Rebel Kazakh Town Denied Right to Vote

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ASTANA — Residents of a mutinous Kazakh oil town will be excluded from parliamentary elections this month due to a state of emergency imposed after the deadliest riots in the Central Asian state for decades, the Central Election Commission said on Friday.

The cancellation of elections in Zhanaozen, where at least 16 people were killed last month in clashes between protesters and riot police, will effectively deny a voice to about 50,000 potential voters in the elections on Sunday.

"This decision can only be based on fear that the party in power would receive absolutely nothing in a real vote," said political analyst Aidos Sarym.

"Fearing any kind of surprise," he said. "And aware that the population is embittered and negatively inclined toward the authorities, the powers that be have simply decided to exclude this region."

The violence in western Kazakhstan has posed the biggest threat to the image of stability cultivated by Nursultan Nazarbayev in more than two decades as president, a period in which he has prized economic growth and market reforms over democracy.

Nazarbayev secured five more years as president by winning 96 percent of the vote in an April 2011 election. The parliamentary vote, brought forward from August, was designed to add a democratic veneer to Central Asia's biggest economy.

Nazarbayev has cited the need for a "multiparty parliament" and the vote will admit a nominal opposition presence by guaranteeing seats in the lower chamber for the second-placed party, whether or not it can meet the 7 percent entry threshold.

While the dominant Nur Otan party is still expected to win a comfortable majority, the unrest in western Kazakhstan after seven months of protests by sacked oil workers has dented confidence in the authorities among some people in the region.

The clashes in Zhanaozen were followed a day later by a riot in the nearby village of Shetpe, where another person died. More than 100 people were wounded in the clashes and peaceful protests spread to the regional capital Aktau for several days.

In response to the clashes, 71-year-old Nazarbayev fired his son-in-law from the top job at the sovereign wealth fund, as well as the heads of state oil company KazMunaiGas, its London-listed production unit and the governor of Mangistau region.

Since Nazarbayev's order to find work for 1,800 sacked oilmen, more than 1,300 people had applied for jobs at two local production units of KazMunaiGas Exploration Production, the government of Mangistau region said in a statement.

Nazarbayev also extended the state of emergency in Zhanaozen, which bans public protests and restricts freedom of movement, until Jan. 31. It had been due to expire last Thursday.

Central Election Commission Chairman Kuandyk Turgankulov said the cancellation of elections in Zhanaozen would have a "minimal" impact on nationwide results.

"There are only 50,000 eligible voters there," he said, adding that the decision had been taken after consultations with the country's Constitutional Council.

Around 90,000 people live in Zhanaozen, 150 kilometers from the Caspian Sea.

Kazakhstan, a country of 16.6 million people, had about 9.2 million registered voters in April's election.

Asked at a news conference if the cancellation would infringe on voters' rights, Turgankulov replied, "The Constitutional Council did not consider this to be the case."

While elections to the national parliament had been cancelled, he said local council elections in Zhanaozen had been postponed and that residents would be able to elect local deputies after the state of emergency was lifted in the town.

Political analyst Dosym Satpayev said the authorities might have taken the measure as insurance against the risk of repeat violence on election day.

"In Kazakhstan, constitutional rights are always relegated in importance when up against the political considerations of the moment," he said.