



Legal and technical reforms bring improvements in well administered Armenian elections, but process tainted by credible information of vote-buying and pressure on voters, international observers say

YEREVAN, 3 April 2017 – The 2 April parliamentary elections in Armenia were well administered and fundamental freedoms were generally respected. Despite welcomed reforms of the legal framework and the introduction of new technologies to reduce electoral irregularities, the elections were tainted by credible information about vote-buying, and pressure on civil servants and employees of private companies, international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. This contributed to an overall lack of public confidence and trust in the elections, the statement says.

“Yesterday’s elections marked a first step towards establishing a new political system in Armenia, but change cannot happen overnight,” said Ignacio Sanchez Amor, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Reform is a never-ending process, and I encourage the parliamentary majority and the new government to continue their efforts to transform the country’s political culture, in partnership with the opposition, civil society and the international community.”

A new Electoral Code was adopted less than one year before elections, in an inclusive process that was seen by most as a step forward in building confidence in the process, the observers said. The legal framework for elections is comprehensive, but was criticized by some as overly complex. The reforms to the Code addressed a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations, although some areas merit further attention.

“There is little doubt that, since the last time the citizens of Armenia voted, efforts have been made, including through logistical improvements, to raise the quality of the electoral process. The authorities should be praised for working to inform the electorate of this new, quite complex, electoral legislation. It is a pity that, despite all of the legal and organizational changes, these elections did not remove long-standing doubts about the reliability and integrity of electoral processes in the country,” said Liliane Maury Pasquier, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. “The use of new voting technologies cannot alone restore confidence in elections – crucial in a genuine democracy – just the same as better legislation is only effective if applied in good faith.”

“The new electoral law provides for greater representation of women and minorities,” said Geir Jorgen Bekkevold, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “I am glad to note that a greater number of our colleagues in the National Assembly will be women, and I encourage political parties to empower them to bring about transformative change.”

“The new electoral procedure was complex and not always understood by the voters. Nevertheless, polling station staff made strong efforts to ensure a smooth process. Regrettably, the process was undermined by credible, recurring information of vote buying, intimidation of voters notably civil servants in schools and hospitals and employees of private companies as well as abuse of administrative positions,” said Heidi Hautala, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament. “The European Parliament will work closely with the future Armenian National Assembly to support reforms and democratization, in line with our commitments as part of the deepening EU-Armenia relations.”

The Central Election Commission (CEC) operated efficiently and conducted its work in a transparent manner. It did not, however, pursue complaints rigorously, the statement says.

The campaign started slowly and intensified as election day approached, and most campaigns focused on individual candidates rather than party platforms or policies. Contestants were largely able to campaign without restrictions, but isolated incidents of violence were reported in some areas of the country. There was credible information of vote-buying, of pressure on public servants, including in schools and hospitals, and of intimidation of voters. This contributed to an overall lack of public confidence in the electoral process, the observers said.

Election day was generally calm and peaceful, but observers noted tension and the intimidation of voters in some polling stations visited. This was generally as a result of large numbers of party proxies and others present around polling stations throughout the day. Voters were identified on election day using voter authentication devices containing electronic copies of the voter lists, their fingerprints were also scanned, and the CEC said that it will conduct cross-checks to identify potential cases of multiple voting in the event of complaints. For the first time, scanned copies of signed voter lists from polling stations will be published, which the observers' interlocutors deemed an important deterrent of voter impersonation, despite the disclosure of voter's private data.

"The measures introduced ahead of these elections have improved the situation regarding the secrecy of the vote, which is an important step towards improving confidence in the process, but more clearly needs to be done to address long-standing practices like vote-buying and pressure on voters," said Ambassador Jan Petersen, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. "Moving forward, our mission will remain here through this week and the next, allowing us to follow post-election developments, including the finalization of results and the handling of any possible complaints and appeals."

There is a public reluctance to report electoral offences, due to a lack of confidence in the system for adjudicating complaints. The lack of independence on the part of judicial, election administration and law enforcement bodies, and the manner in which they dealt with complaints, undermined the effectiveness of providing legal redress, the statement says.

Enhanced inter-institutional collaboration led to improved accuracy in the voter lists. Although the law provides sufficient mechanisms for voters to request corrections, the lists continue to include addresses at which a large number of voters are registered, which requires further scrutiny by the authorities.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution and broadly exercised. The freedom of broadcast media is limited by interference by owners in editorial policy. This results in self-censorship by journalists and discourages reporting critical of the government, including on public television, the observers said. Journalists stated that recent cases of violence and the lack of prosecution of those responsible hamper their work and undermine their safety. There are no restrictions on online news sources, contributing to increased pluralism in the media. OSCE/ODIHR EOM media monitoring showed that the public broadcaster devoted equitable coverage to the contestants in its newscasts.

International and citizen observation is permitted, and party representatives are entitled to be present in polling stations. The CEC accredited a total of 28,021 citizen observers, but media and civil society criticized the legal provisions on observation as making it possible for polling officials to selectively limit the number of citizen observers and media representatives in stations. International NGOs were refused an invitation to observe the elections, which is at odds with OSCE commitments.

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