

Kazakhstan: a quarrel among thieves

by GWYNNE DYER

Two questions about recent events in Kazakhstan. First, was last week's slaughterhouse battle between 20,000 bandits and the regime's police in Almaty, the country's biggest city, really just a quarrel among thieves? And second, why did Russian troops get involved?

Kazakhstan is a kleptocracy: a state where corrupt politicians enrich themselves secretly through kickbacks, bribes, and special favors, or simply direct state funds to themselves and their associates. They often export much of their profits to foreign nations. (Wikipedia definition)

A special Chatham House report last month found that the family and associates of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Communist ruler of Soviet Kazakhstan and then president of independent Kazakhstan for 35 years, bought 34 properties in London and southern England for \$720 million in just the four years 1998-2002.

Everybody in Kazakhstan knows they are ruled by thieves. The Russians who were doing well stayed after independence and the rest left. Kazakhs who are doing well don't mind the thieves-in-office either but most Kazakhs aren't doing very well.

They aren't all dirt poor the protests this time were initially about a doubling in the price of fuel for cars but a recent KPMG report says that 162 people own half the country's wealth. Nobody likes that sort of thing.

So the peaceful protests that began on 2 January quickly spread to every corner of the country and then things went crazy in Almaty. On Wednesday, 5 January, well-organised groups of people unknown to the protesters joined the crowds and began attacking official buildings.

Equally strange is the fact that on that same Wednesday the police left key buildings in Almaty unprotected. The presidential palace was burned, the airport was seized, people were killed but were they the right people?

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev sounded convinced of it. 'Abroad there are calls for talks for a peaceful resolution,' he said on television 'What idiocy! What kind of negotiation can you have with criminals? We are dealing with armed and well-prepared bandits, both local and foreign, who should be destroyed. We must kill them.'

Tokayev was as good as his word. The shooting was over by Friday, and police and troops certainly did kill a lot of people. On 9 January they announced 164 killed and over 8,000 arrested, including a substantial number of foreign nationals. But there were a couple of loose ends in the script.

On the same Wednesday that the violence started, President Tokayev dismissed retired President-almost-for-life Nazarbayev from his remaining job as head of the State Council.

Nazarbayev resigned the presidency three years ago because of his age (he is 81), but everybody assumed he was really still in charge, and still grooming his daughter Dariga for the job. (The protesters shouted 'Old man, go!') Then suddenly Tokayev asks for help from Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Nazarbayev is completely out of the government.

2,000 Russian troops fly in within a day. They don't shoot any civilians, but once they are on the ground Tokayev orders the arrest of the country's former intelligence chief, Karim Massimov, on suspicion of treason. Massimov was Nazarbayev's closest adviser. Would Tokayev have dared to arrest him before the Russians arrived?

I can't help joining up the dots, and it looks like a coup to me. Maybe a failed coup attempt in which Nazarbayeva's people were

trying to take power back from an over-mighty Tokayev who wanted to be the real boss, not just a place-holder for Dariga Nazarbayeva. Or maybe a move by Tokayev himself to sideline the Old Man and his ambitious daughter.

Tokayev admitted himself on Monday that the protests were really a coup attempt, but he didn't say who was behind it. My guess is that he was. That he didn't actually start the protests, but that he saw an opportunity in them.

He needed Russian support to move against the Old Man, and he needed an excuse to invite the Russians in, so he sent his thugs in to turn the protests violent and create that excuse.

Or maybe nothing of the sort happened, and this is just another mundane tale of the rich and powerful crushing the little people. I'm allowed one conspiracy theory a year, and I'm getting it in early.

Either way, I know what Russia's motive was. Most people forget that the Soviet Union was just one more European colonial empire. The only differences were that it was a land empire, and that it decolonised a generation after the others.

Putin grew up in that empire, he still mourns its demise, and he'll take any chance he gets to restore Russia's dominant influence there. There's no coherent strategy here. Putin is tough and he can be nasty, but he's really a romantic, not a would-be world conqueror.