's narrative of economic factors driving instability addressed the relationship between high economic growth and exacerbated social tensions. For example, Nazarbayev's (2007b) statement that "rapid economic growth in many cases is accompanied by social stratification, an income gap between the rich and the poor... creating ground for the emergence of new challenges and threats," alluded to vertical inequalities as a cause of conflict. Nazarbayev (2011d) also alluded to vertical inequalities as a driver of the Arab Spring uprisings when he acknowledged the growing gap between the rich and poor in the MENA and other regions which saw unrest, and highlighted that lowered living standards brought about by the global economic crisis caused unrest both in the MENA and elsewhere. For the regime, other economic factors contributing to the Arab Spring uprisings included the financial crisis, the MENA's dependency on imported food, and youth unemployment (Nazarbayev 2011b). Yet, despite the addition of these factors, the Kazakh regime's perception of the economic causes of the Arab Spring does not represent a radical departure from its established narrative in light of the similarities presented.

Perceived social and demographic causes of the Arab Spring uprisings

Both the Kazakh regime's narrative of social and demographic drivers of conflict at large and in relation to regional events, and the regime's perceived causes of the Arab Spring shared a focus on people's choice to protest. When asked, 'What is the secret of Kazakhstan's "resilience" before the colour revolutions,' Nazarbayev (2006c) responded that 'There is no secret... It is a choice of society in favour of stability, evolutionary economic, social, and political modernization of Kazakhstan.' In a statement in which he referenced the Arab Spring, Nazarbayev (Interfax Kazakhstan 2012) also alluded to people's choice to protest when he stated, 'Democracy is a choice which the state itself and its people must make constitutionally, without tragic breakdowns and revolutions.' Following the Arab Spring, it appears that the Kazakh regime began to view youth as a driver of instability. This is significant when considering that the countries which saw an Arab Spring were characterized by a youth bulge, and that seemingly apolitical youth in the MENA were able to mobilize wide sectors of society precisely because their grievances lacked political and ideological affiliation (Cavatorta 2012). As such the Kazakh regime's shift in discourse towards youth as a cause of conflict is suggestive of an elite-level demonstration effect in light of the role of youth as protestors in the Arab Spring uprisings.

Three factors point towards the regime's perception of youth as a factor driving conflict. The first indication of a different tone in discourse towards youth after the Arab Spring is Tengri News' (2012) headline that 'Nazarbayev advised Kazakhstan young people to not get fascinated by the Arab Spring.' The article gave details of Nazarbayev's speech in which he warned his audience of scholarship recipients that 'there are people who envy us and want everything to go not so well in Kazakhstan,' and that revolution sets a state's economy back between ten and

fifteen years (Tengri News 2012). Nazarbayev's emphasis on the consequences of revolution to this particular audience suggests apprehension that unrest elsewhere could inspire this demographic to protest. Secondly, evidence of an elite-level demonstration effect brought about by the role of youth in the Arab Spring exists in the government's reaction to the book, *Molotov Cocktail: Anatomy of Kazakh Youth* (Satpayev et al. 2014). In *Molotov Cocktail*, the editor Dosym Satpayev (2014, 5) wrote:

The Arab Spring, events in Ukraine and other regions of the world, showed that the new generation can become not as much as legacy, but rather a powerful destructive force of longstanding political systems. Given this it is dangerous to think that extremism and terrorism are the most serious form of radicalism.

In an interview, Satpayev (2016) commented that following the book's publication, "a lot of people in Astana among the different state structures tried to speak with us about young people."

Lastly, following the Arab Spring officials turned to at least one research institute to investigate strategies of overthrowing governments. An interviewee shared an internal document produced in 2013 for officials, which examined the relationship between civil society, youth, and political processes and traced the steps which led to uprising in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine (Anonymous 3 2016). Kazakhstan was also included in the study to pinpoint if domestic conditions were near to those that have triggered protest elsewhere. This document showed that officially sponsored research assessed the similarities between the aforementioned countries which saw uprising and Kazakhstan. It is therefore suggestive of Beissinger's (2007) 'elite learning model.' Because the official response to this document remains unknown, it is not possible to determine what, if any, actions, were taken to raise institutional constraints and thus whether the document satisfied the elite learning model. However, the interviewee who shared this document identified two main perceptions of the Arab Spring which prompted research into

youth and political change. The interviewee (Anonymous 3 2016) stated, ‘The general perception was that it was like a new weapon, a new methodology to overthrow the government...the second dimension was looking into what went wrong, why is this happening, how can we fight this algorithm.’ Another interviewee (Anonymous 4 2016) echoed this statement and described the Arab Spring as ‘feedback for Kazakhstan.’

Although Nazarbayev (2007d) did not directly link youth as factor affecting the onset of conflict prior to the Arab Spring, he did note that ‘youth need to be given clear life guidance and protection from the influence of dubious kinds of ideas.’ Nazarbayev (2008b) also acknowledged the existence of a youth bulge in Kazakhstan, and the ‘current state of youth problems.’ This, alongside the regime’s creation of *Zhas Otan* following the colour revolutions (Polese and Ó Beacháin 2011, 124), suggested that youth concerned the Kazakh regime before the Arab Spring, but that the regime’s perception of youth as political actors continued to evolve after the Arab Spring. The fact the regime has not identified youth as a factor driving conflict, yet has reacted to publications on this topic, indicates the gap between the government’s public and private reaction. For example, an anonymous interviewee (Anonymous 2 2016) noted:

Here it’s more like East, not West, where everything is on websites. A lot of things are done under cover. This move, the reaction to some policy issues abroad, may not be on paper, but under cover. It can be done through a change in the person who is in charge of a field, or the launch of a new policy which is not published.

Rasul Jumaly (2016), former ambassador of Kazakhstan to the Middle East, also highlighted the distance between the elites’ public and private reaction. Jumaly (2016) stated:

There is a big difference between their reaction publicly, officially, and with their own understanding. Publicly, officially, they always said that there is not any possibility, there is not any similarity between their revolutions and our story. We don’t care about problems

because the situation in Kazakhstan in our country is stable, very predictable and etc... But in their thinking, in their minds, of course some of them were afraid, were uncertain about the situation.

The gap between public and private reactions therefore validates the implemented methodology, which has substantiated document analysis with elite interviews.

Perceived consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings

In relation to conflict at large and regional events, Kazakhstan's official narrative addressed the developmental, social and demographic consequences facing a country that has seen conflict. Developmentally, the regime's portrayal of revolutions highlighted that revolutions do not resolve society's problems, rather, they hinder development. For example, Nazarbayev (2012e) stated that political, ethnic and religious conflicts lead to 'poverty, devastation, hunger, protracted civil war and setbacks to the Middle Ages.' Demographically and socially, the regime has emphasized that revolutions do not improve the life of the average person. For example, three years after the Tulip Revolution Nazarbayev (2008c) noted the consequences of the colour revolutions, including 'Kyrgyzstan suffering' and 'the poor people of Georgia.' Regarding the Orange Revolution, former advisor to the President, Ermukhamet Ertysbayev (2007) questioned, 'Who won from this? Not the Ukrainians.' The regime's narrative of the consequences of revolution is also present in state-produced television documentaries. For example, Kazakhstan produced a documentary which portrayed the revolutions in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as an epidemic, and which was aired in Uzbekistan (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit 2006a). An anonymous interviewee (Anonymous 3 2016) also highlighted the consistent timing and content

of state-produced documentary films, and stated ‘If you look at every single propaganda type of movie, they always show them before the election. Because they always say the same story. They demanded more freedom and look where it got them.’ The regime has therefore portrayed the consequences of revolutions as affecting the population at large to a greater extent than they affect an ousted leader or government.

The regime’s framing of the consequences of the Arab Spring has reiterated its established narrative of developmental, social and demographic consequences, but has portrayed the effects of the Arab Spring as multilevel—affecting society, states and interstate relations. For example, the regime has continued to reverse developmental connotation of revolutions, but has introduced a new strand in its narrative: revolutions are a burden for both domestic and international society. This is seen in Nazarbayev’s (2012b) statement at the 5th Astana Economic Forum:

As we see “Arabic spring”, revolutions only hamper the progress and throw the society backwards, make interstate relations complicated and arise more problems. Revolutions can happen only in scientific and technological sphere. But in political and social spheres revolutions are crucial. Reforms are the only way for progress in XXI century [sic].

In other words, the negative effects of the Arab Spring transcend state borders. Notably, revolutions are acceptable in the context of scientific and technological progress—as long as progress follows a designated path. Nazarbayev (2013c) has also continued to reverse the connotation of revolutions through his description of the aftermath of the Arab Spring as an “anti-spring,” which highlighted the failure of Islamist policies in Egypt and Tunisia, the use of chemical weapons and civil war in Syria, and which he anticipated would negatively influence global development. The demographical and social consequences of the Arab Spring for the regime included the refugee crisis in the MENA which Nazarbayev (2011a) attributed not only to

the “humanitarian catastrophe faced by Libya,” but to the regime shifts in Tunisia and Egypt. Because the refugee crisis transcends states, regions and borders, in this statement the regime again highlighted the domestic and the international consequences of the Arab Spring uprisings. Notably for the regime, regime shifts and not domestic policy, bear responsibility for the refugee crisis in Tunisia and Egypt.

Similar to the colour revolutions, state-produced documentaries also depicted the consequences of the Arab Spring (Satpayev 2016). Local analyst Satpayev (2016) stated, “It was to try to work with public opinion here in Kazakhstan. You shouldn’t use this experience because you’ll face a lot of problems. In our state mass media they tried to use the Arab Spring as a fear tactic.” The Kazakh regime’s perceived consequences of the Arab Spring therefore demonstrate a continuation and an evolution of its pre-Arab Spring framing processes.

Does a demonstration effect indicate learning?

On at least one occasion President Nazarbayev acknowledged the possibility that Kazakhstan has learned from the Arab Spring. For example, Nazarbayev (2011d) asked:

In the last year in the territory of many countries, above all in Arab countries, swept a whole wave of speeches, directed against the government of these states. What do you think, what conclusions could the governments of post-Soviet states draw for themselves after these events?

In response to his question, Nazarbayev (2011d) highlighted the importance of ‘social justice, improving people’s living standards, and turning the economy in that direction.’ Nazarbayev’s acknowledgement of the learning aside, did the Kazakh regime learn from the Arab Spring

uprisings? Because changes in narrative, behaviour and policy evidence an elite-level demonstration effect, and hence an indication of the effect felt on a regime from uprising elsewhere, the presence of an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan suggested that it has in fact learned from the Arab Spring uprisings. This is tested through the Kazakh regime's response to the Zhanaozen unrest. However, a challenge of identifying learning occurs when the expected 'lessons' are already in place (Kubicek 2011, 120). Regarding the Kazakh regime's response to Zhanaozen, lessons already in place could include those learned from the colour revolutions, or from its history of limiting civil and political liberties.

Kendzior (2012) has pointed out that domestic protest and resulting policy in Central Asia are often wrongly assumed to be a reaction to happenings abroad. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the Kazakh regime's immediate response to the Zhanaozen unrest was a continuation of Kazakhstan's restrictions on civil society rather than a response to the Arab Spring. In addition to its violent suppression of demonstrators, the regime attributed the unrest to Kazakh civil society activists, and held early parliamentary elections on 12 January 2012 while Zhanaozen was under a state of emergency (Human Rights Watch 2013, 3). The regime also closed the independent media outlet 'Stan.tv,' which reported on the Zhanaozen events, on charges of 'extremist propaganda' (Article 19 2012). Because crackdowns on civil society and media restrictions are not new in Kazakhstan, these measures are very much in line with established lessons. In order to overcome the challenge of identifying learning when the expected 'lessons' are already in place, Kubicek (2011, 120) proposed identifying links between specific events and policies in order to identify a correlation between the direction of policy and anticipated learning. I build upon Kubicek's (2011, 120) method by identifying a correlation between a perceived cause of conflict, and a policy or behaviour that offsets the aforementioned

cause to determine whether measures taken after the unrest were a reaction to events abroad. In the case of the Kazakh regime's response to Zhanaozen, this correlation is evident in their framing of ICT as a driver of the Arab Spring unrest, and the Kazakh regime's treatment of ICT following the Zhanaozen unrest. The regime shutdown internet and phone services following the unrest in Zhanaozen, although it officially attributed the lack of services to electricity outages, cable damage from rioting, and an overloaded system (Lillis 2011).

The shutdown of internet and phone services in Zhanaozen 2011, in the aftermath of violence between police and demonstrators, supported learning from the role attributed to ICT in the Arab Spring uprisings, that of facilitating mobilization. This is because ICT did not play a mobilizing role in the Zhanaozen unrest, yet the regime reacted as though it did. As Satpayev (2016) commented, 'a social explosion can happen without social networks like in Zhanaozen.' Moreover, although the Zhanaozen unrest was founded on local economic grievances, not on the precedent of the Arab Spring, the regime both recognized and sought to counter associations between the Zhanaozen unrest and the Arab Spring uprisings, in particular, the assumption that the unrest would spread. Ermukhamet Ertysbayev (Tengri News 2011), Nazarbayev's political advisor, stated, 'An Arab revolution in Kazakhstan in principle is not possible. This was a local conflict, characteristic of a small town or of a small city named Zhanaozen. I am deeply convinced that this mass disorder will not occur on a national scale.'

Clearly, methodological limitations pose challenges in linking learning to subsequent policy change. It is not clear whether changes in internet policy were shaped by the Arab Spring, Zhanaozen, or other events. However, it is critical to note that changes in rhetoric on ICT have since been translated into policy changes. For example, Freedom House (2016) reported that the 'Law on National Security' was amended in 2012 to allow the government to block

telecommunications during terrorist operations and riots, and in 2014 laws were passed which allowed the state to block communication networks without a court order. At a minimum, the ‘Law on National Security’ suggests an increased awareness to opposition outside of its traditional channels following the Arab Spring uprisings, that has continued into 2014.

Conclusion

In Kazakhstan, a longitudinal narrative analysis of presidential rhetoric from 2005 to 2015 and fieldwork interviews indicated that the Arab Spring uprisings brought about an elite-level demonstration effect despite the absence of unrest at home. That is, the regime perceived a heightened threat to its security as a result of instability and regime responses elsewhere, and it sought to shore-up its position and forestall the emergence of local challenges as a consequence of this, whether through discourse or policy. Three new elements appeared in the Kazakh regime’s discourse and behaviour in relation to the Arab Spring which evidenced an elite-level demonstration effect. Firstly, the Kazakh regime’s narrative of interference delegitimized international intervention in the MENA but called for the creation of a regional council to resolve regional conflict. This demonstrated apprehension over potential regional unrest inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings. A second indication of an elite-level demonstration effect was a shift in the regime’s narrative of external interference in domestic affairs. The regime transferred its established emphasis from NGOs to ICT. A final indication that the Arab Spring uprisings brought about an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan was that the regime began to view youth as a cause of conflict. The discussion then tested the relationship between an elite-level demonstration effect and learning through the regime’s perception of factors driving the

Arab Spring unrest, and a behaviour or policy to offset the aforementioned cause. The regime's perception of ICT as a factor which drove the Arab Spring uprisings, and the shutdown of Internet and phone services following the Zhanaozen unrest evidenced learning. In doing so it confirmed that the presence of an elite-level demonstration effect indicates learning from events elsewhere.

An elite-level demonstration effect brought about by the Arab Spring in Kazakhstan is significant for three reasons. Firstly, the presence of an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan has helped inform its development as a theoretical mechanism. It showed that an elite-level demonstration effect is a mechanism which can account for elite response to happenings elsewhere. Specifically, it illustrated that uprisings outside of a region can shape a regime's narrative, policy and behaviour. In today's globalized and interconnected international system, a theoretical explanation which can account for how authorities perceive and react to events elsewhere is critical. This is because a government's understanding of protest elsewhere shapes response to domestic events and foreign policy. For example, because the elite-level demonstration effect acts as a measure of political change designed to ensure regime security, its presence can have implications for future civil resistance in illiberal contexts. Namely, by deepening regime security it could reduce opportunity and raise the cost of collective civil resistance. Furthermore, although the Arab Spring uprisings occurred several years ago, because they impacted the ruling elites' perceptions of regime security, this can inform future decisions in areas relevant to foreign governments, such as security collaboration and economic reform.

Secondly, an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan revealed that elites can and do learn from events elsewhere. The relationship between the elite-level demonstration effect and learning also has practical and methodological implications. Methodologically, it illustrated

that political change and learning can be evaluated via changes in narrative and behaviour, changes which are not necessarily captured by conventional emphasis on policy or regime shifts. This approach necessitates going beyond conventional emphasis on structural conditions and taking into consideration the agency of the regime. As such, this article provides a framework to identify political change and evaluate learning in illiberal contexts.

Finally, the occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect brought about by the Arab Spring in Kazakhstan, informed the conditions under which it can occur. Because Kazakhstan is influenced to a greater degree by events within the post-Soviet space than with the countries in the MENA which saw uprising (Kendzior 2012), and integrated more closely within the post-Soviet space than with MENA countries, the fact that the impact of the Arab Spring was still felt in Kazakhstan is significant. It suggests that close social and cultural ties are not essential preconditions for the occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect. The occurrence of an elite-level demonstration effect in Kazakhstan brought about by the Arab Spring also shows that uprisings elsewhere, including those outside of a region, can affect authoritarian regimes through an elite-level demonstration effect, even in the absence of widespread unrest at home. This has important implications for understanding the nature of political change and its relationship to authoritarian stability. Indeed, the wider implications of Kazakhstan's rhetorical, and behavioural response to the Arab Spring uprisings challenge understanding of "stable" authoritarian regimes and necessitate examination of the internal dynamics of transformation even in the absence of widespread unrest at home.

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