

Elections in Turkey offered voters variety of choices, but process was hindered by challenging security environment, incidents of violence and restrictions against media, international observers say

ANKARA, 2 November 2015 – The 1 November early parliamentary elections in Turkey offered voters a variety of choices. At the same time, the challenging security environment, particularly in the southeast of the country, coupled with a high number of violent incidents, including attacks against party members, premises and campaign staff, hindered contestants' ability to campaign freely, international observers said in a statement issued today. Restrictions on media freedom remain a serious concern, the observers said.

“While Turkish citizens could choose between genuine and strong political alternatives in this highly polarized election, the rapidly diminishing choice of media outlets, and restrictions on freedom of expression in general, impacted the process and remain serious concerns,” said Ignacio Sanchez Amor, Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Physical attacks on party members, as well as the significant security concerns, particularly in the southeast, further imposed restrictions on the ability to campaign.”

A major terrorist bomb attack in Ankara on 10 October significantly affected the atmosphere and conduct of the campaign, with all political parties temporarily suspending campaign activities. Most contestants could convey their messages to the electorate in a campaign atmosphere that was polarized between the ruling party and other contestants, and confrontational rhetoric was common, the statement says. The last two weeks of the campaign were marked by an increased number of attacks against and arrests of members and activists, who were predominantly from the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

“Unfortunately, the campaign for these elections was characterized by unfairness and, to a serious degree, fear,” said Andreas Gross, Head of the PACE delegation. “In light of this, it is even more vital that the president works for an inclusive political process to deal with the problems facing Turkey, ensuring that all voices, including those who lost these elections, are able to be heard.”

“The violence in the largely Kurdish southeast of the country had a significant impact on the elections, and the recent attacks and arrests of members and activists, predominantly from the HDP, are of concern, as they hindered their ability to campaign,” said Margareta Cederfelt, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “For an election process to be truly democratic, candidates need to feel that they can campaign and voters need to feel that they can cast their ballots in a safe and secure environment.”

While the media landscape comprises a variety of outlets, undue legal restrictions on the freedom of expression remain in place. Investigations against journalists and media outlets for supporting terrorism or defamation of the president, the blocking of websites, the forcible seizure of prominent media outlets and the removal of several television stations from digital service providers reduced voters' access to a plurality of views and information, the observers said. Media monitoring revealed that three out of the five monitored national television stations, including the public broadcaster, clearly favoured the governing party in their programming.

The elections were well organized by the election administration, and the Supreme Board of Elections met all election deadlines. It concluded that voting should be conducted in the areas affected by violence, and a significant number of polling stations were relocated in a number of neighbourhoods by district election boards, in line with the decision.

If implemented fully and effectively, the legal framework is generally conducive to holding democratic elections. However, certain fundamental freedoms, including the right to vote and be elected, are unduly restricted by the Constitution and legislation. Previous recommendations, dating back to 2011, by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and by the Council of Europe to address gaps and ambiguities have generally not been addressed, the observers noted.

“Once again, our assessment, based on our observation over the past five weeks is not simply black-and-white, and while there were positive elements, there were also shortcomings,” said Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR limited election observation mission. “I hope that the relevant authorities will consider the message in today’s statement, as well as in the ODIHR final report on these elections, and engage in substantive follow-up on the recommendations the final report will make.”

In addition, the 10 per cent threshold for parliamentary elections limits political pluralism, while the system for determining the number of seats per constituency results in significant differences in the number of voters per seat, inconsistent with the principle of equality of the vote, the statement says. In a positive step, the freedom to campaign in any language was guaranteed by law in 2014.

The lack of judicial review of decisions by the Supreme Board of Elections runs counter to the principle of the separation of powers and prevents access to judicial remedy in electoral matters. The Constitutional Court’s recent ruling that the Board’s decisions cannot be reviewed even where fundamental rights and freedoms might have been violated further restricted the opportunity for judicial redress, the observers said.

Candidate registration was inclusive overall, providing voters a diverse and genuine choice. However, candidacy restrictions against those who have not completed compulsory military service or have been convicted of any of a broad range of crimes, including minor criminal offences, are incompatible with the fundamental right to stand for election, the statement says.

There was general confidence in the voter register, the observers noted. However, the restrictions on voting by conscripts, students in military schools and prisoners are not in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards, they said.

Women played an active role in the campaign, although they remain under-represented in political life. While the Constitution guarantees gender equality, there are no special legal obligations for the parties to nominate women candidates. On a positive note, some parties implemented gender quotas and introduced affirmative measures to enhance the participation of women. Approximately 24 per cent of candidates on party lists were female, although not in higher positions.

Election day was generally peaceful, and in the limited number of polling stations observed, voting was largely organized in an efficient manner, although observers were asked to leave in seven polling stations, and there were instances of citizen observers accredited on behalf of political parties being denied access. Counting procedures were assessed as transparent and well organized, although there were some instances where procedures prescribed by law were not followed.

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