
INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION

PRESS RELEASE

Elections in Azerbaijan did not meet international standards despite some improvements

BAKU, 7 November 2005 – The 6 November parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan did not meet a number of OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards for democratic elections. While there were improvements in some respects during the pre-election period, uncertainty was evident with regard to key aspects of the process such as voter registration, and continued restrictions on the freedom of assembly, a fundamental right, marred the campaign period.

Voting was generally calm, but the election day process deteriorated progressively during the counting and, in particular, the tabulation of the votes, concluded the International Election Observation Mission in a preliminary statement released today in Baku. The mission deployed 665 observers from 42 countries for the election, visiting more than half of all polling stations in the country.

“The shortcomings that were observed, particularly during election day, have led us to conclude that the elections did not meet Azerbaijan’s international commitments on elections. It pains me to report that progress noted in the pre-election period was undermined by significant deficiencies in the count”, said Alcee L. Hastings, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Special Coordinator for the short-term observers.

Despite an inclusive candidate registration, which provided for a competitive election in most constituencies and enhanced voter choice, interference from executive authorities and media bias favoring incumbents resulted in a failure to provide equitable conditions for all candidates during the campaign period. At times, civil and political rights were infringed upon and there was harassment and intimidation of some candidates and their supporters. The complaints and appeals process overall did not provide redress for these shortcomings.

The Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Leo Platvoet, said: “The Council of Europe is the guardian *par excellence* of democratic principles. These were not fully respected in this election.”

Shortcomings of the elections included interference of local authorities, disproportionate use of force to thwart rallies, arbitrary detentions, restrictive interpretations of campaign provisions, unbalanced composition of election commissions and the failure of those commissions to effectively address a number of issues.

Improvements were noted regarding allocation of free airtime on state-funded media to candidates, the possibility to hold numerous rallies, inking of voters’ fingers to prevent fraud, a voter education campaign, distribution of new identification documents, the reinstating of a candidate who was wrongfully denied registration and transparency in the work of many election commissions.

Marie Anne Isler Béguin, Head of the European Parliament delegation added: “I welcome the inking of voters’ fingers for this election, which despite the late decision to introduce this measure, was a credible attempt to guard against possible multiple voting.”

“The role of domestic observers is crucial in any election in order to promote transparency and increase confidence in the voting process”, said Michael Clapham, Head of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation. “It was encouraging to see so many local observers present in polling stations but this was undermined by consistent reports that many faced problems, including intimidation, being expelled from polling stations and not receiving protocols and other information.”

On election day, observers assessed voting negatively in 13 per cent of polling stations visited. Observers witnessed attempts to influence voter choices, unauthorized persons interfering in, or directing, the process, as well as cases of ballot stuffing. Inking procedures, in particular the checking of voters’ fingers for traces of ink, were not followed in 11 per cent of polling stations visited, with several polling stations not applying the procedure at all. There were observations of domestic observers and even members of polling station commissions being expelled from polling stations.

The observers assessed the ballot counting as bad or very bad in 43 per cent of counts observed. They noted a wide range of serious violations, including tampering with result protocols, intimidation of observers, and unauthorized persons directing the process.

Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR’s long-term observation mission, concluded: “Having read the presidential decree of 11 May, I had very much hoped for a better election and consequently a more positive assessment of the International Election Observation Mission. Unfortunately, the results of our observation made this impossible.”

A final report will be released approximately six weeks after the completion of the electoral process.

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