

Turkey's well-managed, democratic elections demonstrated pluralism, but also showed a need for improvements on fundamental freedoms

The 12 June 2011 elections to the Turkish Grand National Assembly demonstrated that recent changes enacted by the Turkish government have improved the electoral system, yet there were some worrying developments, especially regarding freedom of expression, including media freedom. The electoral process was generally characterized by pluralism and a vibrant civil society. Voting and counting observed on Election Day showed a mostly calm and professionally-managed process.

Some elements of the legal framework continue to constrain activities of the media and political parties by limiting freedom of speech.

The 10 percent threshold for political party representation in Parliament – the highest in the OSCE region – remains one of the central issues that limit the representative nature of the legislature.

For the first time, contestants were allowed to buy political advertisements. Political parties are granted free airtime in the final week of the campaign on the main state-owned public television channel; additional airtime is granted to parties proportionally based on votes received in the last elections. Independent candidates do not qualify for free airtime and opposition parties claimed that they receive significantly less coverage in Turkish media compared to the governing party.

The registration of political parties and independent candidates offered voters genuine choices. The practical allowance for the use of other languages, including Kurdish, in political campaigning is an important change this year that strengthened the country's pluralistic, democratic debate.

Government control over influential media groups allegedly resulted in biased reporting and self-censorship, but journalists and NGOs said business interests also limit media freedom. Observers noted the detention and ongoing investigations of more than 50 journalists in Turkey, some linked to alleged connections with an attempted coup. Limiting freedom of the media is a violation of the 1990 Copenhagen Document and a host Council of Europe documents. On 2 May 2011 the Turkish Constitutional Court amended the Press Law to extend the statute of limitations for filing criminal cases against journalists from two months to eight years. This ruling has been cited by many observers, including the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, as putting journalists under the permanent threat of criminal lawsuits.

Procedures during the elections were generally well organized and conducted in an orderly and professional fashion, even though there were initial problems with the registration of some independent candidates. The Supreme Board of Elections (SBE) enjoyed broad public confidence and respect through its transparent, professional and efficient administration of the election. Voters had to present photo identification at polling stations. Transparent ballot boxes were used for the first time.

In a technical improvement, the SBE had prepared voter lists for the elections based on a nationwide electronic civil registration system that links a voter's registered residence with a unique personal identification number. However, many stakeholders raised questions about remarkable changes in the number of registered voters in recent years, and the printing of a disproportionately high number of excess ballot papers.

Political parties had sufficient ability to convey their programs to voters. The election campaign took place in a polarized environment. The parliamentary observers welcomed the fact that the stakeholders mostly exercised restraint even if there was heavy police presence and tensions in parts of the South East, as well as isolated reports of physical attacks. At the same time, many rallies with large crowds of citizens occurred largely free of violence. Most importantly, the election day was overall carried out without violence.

The counting observed was done efficiently and in compliance with the existing regulations. Party representatives and observers had access to the results in the polling stations.

There is a need to broadly promote more participation and representation of women in the political life of the country. Less than 9 per cent of the seats in the outgoing parliament were held by women, and the candidate lists presented by the political parties did not meet promises made; women never made up even 20 per cent of the candidates on any party's candidate list.

On Election Day, observers witnessed the opening of polling stations, voting and the closing process, including the vote count. Local election officials and poll workers appeared well-trained, polling proceeded in a calm and well-organized manner. Turnout was reported at 84 per cent.

In keeping with its OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, Turkey invited parliamentarians from the OSCE and Council of Europe to observe these elections. The observers were mostly granted access to all levels of election administration and polling stations on Election Day. In order to remove any uncertainty and to comply fully with OSCE commitments, it is desirable that the law specifically allow international observers access to national election proceedings.

The observation, bringing together more than 70 observers, including 61 Members of Parliaments from 30 countries, was a joint effort of delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA), led by OSCE PA Vice-President, and Member of the Danish Parliament Pia Christmas-Moeller, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), led by Member of the Swedish Parliament Kerstin Lundgren.

For more information, contact

Neil Simon, OSCE PA, +45 60 10 83 80, neil@oscepa.dk

Nathalie Bargellini, PACE, +33 607 06 77 73, Nathalie.Bargellini@coe.int