

Observers: Turkish elections competitive, hindered by violence and media restrictions



Ignacio Sanchez Amor speaks to the media alongside Margareta Cederfelt outside a polling station in Ankara, 1 Nov. 2015

The 1 November early parliamentary elections in Turkey offered voters a variety of choices and were well organized by the election administration bodies, announced Special Co-ordinator of the short-term OSCE observer mission Ignacio Sanchez Amor and Head of the OSCE PA delegation Margareta Cederfelt in Ankara on Monday.

At the same time, the security environment, particularly in the southeast of the country, coupled with a high number of violent incidents against party members, premises and campaign staff, hindered contestants' ability to campaign freely. Restrictions on media freedom remain a serious concern, the observers said.

"While Turkish citizens could choose between genuine and strong political alternatives in this highly polarized election, the rapidly diminishing choice of media outlets, and restrictions on freedom of expression in general, impacted the process and remain serious concerns," said Sanchez Amor. "Physical attacks on party members, as well as the significant security concerns, particularly in the southeast, further imposed restrictions on the ability to campaign."

A major terrorist bomb attack in Ankara on 10 October significantly affected the atmosphere and conduct of the campaign, with all political parties temporarily suspending

campaign activities. The last two weeks of the campaign were marked by an increased number of attacks against and arrests of members and activists predominantly from the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

"The violence in the largely Kurdish southeast of the country had a significant impact on the elections, and the recent attacks and arrests of members and activists, predominantly from the HDP, are of concern, as they hindered their ability to campaign," said Cederfelt. "For an election process to be truly democratic, candidates need to feel that they can campaign and voters need to feel that they can cast their ballots in a safe and secure environment."

While the media landscape comprises a variety of outlets, undue legal restrictions on the freedom of expression remain in place. Investigations against journalists and media outlets for supporting terrorism or defamation of the president, the blocking of websites, the forcible seizure of prominent media outlets and the removal of several television stations from digital service providers reduced voters' access to a plurality of views and information, the observers said.

Election day was generally peaceful, and in the limited number of polling stations observed, voting was largely organized in an efficient manner.

The OSCE PA worked closely with observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and with the limited election observation mission deployed by the OSCE/ODIHR. More than 30 OSCE parliamentarians took part in the observation mission and were joined by OSCE PA Secretary General Spencer Oliver and Deputy Secretary General Gustavo Pallares.

The mission was supported by Director of Elections Andreas Baker, Senior Policy Analyst Francesco Pagani, Operations Officer Iryna Sabashuk, and Programme Officer Loic Poulain.

Secretary of BiH's Delegation appointed Ambassador to Israel

The Secretary of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Delegation to the OSCE PA, Jelena Rajaković, has been appointed BiH's Ambassador to Israel and completes her engagement with the parliament this week. Having performed duties as Secretary of Delegation for more than a decade, Rajaković has also served concurrently in parliament as Head of Division for Bilateral International Relations. She will be succeeded as Secretary of Delegation by her colleague Dženana Leper.

OSCE PA Secretary General Spencer Oliver wished Rajakovic congratulations and success in her new endeavour. "Jelena has been with us a long time and she will be sorely missed," Oliver said. "But all of us at the Secretariat wish her the best in this major step in her career."

Special Rep Nothelle addresses Forum for Security Co-operation

The OSCE PA's Special Representative in Vienna, Ambassador Andreas Nothelle, addressed the OSCE's Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) on 28 October during the Security Dialogue on the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security.

In his statement, Amb. Nothelle emphasized the importance of democratic oversight of the armed, security, and intelligence services, and described the efforts the PA continues to make in promotion of the Code of Conduct. "These efforts began almost at the inception of the PA in 1992, even prior to the adoption of the Code," he said. "It was at this time that the PA made reference to the most fundamental ideals of the Code [in the Budapest Declaration of 1992]."