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3 Parties Win Seats in Kazakh Parliament

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Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, second left, singing to victory at the headquarters of his Nur Otan party in Astana. Nur Otan won a landslide victory, as expected, with 81 percent of the vote in Sunday's polls, while two other parties, broadly sympathetic to the government, also won seats. **Mukhtar Kholdorbekov**

ASTANA — Three parties won entry to Kazakhstan's parliament, election results showed on Monday, a small concession to democracy by President Nursultan Nazarbayev after deadly clashes in a mutinous oil town shook the Central Asian state's image of stability.

⊠Nur Otan, the ruling party of the long-serving leader, won a landslide victory, as expected, with 81 percent of the vote in Sunday's elections. Two other parties, broadly sympathetic to the government, got over the 7 percent threshold to enter parliament.

⊠By finishing second, the pro-business Ak Zhol party would have won seats regardless of whether it cleared the threshold after changes to the electoral law guaranteed the end of the one-party chamber. ⊠Ak Zhol received 7.5 percent of the vote and the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan 7.2 percent. Turnout among the country's 9.3 million registered voters

was 75 percent, the Central Elections Commission said.

⊠Nazarbayev, 71, hailed his party's victory as a sign of national unity one month after protests by fired oil workers in the western town of Zhanaozen erupted into clashes that killed at least 16 people on Kazakhstan's Independence Day. ⊠

"Someone or other wanted to turn this to their advantage, to use the Zhanaozen events for political gain," Nazarbayev said. ⊠

"Residents of Zhanaozen gave their answer: nearly 70 percent voted for Nur Otan," he said to rapturous applause at a victory rally in a sports center attended by thousands of party members.

⊠Nazarbayev had overruled a decision by the Constitutional Council to cancel the election in Zhanaozen, part of a public show of support for the oil workers after the riots. He also fired several high-ranking officials, including his son-in-law.

⊠A state of emergency remains in place in the town. Voters who braved a blizzard on Sunday were watched by black-clad police officers armed with rifles.

⊠The decision to allow parties other than Nur Otan into parliament appears designed to create a veneer of democracy and ease frustration over the unequal distribution of oil riches in the republic ruled by Nazarbayev since 1989.

⊠"The gap between rich and poor is too big. We shouldn't have splendor and squalor side-by-side," said Valentina, a pensioner in Kazakhstan's commercial capital and largest city Almaty, where voter turnout of 41 percent was the lowest in the country.

⊠Stability in Kazakhstan had been upset by a series of Islamist-inspired attacks even before the riots in Zhanaozen, which also spread to other parts of the Mangistau region.

⊠Kazakhstan's leaders are also wary after mass protests greeted disputed elections last month in Russia.

⊠Despite official claims of transparent elections, critics of Nazarbayev have cried foul after being excluded from the vote. Politician Bolat Abilov said his All-National Social Democratic Party was the only true opposition party represented.

⊠Abilov was removed from his party list for an incomplete asset declaration. His party polled 1.6 percent to finish fourth of seven parties.

⊠Amirzhan Kosanov, leader of the Social Democrats, said he doubted the veracity of the polls. "If there are mass falsifications, we will express our views in a protest against this sort of election," he said.

⊠Membership of Ak Zhol has risen rapidly since its founder left Nur Otan last year. The Communist People's Party also refrains from criticizing the government.

⊠The similarly named but distinct Communist Party, fiercely critical of the government, was ineligible to participate due to a suspension. Another critical movement, Alga!, has

consistently failed to secure official registration as a political party.

⊠By rubber-stamping Nazarbayev's policies, Nur Otan is viewed by many as the best guarantor of the stability that has set Kazakhstan apart from its restive and poorer neighbors.

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