



Azerbaijan's elections were peaceful and the opposition participated, but the process overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in democratic development

Strasbourg, 08.11.2010 – Yesterday's parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were characterised by a peaceful atmosphere and all opposition parties participated in the political process, but the conduct of these elections overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in the democratic development of the country, international observers said in a statement issued today.

The observers noted that the Central Election Commission overall administered the technical aspects of the electoral process well. But limitations of media freedom and freedom of assembly, and a deficient candidate registration process, further weakened the opposition and made vibrant political discourse almost impossible. This and a restricted competitive environment created an uneven playing field for candidates, making it difficult for voters to make an informed choice. On the positive side, voters had the opportunity to check the centralised voter register and request correction or inclusion, and the CEC conducted a voter education campaign, including in the media. Voting on election day was assessed positively in almost 90 per cent of the polling stations visited, while serious problems were noted in 10 per cent. Counting deteriorated, with almost a third of polling stations observed rated bad or very bad, with worrying problems like ballot box stuffing noted in a number of places.

"It is never easy to do justice to a country which is developing its democratic institutions, especially in a difficult environment. We have seen the many efforts made to make progress and the areas in which the country does very well, and we welcome them as much as the hospitality demonstrated by all our interlocutors. However, despite all the efforts made, the country needs to do much more to make progress in developing a truly pluralist democracy," said Wolfgang Grossruck, who led the short-term OSCE observer mission and headed the delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

"In a welcome departure from the past, the run-up to the elections and election day were peaceful and not marred by violent incidents, all opposition parties opted to participate in the political process, sometimes running as part of electoral blocs, rather than to boycott it, as was the case in the past. A positive environment was created by good co-operation between the authorities, international institutions and the domestic actors," said Paul Wille, head of the delegation of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE).

"Economic growth and stability are evident in Azerbaijan. Sustainability of this situation can only be reinforced by greater political liberalisation and democratisation of the country. Independent observers have reported vote count irregularities, harassment of opposition observers and ballot box stuffing. Azerbaijan has to make further efforts to ensure greater democratisation," said Anneli Jäätteenmaki, Head of the delegation of the European Parliament.

"Regrettably, our observation of the overall process shows that the conditions necessary for a meaningful democratic election were not established. We are particularly concerned about restrictions of fundamental freedoms, media bias, the dominance of public life by one party, and serious violations on election day. We stand ready to assist the authorities in moving Azerbaijan's elections towards meeting OSCE commitments," said Ambassador Audrey Glover, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission.

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