

In Türkiye's presidential runoff, a competitive campaign continued to be marked by lack of level playing field and media bias: international observers

ANKARA, 29 May 2023 – The second round of Türkiye's presidential election was well run and gave voters the opportunity to choose between real political alternatives, but was characterized by increasingly inflammatory and discriminatory language during the campaign period. Media bias and ongoing restrictions to freedom of expression created an unlevel playing field, and contributed to an unjustified advantage of the incumbent, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) found that although the election authorities introduced some regulations ahead of the first round to ensure the smooth running of a potential run-off, the legislation does not address important aspects of holding second rounds, which has a negative impact on legal certainty and the stability of the overall legal framework.

While candidates were able to campaign freely, supporters of some opposition parties continued to face intimidation and harassment. Inflammatory and discriminatory language was used on both sides, with mutual accusations of collaboration with terrorist organisations.

"Concerns raised during the first round over the lack of a level playing field and the unfairness of the campaign remained unaddressed, with the incumbent president continuing to benefit from an unjustified advantage," said Farah Karimi, who headed the OSCE PA delegation and served as Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. "Regretfully, the use of harsher rhetoric by both contesting sides that was discriminatory and inflammatory further polarized the political environment. Voters came out in great numbers yesterday, and it is crucial that the winner makes genuine efforts to ensure the unity of the people of Türkiye."

The campaign period ahead of the second round was generally peaceful. At the same time, instances of campaigning while performing official duties continued ahead of the second round, with breaches of the ban on inauguration events during the campaign period. Together with the ongoing use of public resources for campaign purposes, this provided an undue advantage to the incumbent that was also noted in the first-round campaign.

"The second round of the presidential elections has resulted in a clear winner. Nevertheless, this second round also took place in an environment that in many ways does not provide the conditions for holding democratic elections," said Frank Schwabe, head of the PACE delegation. "Türkiye must now implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and, above all, release Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş. In the future, the Supreme Electoral Council must be committed to the greatest possible transparency in order to strengthen trust in the electoral process."

The election administration managed the preparations for the second round efficiently within a short timeframe. However, the national election authorities postponed the declaration of the final parliamentary results until after the second round, missing the deadline earlier set. It also continued the practice noted during the first round of holding closed sessions and withholding the publication of most decisions, including on complaints related to the first-round results. This further impacted the transparency of its work. Election day was largely peaceful, but there were isolated instances of violence that were mostly directed against opposition supporters. Observers also noted cases of group or family voting, while the secrecy of the vote was potentially compromised due to the layout of some polling stations.

Trials and arrests of journalists and bloggers continued ahead of the run-off, further restricting freedom of expression. At the same time, observers noted that many broadcasters did not meet a legal obligation to provide impartial coverage of the campaign and equal opportunities for the two presidential candidates, with the public broadcaster significantly favouring the incumbent and a similar bias noted in numerous private media outlets.

“It’s true and positive that voters had a real choice between political alternatives on election day,” said Ambassador Jan Petersen, head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “But voters were left underinformed by the lack of transparency on the part of the election administration, and the lack of balanced media coverage was concerning. In contributing to the unlevel playing field overall, this was certainly among the greatest shortcomings of this election. ODIHR stands ready to assist in addressing these.”

The international election observation to the second round of the presidential election in Türkiye totals 232 observers from 31 countries, made up of 181 ODIHR-deployed experts, long-term, and short-term observers, 31 from the OSCE PA, and 20 from PACE.

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