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Following Deng's Footsteps

By Konstantin Sonin

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At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization conference earlier this month, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev advised President Vladimir Putin to run for a third term. There are many political commentators -- including myself -- who are certain that Putin will seek a third presidential term one way or another. Nazarbayev's remark can be interpreted as another sign that strengthens the third-term theory. In offering this advice, however, Nazarbayev was not trying to interfere in Russia's internal politics. After all, he has enough political problems of his own at home.

On the surface, it would seem that Nazarbayev has no problems at all. The Nur Otan party, which he heads, took every seat in parliament in last week's elections. In addition, the previous parliament granted him the presidency for life.

Events of the 20th century have shown that in quasi- and nondemocratic states, presidents who have at least a modicum of popularity tend to hold onto their power as long as possible.

But this is where the problems start. If Nazarbayev were an iron-fisted dictator, it would be simple enough to predict his future behavior: He would stay in power until the last possible moment and then flee to another country. But he is more like a "soft dictator." For these leaders, it is more difficult to predict their behavior because they don't abuse their authority excessively. For example, they don't deny citizens the right to leave the country, and they don't interfere with the people's personal or political lives.

When these "soft dictators" have been in power for a long time, however, they often feel compelled to tighten their grip on power, particularly when they become older and tired. At the same time, these presidents begin to rely more and more on an irreplaceable circle of their closest political advisers (in Nazarbayev's case, this means his relatives). They are typically loyal but incompetent. This is precisely why they have the most to gain from extending the rule of an authoritarian leader.

But when a leader becomes more dictatorial, he increases the risk that he will be ousted by force.

All modern leaders, and especially dictators, would like to follow in the footsteps of Deng Xiaoping, who, after leaving his official post, retained political influence right up to his death.

It might be difficult to repeat that feat, but a leader can still attempt to provide himself with a relatively comfortable retirement in his native country. This is why Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi is looking for ways to "divest" himself of his dictatorship, seeking recommendations from political analysts from around the world. It is also what motivates Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to hold talks with leaders of the opposition.

To some extent, Nazarbayev's task is simpler because there is no real opposition to the ruling Nur Otan party. Moreover, there is not a single political figure in the country who could emerge as an alternative presidential candidate. If Nazarbayev leaves office, it could very well result in a leadership vacuum, similar to what took place in Russia in 1964 when political rivals in the Politburo colluded to oust Nikita Khrushchev from power. It took 10 years to determine his successor. In the same way, Nazarbayev's departure could enable Nurtai Abykayev, Kazakhstan's ambassador to Russia; Almaty Mayor Imangali Tasmagambetov; and the speaker of the senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, to share the posts of president, prime minister and so on.

Of course, presidents rarely leave office based on the advice of a newspaper columnist. But this advice might carry some additional weight if it has history on his side. Deng Xiaoping is an excellent historical example. The lesson here is not that he continued to wield power after he stepped down as president. The most important element of this episode is that he actually stepped down.

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