

Kazakh Rebel Town's Vote Rights Restored

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Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev on Tuesday overturned a decision to cancel parliamentary elections in the mutinous oil town where deadly riots have posed the largest challenge to the country's stability throughout two decades of independence.

By exercising his veto over the Constitutional Council's decision, Nazarbayev will allow residents of Zhanaozen to participate in the Jan. 15 vote. Officials say 16 people were killed when riot police clashed with protesters in the town on Independence Day last month. ☒

The Constitutional Council had ruled on Friday that the vote should not take place in Zhanaozen due to an extended state of emergency in the town, where a months-long strike by fired oil workers erupted into Kazakhstan's worst violence in decades.

"The president of Kazakhstan took into account the disquiet and concern of Zhanaozen's residents at the fact their electoral rights were limited by the Constitutional Council's decision," the presidential administration said in a statement. ☒

"The single aim of the head of state's decision is to provide the residents of Zhanaozen with the opportunity to realize their constitutional right to vote and to be elected into government and local councils," said the statement on the presidential web site.

The violence has posed the biggest threat to the image of stability cultivated by Nazarbayev in more than 20 years as leader, a period in which he has prized economic growth and market reforms over democratic freedoms in Central Asia's largest oil producer.

Nazarbayev secured five more years as president by winning 96 percent of the vote in an April 2011 election. The Jan. 15 parliamentary vote, brought forward from August, is designed to add a democratic veneer to the biggest economy in the region.

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-place 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 Dec. 16 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 protests spread to the regional capital Aktau for several days. ☒

Analysts had said the initial decision to cancel elections in Zhanaozen was based on fear that the Nur Otan party would suffer a heavy defeat in the town or that violence could once again flare up.

Kazakhstan's marginalized opposition had criticized the decision and called for a boycott of the parliamentary election. Some parties critical of Nazarbayev have had their registration denied or suspended.

Zhanaozen has about 50,000 registered voters. Kazakhstan, a country of 16.6 million people covering an area four times the size of Texas, has around 9.4 million registered voters.

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 out-of-work oilmen, more than 1,300 people have applied for jobs at two local production units of KazMunaiGas Exploration Production.

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 on Jan. 5.

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