



PACE 147 (2014)

Presidential candidates in Turkey able to campaign freely, but playing field not level, say international observers

Strasbourg, 11.08.2014 – Three candidates, representing different political positions, were generally able to campaign freely, and freedoms of assembly and association were respected in the 10 August presidential election in Turkey, international election observers said in a statement issued today. However, the Prime Minister's use of his official position, along with biased media coverage, gave him a distinct advantage over the other candidates.

"This first direct presidential election demonstrated that there is a vibrant political life in Turkey, and the preliminary results show the potential for a healthy balance in political forces," said Vilija Aleknaitė Abramikienė, Special Co-ordinator who led the short-term OSCE observer mission. "However, the challenges we have noted, particularly the imbalanced media coverage, must be overcome to fully live up to the democratic aspirations of the people."

The Supreme Board of Elections (SBE) and the election administration functioned in a professional manner, and there was overall confidence in the quality of the voter register, the preliminary statement notes. However, the absence of a right to appeal election administration decisions limits the ability to seek effective judicial remedy in case of election disputes.

"The presence of political party representatives in polling stations across the country yesterday is an important oversight mechanism," said Åsa Lindestam, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation. "I hope that citizens and NGOs will also be given the right to observe in the future, bringing Turkey's dynamic civil society fully into the election process."

International observers noted that media coverage of the campaign reflected a bias in favour of the Prime Minister, with major television stations providing extensive coverage of his campaign and only limited coverage of other contestants. The imbalance in media coverage was compounded by the predominance of paid political advertising for him and by the absence of a clear definition of the impartiality requirement for broadcasters.

"The direct election of the president marks only the beginning of a new phase of Turkey's democratic development," said Meritxell Mateu Pi, Head of the PACE delegation. "We will continue to work with Turkey and support its efforts in fulfilling the Council of Europe's standards."

The largely active and peaceful campaign was undermined by the misuse of state resources, the staging of campaign activities during official state events and, in some cases, attacks on the campaign of one of the candidates. The introduction of campaigning in minority languages was a positive change to the legal framework, although recent election administration regulations still require that the main language of campaign coverage and advertising be Turkish. The decision by the SBE to apply an earlier law than the 2012 Law on Presidential Elections, thus resulting in a ten-day campaign period, meant that campaigning was underway for almost three weeks before key campaign regulations took effect.

"Despite guarantees in the law, this decision of the SBE contributed to the lack of a level playing field", said Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission.

"The delay in applying these provisions and the misuse of state administrative resources benefited the governing party's candidate."

While the legal framework was found to be generally conducive to the holding of democratic elections, a lack of clarity and accountability resulted in inconsistencies in its implementation. In

particular, discrepancies remain between the 2012 law and earlier laws regulating elections in general. The recent introduction of campaign finance regulations was a step forward, although these regulations do not extend to private and party sources of funding or provide for adequate oversight of campaign financing or sanctions in the event of violations.

In a positive step, the introduction of out-of-country voting gave nearly three million citizens abroad the chance to vote. However, active conscripts, cadets and prisoners who have been convicted of intentional crimes were not permitted to vote.

In the limited number of polling stations visited by the international observers, election day was generally organised in a professional and efficient manner, and polling station committees were well prepared and followed voting procedures overall.

The final report is expected be presented in six to eight weeks.

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