

Although Tajikistan’s parliamentary elections provided some political alternatives, campaign space was restricted and a fair count could not be guaranteed, international observers say

DUSHANBE, 2 March 2015 – Some contestants provided political alternatives, yet the March 1 parliamentary elections in Tajikistan took place in a restricted political space and failed to provide a level playing field for candidates, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. Although the government stated its ambition to hold democratic elections, and some improvements were made to electoral law, restrictions on the right to candidacy, on freedoms of expression and assembly, and on access to the media limited the opportunity to make a free and informed choice.

“Engagement by various political forces in this campaign was, unfortunately, not enough to result in truly competitive elections. Uneven treatment by the authorities and remaining legal restrictions limited the space for debate on the real problems facing Tajikistan.” said Marietta Tidei, the Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “The voters, many of whom I was pleased to speak with yesterday, deserve more genuine discussion about the future of their country.”

“I was pleased to observe that the vote took place in a calm and peaceful manner, however significant shortcomings, including multiple voting and ballot box stuffing, and disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed.” said Norbert Neuser, Head of the EP delegation. “I encourage the authorities to introduce the changes necessary to make the voting procedure transparent and credible.”

More than half of the vote counts observed were assessed negatively.

Despite the existence of some political choice, the campaign took place in a controlled environment, as regulations limited the possibilities for candidates to campaign. The distinction between the state and the ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan was often blurred in the campaign. There were credible allegations of harassment and obstruction of some opposition parties, as well as pressure on voters, the observers said.

The imbalanced coverage by state media, negative reporting on the opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, and the absence of genuine political debate considerably limited the opportunity for voters to make an informed choice, the statement says. The state-owned media outlets – the only broadcast outlets with nationwide coverage – focused overwhelmingly on the activities of state authorities, and not on contestants’ campaigns.

“While we have noted some improvements, for example in the election law, the advantages of incumbency were still misused. Greater equal treatment in law and in fact for all political forces is required for Tajikistan to live up to its democratic commitments,” said Geir Jørgen Bekkevold, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “I was pleased to see that some choice existed for voters, and hope that in the future there will be more space for a vibrant campaign.”

Amendments in 2014 to the election law addressed some long-standing recommendations by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), but further reform is needed to bring this in line with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards. While it includes important electoral principles, the legal framework does not comprehensively regulate the process and certain aspects lack clarity and coherence, the observers said. The law was often selectively interpreted in a manner that restricted the freedoms of expression and assembly, as well as the right to access information.

Legal deadlines were met, and the sessions of the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) were generally open to observers and the media. The lack of transparency in the appointment of election commissions and the strong role of the government administration contributed to a lack of confidence in the election administration's independence and impartiality on the part of opposition representatives. While there was a comprehensive voter information campaign in state media and training for lower-level commission members offered an opportunity to clarify vague procedural matters, the failure by the CCER to address unclear aspects of the campaign, registration and polling procedures contributed to inconsistent implementation, the statement says.

The voter registration process was inclusive and allowed voters to verify their registration, but the lack of safeguards against multiple voting undermined the integrity of the process, the observers said. Significant questions remain as to whether the number of polling stations abroad was sufficient to facilitate voting for the large number of citizens outside the country.

All eight political parties registered candidates, but only two had enough registered to potentially win a parliamentary majority. Eligibility requirements related to education, residency, language and criminal conviction and investigation records are contrary to international obligations and standards. In a positive step, the financial deposit was halved, although some parties reported this remained too high. There are no special legal measures to promote women candidates, and few women were placed in winnable positions on party lists.

“Genuinely democratic elections cannot be held without real debate in the media, an independent election administration and an environment free of repression. Unfortunately all of these were missing,” said Miklós Haraszti, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “The deeply felt desire for peace among all players gives me hope, however, that the electoral reform process will move forward in addressing the serious shortcomings we have observed.”

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