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**Kazakhstan**

**The leader of an unofficial opposition party in Kazakhstan has been jailed for seven and a half years for attempting to overthrow the government.**

Vladimir Kozlov was accused of stirring up dissent among striking oil workers last December. At least 15 people died when police fired on the strikers.

Mr Kozlov said the charges were an attempt to stifle opposition protests.



Vladimir Kozlov says the charges are politically motivated

He is an outspoken critic of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's autocratic president of 20 years.

A judge ruled that Mr Kozlov, the leader of the unregistered Alga party, incited oil workers to violence in the remote western town of Zhanaozen, as part of a plot with Mukhtar Ablyazov, a political rival of President Nazarbayev who fled Kazakhstan in 2009.

**'Criminal conspiracy'**

Violence flared when police clashed with oil workers who had occupied the central square for seven months.

Eyewitnesses said police fired on unarmed protesters, but the authorities said they were forced to defend themselves.

Prosecutors described Mr Ablyazov, a political ally of Mr Kozlov, as the head of a criminal conspiracy to "seize power by inciting civil strife and hatred".

Two more opposition activists also standing trial alongside Mr Kozlov were given three- and four-year suspended sentences.

Mr Nazarbayev has been president of independent Kazakhstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In that time the central Asian nation has seen significant economic growth as a result of its oil wealth, but critics say there has been no sign democratic reforms that could weaken Mr Nazarbayev's grip on power.



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