

## Tajikistan presidential election peaceful, but lacking in pluralism and genuine choice, international observers say

DUSHANBE, 7 November 2013 – The 6 November presidential election in Tajikistan took place peacefully, but restrictive candidate-registration requirements resulted in a lack of pluralism and genuine choice, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. Extensive state media coverage of the official activities of the incumbent provided him with a significant advantage. In a positive step, the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) took measures to enhance the transparency and efficiency of election administration. Significant shortcomings were noted on election day.

Six candidates, including the incumbent, were registered for the election. Restrictive requirements, including the unreasonably large number of signatures potential candidates must gather to qualify, present significant obstacles and are at odds with OSCE commitments and other standards for democratic elections, the statement says.

“It’s hard to stand up and exercise your freedom of choice, but it’s indispensable to being truly free. While quiet and peaceful, this was an election without a real choice,” said Gordana Comic, the Special Co-ordinator who led the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Being in power requires abiding by OSCE commitments, not taking advantage of incumbency, as we saw. Greater genuine political pluralism will be critical for Tajikistan to meet its democratic commitments.”

The campaign lacked the political debate necessary for a competitive campaign environment, the observers conclude. The authorities did not provide safeguards against the misuse of state resources and the distinction between the state and political parties was often blurred.

State broadcast media allocated an equal share of airtime to candidates in their news and free-airtime programmes, as required by law. However, extensive positive coverage of the incumbent president’s official activities provided him with a significant advantage.

“In addition to the need for a genuine political debate, there is also a need to increase the voters’ understanding and knowledge of the process as a whole, as well as its significance, for future elections,” said Elisabeth Jeggle, Head of the EP delegation. “The European Parliament, within the framework of the EU-Tajikistan Partnership Cooperation Agreement, stands ready to reinforce its co-operation with Tajikistan to further develop its democratic practices for the benefit of its people.”

The election was essentially conducted using the same legal framework as the preceding presidential election, in 2006, and shortcomings including unduly strict candidacy requirements and vague provisions on essential aspects such as voter registration remain,

despite recommendations for improvements to the relevant election laws by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the statement says.

The lack of a centralized voter register prevented any nationwide crosschecks to eliminate double entries, the observers conclude. Although precinct election commissions made concerted efforts to verify the accuracy of voter lists, the process was inconsistent, due to the absence of clear instructions.

“The lack of any women candidates registered, and the almost complete lack of women in political life and leadership, calls into question how much the political class genuinely represents Tajikistan,” said Margareta Cederfelt, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “This is indicative of a serious restriction on the choice voters were given.”

One woman was nominated, but fell short of the required number of supporting signatures due to administrative obstacles, and stated that some voters feared government reprisals if they signed. Women were significantly underrepresented at all levels of the election administration, the statement says.

“Our observation here over the past six weeks has identified serious shortcomings in candidate and voter registration, the consistent application of election laws, and equal representation for political parties in lower-level election commissions, among others,” said Paraschiva Bădescu, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “The majority of past ODIHR recommendations remain unimplemented, but the final report by our mission and the recommendations it will contain represent a fresh opportunity to improve the electoral process in Tajikistan, and ODIHR is ready, as always, to assist in this.”

Election day took place peacefully, but observers noted shortcomings in a significant number of the polling stations visited, with violations including widespread proxy voting, family voting and group voting, as well as indications of ballot box stuffing. Basic procedures were not followed during the count and, contrary to CCER instructions, the results protocols were often not posted publicly outside polling stations.

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