

Hero Worship of Kazakhstan Leader Hits New Height

By [The Moscow Times](#)

December 01, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Kazakhstan on Saturday observed a new holiday lauding President Nursultan Nazarbayev, part of a growing cult of personality around him.

The highlight of First President's Day, which marked the anniversary of Nazarbayev's first election in 1991, was a carefully choreographed pageant by some 30,000 performers in an arena in the capital, Astana, including mass singing and banner-waving.

Across the country, schoolchildren and state employees held demonstrations of affection, concerts, and sporting events in his honor. To what extent the participation was voluntary was unclear.

In the run-up to the holiday, state media lauded Nazarbayev, 72, as a visionary who prevented the ethnically diverse country from plunging into bloodshed like that in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and equated him with the United States' founding fathers.

Nazarbayev has become the subject of films, plays and even children's fairy tales. A university, a network of elite schools, and a city park adorned with his statue have been named after him. An imprint of his hand is incorporated into the design of the nation's banknotes.

Observers say this is partly an old-style personality cult, but also an attempt to cement a unifying element in a vast and sparsely populated, multiethnic country of 16.5 million that some fear could one day be torn apart by clan rivalries and regional loyalties.

"Kazakhstan's statehood still lacks a symbol uniting all of its citizens," said Marat Shibutov, a well-known local political commentator. "That is why this holiday has appeared."

All across the country, billboards bear Nazarbayev slogans identifying national strength in ethnic unity. Russian-speaking ethnic Slavs make up around one-fourth of the population, and there are also substantial German, Tatar, Uyghur, and Turkish communities, among a dizzying array of ethnic groups.

The development of Kazakh nationalism has been fervently resisted by Nazarbayev, although tight controls over the media make it difficult to assess the strength of underlying social tensions.

Making Nazarbayev an inescapable part of public life is a task that has been undertaken with gusto by government media. One Twitter user noted that the news on Khabar state television Wednesday evening mentioned Nazarbayev's name on 26 occasions and the word "president" 40 times.

Shortly before Saturday's holiday, a day of lectures was held at Astana's Nazarbayev University to celebrate the leader's much-trumpeted legacy, including his decision to get rid of the nuclear weapons arsenal that Kazakhstan inherited in the Soviet collapse.

Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, a senior United Nations official and Kazakhstan's former foreign minister, said Nazarbayev had resisted overtures from pariah states.

"In early 1992, the Foreign Ministry received a letter addressed to Kazakhstan's president from Libyan revolutionary leader Moammar Gadhafi proposing to hold onto the nuclear arsenal," Tokayev said. "Billions in assistance were offered in return."

Instead, Kazakhstan drew on substantial U.S. assistance to dispense with its nuclear stockpile, earning widespread plaudits. But international criticism also is strong.

The past week alone has seen a new crackdown on opposition parties and independent newspapers critical of the president as authorities seek the courts' approval in having them ruled extremist.

There is no obvious sign of when or even if the president will ever step down — Nazarbayev University's Life Sciences Center announced last month that it had devised a yogurt-type concoction that could extend life expectancy. Nazarbayev has in the past, perhaps only half-joking, urged scientists to find him an elixir of youth.

And yet, even his supporters recognize that change is beckoning.

In an interview published Saturday in Vremya newspaper, an adviser to the presidential rights committee, Vitaly Voronov, said the time had come to boost the role of parliament, which is now occupied by Nazarbayev's party and two weak and largely pro-government forces.

Nazarbayev "should go down in history as the first and last leader of Kazakhstan with super-presidential powers," he said.

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