

## Political Leadership Style in Kazakhstan,

*Abstract of an analytical paper*

*by Almaz Tolymbek, PhD candidate, Kent State University, OH*

In view of the importance of political leadership issues in the post-Soviet countries, many of which experience dramatic changes in their political elites, the problem of the *leadership quality* seems to deserve particular attention. Indeed, have new political leaders of those “color revolution” nations demonstrated visibly *different* quality in their leadership? And how effective is the current political leadership in Kazakhstan where its citizens have opted for the long-standing incumbent?

In this regard, the article offers an “independent expert” analysis of the leadership style of Nursultan Nazarbaev based on applying an American theory of *political character types* developed earlier by James Barber (1972) based on which he provided an insightful assessment of several US Presidents. In a nutshell, his analysis of Presidential characters draws upon a typology of leader characters based on the two following dimensions: active-passive and positive-negative.

I examine the political biography of the first Kazakhstan President who has arguably, as seen in the course of his earlier ascendance from humble rural origins to the national political Olympus, demonstrated the *active-positive* character type. This premise seems to be supported by an assessment of his leadership behavior since the mid-1980s throughout the later Soviet period and post-independence phase of Kazakhstan. In this respect, Nazarbaev appears to rely on *managerial* approach in policy-making, which is revealed in a mix of his both *entrepreneurial* and *strongman style* of political leadership. In fact, this leadership style has been displayed at crucial junctures throughout the Gorbachev’s perestroika period, at Soviet disintegration, and then over the post-Soviet history of Kazakhstan. As an outcome, this active-positive pattern, revealed in his positive attitude, inter-personal flexibility, and economic pragmatism, have arguably contributed to the successful market-economy development of Kazakhstan and his prominent ranking among late Soviet and post-Soviet political elites. This profile is also congruent with his operating “philosophy of balance” reflected in the nation-building strategy as well as regional cooperation and multi-vector international policies. From this perspective, Nazarbaev’s *gradualist* approach toward the political liberalization in Kazakhstan may be accounted by his sense of *situational match* of an appropriate leadership style (as a right proportion of *enabling v. structuring*) and the “political infancy” stage of the country, slowly developing a new political culture indispensable for a full-fledged democracy.

On the other hand, his excessive reliance on marketization in cutting back the prior socialist welfare system has led to the eroding social safety and human development index in Kazakhstan. Very uneven marketization gains by different social groups in Kazakhstan as well as widespread perceptions of corruption within the government and his personal office abuse also breed a latent damage to the image of Nazarbaev.

Using Freud's (1955) perspective, it can be viewed as lowering the *public ego-ideal* embodied in the top leader, which, in Vaclav Havel's (1992) terms, contributes to "moral erosion" of the nation. Thus, as revealed by my field study in Kazakhstan, an *Inspiring Statesman* type, combining enlightened, activist, and public-spirited leadership, so much desired by most citizens still appears as something of an ideal.

In this regard, it remains to be seen whether Nazarbaev's *entrepreneurial* character will prevail the Soviet autocratic legacy also imprinted in his personality style. If his *philosophy of balance* will prove to be consistent in opening up the "political market" after the economy thus contributing to *diversification* of the "political opportunity structure" open for all newly emerging leaders in the country, it would be the ultimate long-term litmus test for his *leadership quality*.

Using terms by Maccoby (1982), there seems to be a parallel between profiles of the first US and Kazakhstan Presidents related to their mixed *social character* profiles. Indeed, George Washington was featured by both his aristocratic upbringing and leadership attitude open to all the American citizenry. Nazarbaev appears to combine the prior Soviet, authoritarian management approach *and* dynamic entrepreneurial spirit. In this regard, both leaders represent *transitional* leader types *combining* social character traits of the past and the emerging present in respective histories of their nations.

In sum, under Barber's model, Nazarbaev displays the leadership style characterized as a combination of the *active-positive* character type; political *philosophy of balance* and *economic pragmatism*; and a *mix of authoritarian and entrepreneurial* personality style. Taking into account the transitional nature of political culture in today's Kazakhstan featured as a *coexistence* of old and new patterns of thinking and behavior of its citizens, Nazarbaev's leadership style appears to match for the time being, in *situational* terms, the politically immature citizenry of the country as they *gradually* grope their way from reliance on a paternalist leadership toward a more democratic ideal.