

Azerbaijan's elections devoid of real competition amid diminishing respect for fundamental freedoms, but efficiently prepared: international observers

BAKU, 2 September 2024 – Azerbaijan's early parliamentary elections did not offer voters genuine political alternatives and took place within a legal framework overly restrictive of fundamental freedoms and the media, although they were efficiently prepared, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

Election legislation has remained substantially unchanged since the last parliamentary elections, leaving long-standing recommendations unaddressed, the joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) found. The candidate registration process was marred by overly burdensome requirements, inconsistently applied procedures, and cases of candidates withdrawing citing intimidation, while new requirements for political parties introduced further restrictions on their registration.

"These elections took place in a restrictive political and legal environment, the consequence of which was a lack of political pluralism coupled with the subdued and low-key campaign, all of which undermined the electoral process," said Michael Creed, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers. "Furthermore, the dominance of ruling party affiliates within election commissions, alongside restrictions on access for independent domestic observers, run contrary to the principles of transparency and inclusivity, which are at the heart of democratic elections."

6.4 million voters were registered to take part in yesterday's elections. This is approximately 1.2 million fewer than the number of citizens of voting age, raising questions about the accuracy of data and inclusiveness of the voter register. While preparations for the elections were carried out efficiently and there was an extensive voter information campaign, the election administration was effectively controlled by the majority party, impacting its impartiality and the integrity of the process. Observers assessed the opening and voting processes to be orderly and efficiently organized. However, there were serious irregularities and inconsistencies in the application of important procedures and safeguards, particularly during vote counting, that raised concerns about the integrity of the process overall.

The election campaign was barely visible, including online. Observers were informed of public sector employees and others who were forced to attend campaign events, causing concerns about intimidation of voters and their ability to cast their vote without fearing retribution. At the same time the increase in arrests and detentions of journalists and civil society activists, combined with the restrictive media legal framework, resulted in widespread self-censorship and severely limited the scope for independent journalism. Political debate became further subdued by the authorities' declared intention to monitor the internet and social networks.

"In these elections, the lack of genuine choice and engagement that led to pervasive political apathy among the population was quite evident," said Lucie Potůčková, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. "Equally, the alarming trends of ongoing restrictions on media outlets and increased pressure on non-governmental organizations, including arbitrary arrests, decisively stifle political discourse. Without substantial reforms and change, these issues will continue to undermine democracy and rule of law in the country."

While the law allows for citizen and international election observers, the vast majority of citizen observers were nominated by the ruling party and affiliated candidates, raising concerns about the access of independent observers to the election process. At the same time, restrictive legal



provisions meant that well-known citizen election observer groups remained unregistered and deprived of funding, while some prominent members are under arrest or detention.

“There was regrettably no genuine political pluralism in these elections, with numerous candidates who wished to participate facing serious obstacles, election commissions that lacked impartiality, and restrictions that made the work of many citizen observers impossible,” said Ditmir Bushati, Head of ODIHR’s election observation mission. “Despite the efficiency of the process, these conditions did not allow elections to be held in line with democratic standards. We stand ready to support the authorities in implementing our long-standing recommendations to improve the overall process, for the good of all citizens.”

Women made up 30 per cent of all registered candidates, a significant increase from 21 per cent in the previous elections. They were also well represented in the lower-level election administration, although this was not the case for the Central Election Commission. Overall though, women remain underrepresented in elected and appointed positions, and there are no affirmative measures to increase their political involvement.

The international election observation mission to the early parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan totalled 279 observers from 34 countries, composed of 225 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term and short-term observers, and 54 from the OSCE PA.

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