

Kazakh Vote Tests Stability After Clashes

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ZHANAOKEN, Kazakhstan — Kazakhstan voted on Sunday in an election designed to put a second party in parliament and ease growing discontent after deadly clashes shook the country's image of stability.

No one doubts that President Nursultan Nazarbayev's Nur Otan party will win by a landslide. The second-placed party will also be guaranteed a presence in the 107-seat chamber, whether or not it clears the 7 percent entry threshold.

But Nazarbayev's most critical opponents have been barred from standing, and the party expected to come second is Ak Zhol, a pro-business group led by a former ruling party member.

"Top-down changes are practically impossible in Kazakhstan," said opposition politician Bolat Abilov. "The president, the ruling party and their circle are too convinced they are right."

Black-clad security forces patrolled Zhanaozen — a dusty oil town in the remote western region of Mangistau, where officials say 17 people were killed in clashes during which police fired live rounds last month — as polls opened in a blizzard. The first voter at a local school, a middle-aged woman, was presented with a vase. An unclaimed set of crystal glasses awaited the first 18-year-old voter.

"The events that took place here should never be repeated, God forbid," said Kumlyumkos Nurgazinov, 63, an oil-field machinery operator, after he cast his ballot for Nur Otan.

Politicians are wary of the mass protests that greeted disputed elections last month in Russia.

"This is a big examination for us," Nazarbayev said after voting in the national library in Astana. "I'm sure Kazakhs will make the right choice for their future and for our peaceful development."

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