

“Protest art offers what no other post-Soviet, institutionalized opposition has been able to provide: the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the seemingly unchangeable authoritarian status quo.”

Art and Protest in Kazakhstan

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In early January 2022, my native Kazakhstan became a top item in the international news when massive antigovernment protests swept the country. As people flocked to central squares, even though they had disjointed agendas, most were demanding real political change. Within days, the protests generated images that had previously been unimaginable for the majority of Kazakhstanis.

First came a video of a monument to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev being toppled in one of the retired dictator’s strongholds, the Almaty region. Then came unprecedented violence and the first reports of victims, as well as allegations from top officials about “terrorist attacks.” There were many reports of organized armed groups. Journalists, scholars, and others close to the protests on the ground learned quickly to distinguish peaceful protesters from violent mobs trying to exploit the situation.

On January 6, the day of the worst violence, peaceful protesters gathered in Almaty, the country’s biggest city. In New Square, they displayed a long poster bearing the message in Kazakh: *Biz Qarapayim Halyqpyz, Biz Terrorist Emespiz* (“We Are Ordinary People, We Are Not Terrorists”). This slogan and the associated social media hashtag #BizQarapayimHalyqpyz marked a historic breakthrough for Kazakhstani society. The demonstrators aimed to convey the legitimacy of their protest as an act of communication, while also using banners to shield themselves from bullets and violent repression. They encouraged people to speak openly to a regime that many simply called “power”—*vlast*’ in Russian or *bilik* in Kazakh.

It was not the first time that ordinary citizens in Kazakhstan had used posters, slogans, and protest art as tools to speak up to the regime. Yet the language, the form, and the performance of the January 6 banner brought regime–society relations into focus.

The wave of protests that culminated in the toppling of the Nazarbayev monument came to be known as the Kazakh Spring. The protests started as early as March 2019, following the strongman’s resignation, in response to the regime’s move to install its chosen successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, instead of holding open, competitive, and democratic elections. From the start, protest art was one of the main tools of resistance. In what became known locally as the “poster wars,” anonymous activists challenged the authoritarian regime with a series of posters demanding open and fair elections. Some quoted the constitution, noting that one of its articles states that “the only source of power is the people.” Others expressed their demands by quoting the Soviet rock band Kino’s legendary song “Changes!”

Groups of people all across the country, from Astana to Uralsk and Almaty, were arrested for protesting during the poster wars, even when the posters they carried were blank. When the police arrested participants for standing at rallies, they staged walking protests (*seruen*), using the streets, famous monuments, and parks as stages for their prolonged demonstrations.

As the poster became a symbol of civil disobedience during these three years of constant demonstrations in Kazakhstan, law enforcement officers were puzzled as to the source of this form of protest. At the heart of the Kazakh Spring were artists’ studios where young activists and future political leaders met and planned their next rallies. This was where new ideas and slogans for posters were born. In one operation, activists repainted

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a semiofficial Nazarbayev mural in one of Almaty's microdistricts, turning the old dictator's stern visage into the face of a clown. That was accompanied by a social media campaign with the hashtag #CancelElbasy—a repudiation of the title “Elbasy” (“Leader of the Nation”), which Nazarbayev continued to hold after his resignation as president. Constitutional reforms approved in a June 2022 referendum would strip Nazarbayev of that title along with numerous privileges.

Protest art may not be a new phenomenon for European societies, where artists historically have been the avant-garde of political change. But examining the way it has developed since the late 1980s in the post-Soviet space can provide an original contribution to our understanding of political dynamics and transformations in nondemocratic and highly authoritarian contexts. Art, and especially visual art, has become a form of expression and protest, as well as a platform that gives voice to many in places where nothing else has seemed to work, to ensure that they would be seen and heard by those in power, both in the regimes and among the elites.

In countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Russia, political change has been inspired by art exhibitions and artists' studio discussions that transformed the private sphere of Soviet-style “kitchen talks,” where many had discussed political dissent, into vast revolutionary spaces. Protest art offers what no other post-Soviet, institutionalized opposition has been able to provide: the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the seemingly unchangeable authoritarian status quo. It demonstrates how monuments to the most powerful dictators can be destroyed in seconds. Above all, it inspires and demands change. In conditions of an almost total absence of viable institutions to counter growing authoritarianism and the persistence of personalized regimes, with a relatively weak civil society, local contemporary art emerges as a driving force to resist and rethink these power relations.

CRITICAL MISSION

Protest art is part of a form of contemporary art that emerged in the post-Soviet space as the influence of once-dominant Socialist Realism began to wane. This was a completely new phenomenon, both conceptually and practically. For the first

time in almost a century, art offered nearly complete freedom from both state domination and the logic of propagandistic production.

Those in this region who proudly call themselves contemporary or conceptual artists do not receive state subsidies. They are not part of the state-controlled Artists' Union or any other form of state domination of artistic production. Contemporary art in post-Soviet Central Asia is a type of cultural production that aims to be free from state censorship, control, and support.

This often means enduring harassment, fines, and threats. In some of the most severe cases, artists have faced criminal charges. This was the case with Uzbek photojournalist Umida Akhmedova (a recipient of the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent), first in 2009 and again in 2014, when she protested in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Tashkent against a crackdown on anti-government protests in Kyiv.

Uzbek artist Vyachaslav Akhunov, who dedicated his lifetime of artistic production to rethinking and ridiculing Soviet propaganda (in his reworking of Lenin posters, for example) and openly criticized the regime of Islam Karimov in comments to the press, was subject to foreign travel restrictions for several years. His younger conceptual artist colleagues were

often worried that they would not get their Uzbek passports issued in time to make scheduled trips, or that they would not be allowed out of the country at all, because of the critical stances they had taken against the regime.

Conceptual art in these contexts is created not to serve the regime (as Socialist Realist art did) or corporate interests (as commercial art does) but to produce a specific field of critique. “The art cannot be conceptual, contemporary, if it is not critical,” one local curator once told me. She did not mean that it is a prerequisite for every artist to find something to criticize. But in this field, the rules were set unanimously a long time ago, and protest art remains a barometer of the political injustices of repressive regimes.

Kazakh political artist Askhat Akhmediyarov once told me that “the artist is like a surgeon,” on a mission to detect and remove authoritarian frames of thinking. The artist has to work on a deeper level, he explained, in order to establish dialogues with society, but also to get rid of the

*Coercion gave rise to the
country's most creative
protest movement.*

frames that regime propaganda established in people's minds: that change is impossible or that the stable status quo is preferable to uncertainty and chaos. The role of the contemporary artist is to demonstrate reality as it is, such as the unbearable living standards that Akhmediyarov portrays in his series dedicated to class stratification.

Contemporary art also has to offer an alternative future—not in the form of the ubiquitous official banners promising a “prosperous homeland” in fifty years, but an alternative that everyone can start building now. By doing so, the contemporary art community in Central Asia quickly developed into a thriving sector of civil society.

TALKING BACK

On March 19, 2019, Nazarbayev delivered a televised address in which he announced his sudden resignation as leader of the nation he had ruled for thirty years. This remarkable event gave rise to a new epoch in which Nazarbayev remained bodily present in public and political life, retaining the influential position of Leader of the Nation, but in a slow transit from his long reign of total control to an undetermined future.

Rapid changes followed Tokayev's installation as interim president. Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga, was appointed the new speaker of the Senate, putting her next in line to the presidency. This move raised concerns among the public that she was being groomed as her father's eventual successor. The protests were partly directed against this possibility.

Days after Nazarbayev's resignation, the capital city formerly called Astana and Furmanov Avenue, the central street in Almaty, were renamed after him, setting off a number of protests and petitions. An anonymous artistic Facebook account called Akimat Astany (“the city administration of Astana”) created a popular digital slogan: “Tokayev is not my president, Nur-Sultan is not my capital, Dariga is not my speaker of the Senate.”

A local alternative band promptly released the song “*Ya umirayu v Nur-Sultane*” (“I Am Dying in Nur-Sultan”), which was played at unsanctioned rallies and made into a legendary meme. Contemporary artist Medina Bazargali organized a solo walking picket against staged elections right after the March 19 resignation and broadcast it live on their Instagram account, an act that instantly turned the 17-year-old artist from Almaty into the “symbol of a new revolution,” as Bazargali put it.

In an interview I conducted with the artist in 2020, they explained how this brave act allowed them to overcome a “certain barrier” and gain a sense of freedom:

There was a lot of activism back then [in the spring of 2019], and my picket gave me the opportunity to speak up freely about things I wanted to say and say it openly online. . . . Perhaps that March was a definitive moment for me when I understood that I could freely talk about things I do not like. Not that I just don't like it, but that I want the change to be coherent. . . . I just feel an enormous responsibility as a citizen. . . . When I overcame that barrier—that main fear when you are so scared—to tell the truth online, then at that moment I completely rejected my fear with that picket, and since then, I openly say what I feel and think.

INDEPENDENCE GENERATION

In March and April of 2019, a series of protests and the formation of underground artistic and political movements gave rise to a new concept in Kazakhstani politics. This was the Qazakh Koktemi (Kazakh Spring) and the deinstitutionalized political movement now known as Oyan, Qazaqstan (Wake Up, Kazakhstan!).

For most Kazakhstanis, Qazakh Koktemi culminated on April 23, 2019, with an artistic intervention at the Almaty marathon. During the race, large banners were unfurled at three locations. Their main message was: “You cannot run from the truth. For Fair Elections” (*Ot Pravdy ne ubezish. Adil Sailau Ushin*). Asya Tulesova and Beybarys Tolymbetov held a smaller banner, leading to their arrest, while another was hung but abandoned by a different group of art activists. Two other activists, photographer Aigul Nurbulatova and Sunbike Suleimenova, who was four months pregnant and was filming the event, were also arrested by the police.

All four were immediately interrogated and spent long hours in a cold prison cell before being put on trial for their actions, prompting large gatherings of activists, artists, friends, and journalists who attended and reported on the court hearings. This attempt to deter further activism by coercion ironically gave rise to the country's most creative protest movement. It also turned Tulesova, Suleimenova, and Tolymbetov into the initial leaders of the newly formed Oyan, Qazaqstan movement, which was consolidated in the corridors of the courthouse between the trials of activists in April and May

2019. This was also how the so-called poster wars started.

The protest movement was led by young people, particularly the so-called independence generation born shortly before or after 1991, when Kazakhstan became independent. Members of the movement were aware that it was rooted in underground meetings of young contemporary artists. Even if Oyan, Qazaqstan looked from the outside like a political movement promoting reforms and democratization, internally it was driven by the creative might of young artists. Gathering for the first time in an unnamed art studio in late March 2019, the group of artists was diverse and relatively small, not more than 15 or 20 people from the same network who had exhibited together, partied at the same clubs, and met for discussions in the same artistic circles.

“Everyone completely switched off their phones and hid them in a separate room so that secret police wouldn’t have access to our information,” remembered one of the activists (who, like the others I interviewed, asked to remain anonymous). They offered the same reasons for their gathering. One said, “Unfortunately, I cannot imagine the situation where we would have fair elections in Kazakhstan.” As another put it, “We were triggered by Nazarbayev’s resignation and by the fact that he simply relegated his power to Tokayev, another person from his tight circle of elites.”

When I asked an activist what led them to engage in this political art and activism even though they had not previously done so, they said:

It did not happen in April; it happened earlier, in March, the event that we all are aware of, when our first president left and when subsequently they renamed the capital city after him in just one day [without holding a referendum on the issue]. . . . Before that, I thought that there were a lot of unfair issues that we were putting up with constantly. Some of these things are completely unbearable. But that move . . . just raised such a feeling inside me—I could not believe this; how can this occur at all? It was very shameful just to be silent and not attempt to do something against it. [If we didn’t act], it would have just demonstrated that something is wrong with our society. We do not have an ideology, and our only “ideology” is paternalism, and on top of that, it is

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this type of paternalism where [the masses] do not even receive these resources. Only a tiny group lives on the benefits of these resources, and the main part of the population barely survives. . . . At that moment, me and my friends, other people involved [in the anonymous art group] did not think of our protest acts as a continuation of our art careers; it was more an act of despair. Because we no longer could be silent, and we felt that we needed to say something. . . . We were not in direct contact with those other people who protested with posters in other cities in Kazakhstan. We did not know each other, but we understood that everyone knows about [authoritarianism], and many people think about what to do.

All the members of this anonymous art group remembered how their moments of short-lived happiness over Nazarbayev’s resignation were overshadowed by enduring moments of despair over the fact that “it brought no change.” Their urgent need for change drove them to action and inspired the idea for the banner bearing the message “You cannot run from the truth” to be displayed at the Almaty marathon at the end of April. As one activist from the group remembered it:

If it wasn’t for that banner, Oyan, Qazaqstan wouldn’t have existed right now.

Because prior to June 5 [2019, when activists announced the creation of the movement at a press conference] it was simply a disorganized number of people, and we did not have the name of the movement. To be completely honest, not everybody had a plan or strategy to self-organize. But then when the banner set everything in motion—some of our art activists were arrested and were tried—people started coming to the court hearings. . . . In this process, we understood that there were a lot more of us—like-minded people who were united in the corridors of the courtrooms—and we understood that we needed to do something.

The aim of this underground group was to produce anonymous visual protest art, and this dictated the medium of expression—handmade banners bearing catchy slogans, displayed in public spaces. Activists gathered in art studios to discuss the form and message of each banner, decide on locations for display, and delegate to each group the task of placing it in a specific public space. Then

another group was responsible for taking photos of the banner before the police could remove it. All the members of the group and their friends then disseminated the photos on social media, where the images spread widely in Kazakhstan and beyond.

Each banner, even after the historic April 2019 Almaty marathon intervention, spurred public discussions, media reports, and commentary by local political analysts. The intention, according to the creators, was to start a public dialogue about the unequal and unfair nature of the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan. After the first poster in April 2019 called for open and fair elections, a banner in early June 2019, also displayed in Almaty, cited the first article of the Kazakh Constitution: “The only source of power in the state is the people” (*narod*).

This “constitutional banner” was placed at a pedestrian bridge in the city center, over one of Almaty’s main avenues, in the early morning hours. By the time a photo of the banner was widely shared on social media, news of the arrest of local contemporary artist Roman Zakharov had also spread across social media channels, from Facebook and Instagram to Telegram and private messenger groups. Online mass media was quick to relay the social media reports. Zakharov was hastily tried on charges related to the “constitutional banner.” He faced up to 15 days in a temporary detention center, but the story was shared so widely—and the idea that someone could be imprisoned just for citing the constitution caused such outrage—that he was released later on the day of the trial, hailed as a hero.

OPEN LETTER

Saule Suleimenova is a well-known Almaty-based contemporary artist. She has been protesting with her art since the mid-1980s, when she was part of the first unofficial art groups to emerge at the end of the *perestroika* years, such as the famous Green Triangle in Almaty. Over time, Suleimenova’s art became more critical of the political realities around her. She is now perhaps one of the most prominent voices of decolonial post-Soviet art, which questions and conceptualizes Central Asia’s position and pathways in relation to different empires and colonial experiences, past and present. Her work is a testament to the transformations her country has gone through in the past three decades.

In our conversations, when I cannot find any other words but keep asking how she manages to

feel and capture her time so well, she tells me that it is literally under her skin. Every event hits harder than the previous one. Not only does her work engage with contemporary events, it also confronts dark passages in Soviet history. Suleimenova has produced works commemorating the victims of Stalinist terror by depicting faces in the gulags. She has also done a series on the 1933 Kazakh famine, known as *Asharshylyq*, which happened at the same time as the Ukrainian Holodomor, was similarly caused by Stalin’s collectivization campaign, and claimed the lives of at least a quarter of the Kazakh population.

On July 6, 2022, Suleimenova opened a solo exhibition of her art in the heart of Almaty’s old quarter. The opening fell on a day of great symbolism: it was Nazarbayev’s unofficial date of birth, as well as the official celebration of Astana Day. Moreover, July 6 marked the passage of six months since January 6, the most violent day of the protests. In Kazakhstan, few people call them “the January protests.” Those who are scared simply refer to them as the “events” (*sobitiya*), whereas those who are braver call the episode Bloody January (*Qandy Qantar*). For those who still hurt, *Qantar* (January) suffices. The difference in nomenclature is not accidental. Kazakhstani society has been deeply traumatized by what happened.

Suleimenova, for as long as I have known her, has always been attentive to emotions rather than words. She responded to January 6 with a project that aims to heal the collective trauma. Several weeks prior to the exhibition’s opening, she posted requests on all her social media accounts, asking people to donate plastic bags for a big plastic art painting. Suleimenova has worked with plastic bags for over a decade, incorporating bits and pieces of these mundane objects into works of art. This time, she asked people to donate red plastic bags because the work was to be dedicated to Bloody January. She called the exhibition *Biz Qarapayim Halyqpyz*, quoting the January 6 poster that declared, “We Are Ordinary People.”

As the spectators entered an old house in downtown Almaty that hosts an art space called Dom, they faced a large painting of the city’s New Square. (See Figure 1.) For years, the square has served as a space for demonstrations—from the December 1986 protests that were violently repressed by Moscow’s forces, to the opposition’s clashes with the local police throughout the 2000s, and now in the tragic days of January 2022. Suleimenova depicted everything in the

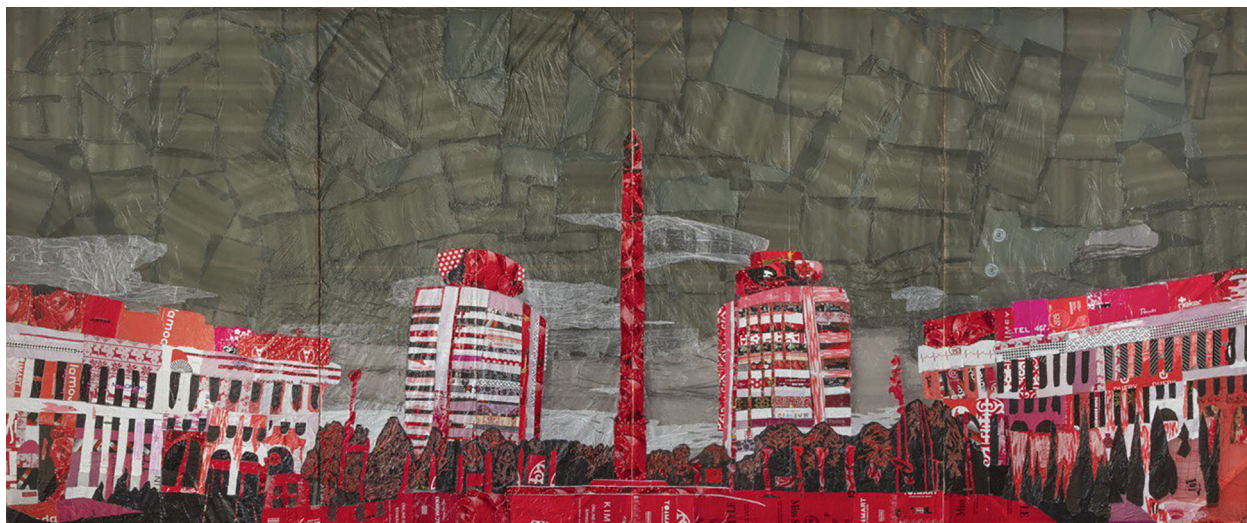


Figure 1. Saule Suleimenova, “The Skies above Almaty. Bloody January.” Shown at the July 2022 exhibition *We Are Ordinary People* in Almaty, Kazakhstan. (Artist’s photo.)

massive painting—the old Soviet buildings standing side by side, with the Monument of Independence and its stela (which none of the artists I interviewed particularly liked), and former administrative offices in the background. Every little piece of this urban structure is known to most Kazakhstanians who have been to Almaty, the former capital, at least once in their lifetime.

This is the central space where the old Soviet city meets the new megalomaniacal and neoliberal Almaty, with its proliferating shopping malls. The contours of the familiar settings are painted in red to symbolize the blood of the people who died during the protests. The spectator is confronted

with that reality, and with the silence that suddenly fills the busy room, facing questions.

The question posed by the exhibition’s curator, Vladislav Sludsky, was an obvious one: Has art become the new instrument to deal with the collective trauma caused by the regime? Suleimenova said she hoped that many politicians would visit the exhibition to attempt to answer that question. She sent an invitation to the Kazakh president himself.

Contemporary art has long been in conversation with the regime. In this case, the artist chose the dictatorial power of the regime as her main opponent. Still, the invitation hangs there as an open letter to a state that has to finally start listening. ■