

Election in Azerbaijan undermined by limitations on fundamental freedoms, lack of level playing field and significant problems on election day, international observers say

BAKU, 10 October 2013 – The 9 October presidential election in Azerbaijan was undermined by limitations on the freedoms of expression, assembly and association that did not guarantee a level playing field for candidates, the international observers concluded in a statement released today. Continued allegations of candidate and voter intimidation and a restrictive media environment marred the campaign.

Significant problems were observed throughout all stages of election day processes and underscored the serious shortcomings that need to be addressed in order for Azerbaijan to fully meet its OSCE commitments for genuine and democratic elections, the statement said.

“I was pleased by the good organization of the election and the number of candidates who took part, as well as the peaceful atmosphere on election day,” said Michel Voisin, the Special Co-ordinator who led the OSCE short-term election observation mission. “Regretfully, however, we have to underline shortcomings in areas like the counting of ballots, and I would hope that the Azerbaijani authorities will make a real effort to bring such areas in line with OSCE commitments.”

Ten candidates were registered for the election, while four individuals were denied registration when the CEC ruled they had failed to collect the requisite number of valid signatures, and the courts ruled against their subsequent challenges of the signature-verification criteria. The authorities approved only 152 venues for campaign rallies, thereby limiting citizens’ freedom of assembly, the observers concluded.

The Central Election Commission generally administered preparations for the election efficiently and held regular sessions open to observers and media. Nevertheless, the formula for structuring all election commissions gives pro-government forces a *de facto* majority. As a result of this, opposition representatives expressed a lack of confidence in the election administration, the statement said.

Overall, candidates were provided with insufficient access to the media. Distinctly disproportionate coverage of the incumbent President during the campaign period contributed to the lack of a level playing field among candidates. Detentions, criminal prosecutions, and testimony of physical attacks and other forms of pressure on journalists negatively impacted the media environment, the observers concluded.

Despite recent amendments, the majority of previous ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed in the law, the statement says, including key provisions related to the composition of election commissions and candidate registration.

“I welcome the high turnout, and I was happy to see so many people who were eager to cast their vote,” said Doris Barnett, the Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) delegation. “At the same time, the report underlines serious challenges. I would urge the authorities to support the democratic aspirations of Azerbaijan’s citizens by swiftly addressing the issue we highlighted.”

The review of election appeals lacked impartiality and failed to provide appellants sufficient guarantees of effective redress, the statement says, and the condensed timeline for the conduct of the election was insufficient to allow for legal remedy.

“Looking at the facts our mission has gathered over the six weeks we have been observing the electoral process, the stark reality is that this process has fallen well short of OSCE commitments in in most areas,” said Tana de Zulueta, the Head of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) long-term election observation mission. “The limitations placed on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, the lack of a level playing field, the allegations of intimidation all came in the lead up to an election day that our observers found to be seriously flawed.”

A high number of observers assessed the situation in polling stations on election day as negative, with significant problems coming in the opening, voting and counting procedures. They reported clear indications of ballot box stuffing in 37 polling stations, and the counting was assessed negatively in an unprecedented 58 per cent of the stations observed.

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