

Think George Washington, Jomo Kenyatta, Nelson Mandela or Lee Kuan Yew. Kazakhs believe that President Nazarbayev is in this league.

The president is earning that same kind of trust even in the area where his critics are most vociferous — human rights.

They are not perfect in Kazakhstan, but they are getting better. The notion that the country is a “dictatorship” is a lazy and out-of-date journalistic cliché.

I am a regular visitor to the country's courts, prisons and young offenders' institutes. They are slowly but steadily improving. The number of prisoners has halved in the last decade. Sentences are getting shorter as the old Soviet penal code is replaced by laws drafted to European standards. Probation and rehabilitation programs are now important parts of the criminal justice system. The KNB (formerly KGB) has stopped investigating financial frauds and tax evasion. Torture has been banned from police procedures. Electronic tags and single-cell prisons are on their way in. Corruption is on its way out — although not quickly enough.

Free speech in antigovernment publications may not be ablaze, but the fires of criticism are not snuffed out. Kazakh public opinion counts with the president, who is a sensitive listener with his ear tuned to both OSCE reports from abroad and a liberal young domestic population at home. President Nazarbayev may have autocratic tendencies, but they are benign ones.

As his tenure in power lengthens, Kazakhstan's president seems to be trusting his ministers more. Surprisingly, there was no post-election reshuffle of the cabinet. This reflected competence rather than

conyism. “The best way of judging the quality of a ruler is to judge the quality of the brains of the men about him,” wrote Niccolò Machiavelli.

Any informed Kazakhstan watcher soon comes to the conclusion that the top men in the government — prime minister, finance minister, foreign minister, energy minister, security chairman and senior presidential aides — all pass the Machiavelli test with flying colors. The middle ranks of government are also full of quality brainpower, most of it supplied by men and women with degrees or doctorates from the world's top universities.

President Nazarbayev's longstanding policy of sending thousands of young graduates to international universities on his Bolashak (“The Future”) program for their higher education is paying a handsome dividend. Careers are open to talent.

Kazakhstan is a contented young country, not a crushed one. The Western media have only partially gotten this message. One day the image will catch up with the reality. In the meantime, perhaps the election result will give the image makers a wake-up call, while the pilot weathers the economic storm and continues to steer his ship of state on an even keel of stability.

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