

Azerbaijan's elections lacked competition but were efficiently prepared: observers



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 issued Monday. Election legislation has remained substantially unchanged since the last parliamentary elections, the joint observation mission from the OSCE PA and ODIHR found, and long-standing recommendations remain unaddressed. 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."

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.

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.

"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."

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, led by Ditmír Bushati, and 54 from the OSCE PA.

Registration reminder for Autumn Meeting, election observation missions

Delegations are kindly advised that registration is open for the upcoming OSCE PA Autumn Meeting, as well as several election observation missions. The International Secretariat has distributed invitations to observe in Moldova, Georgia, and the United States, and expects to send out an invitation for Uzbekistan this week. Delegations wishing to nominate members to participate in these election observation missions are kindly asked to complete and return registration documents to the International Secretariat at eom@oscepa.dk as soon as possible.

Pres. Kauma and SG Montella issue letter to PA members on OSCE leadership vacancies

In a letter distributed to members of the OSCE PA Standing Committee today, President Pia Kauma (Finland) and Secretary General Roberto Montella bade farewell to Secretary General Helga Schmid, ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci, Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro, and High Commissioner on National Minorities Kairat Abdrakhmanov, whose mandates expired this week.

Praising the service of the outgoing leaders, Kauma and Montella noted that their significant impact has been indispensable. The current lack of agreement on their successors, however, presents a critical challenge, they said.

"The absence of new appointments undermines the credibility and functionality of our Organization," Kauma and Montella wrote. "Strong and effective leadership is essential for the

OSCE to address the pressing issues confronting our participating States and to uphold our commitment to peace, security, democracy, and human rights."

Toward this end, the PA leaders commended the Maltese Chairpersonship for its tireless efforts in seeking a resolution to the current impasse, and urged OSCE PA members to help increase the political will necessary to ensure the effective functioning of the OSCE.

"I hope you will take this opportunity to exchange with your Minister for Foreign Affairs and encourage increased efforts to find a solution in the best interests of the Organization," Kauma and Montella wrote. "Your active engagement is crucial in overcoming this impasse and ensuring that the OSCE continues to serve its vital role."

For further information contact Head of Communications and Press Nat Parry at [+45 33 37 80 40](tel:+4533378040) or email nat@oscepa.dk | www.oscepa.org