
Azerbaijan's President Election : National Mandate for Policy Continuity

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The final returns of Azerbaijan's October 15 presidential election, released by the Central Electoral Commission, show President Ilham Aliyev winning reelection for another five-year term with 88.7 percent of the votes cast. Six other candidates received between 2.86 and 0.65 percent each. Nearly 76 percent of eligible voters turned out (www.day.az, October 19, monitored by BBC Global Newsline, October 19). The victory comes close to the margin of between 82 percent and 85 percent recorded by several NGOs in their exit polls (IWPR [Institute for War and Peace Reporting, London], Turan, October 16).

Pluralist in its lineup although uncontested in practice, the election reflects broadly based popular approval of presidential and governmental policies. Azerbaijan has enjoyed three consecutive years of world-record GDP growth, averaging 30 percent annually. The election's outcome signifies a strong national mandate for continuation of those successful policies (see EDM, September 23, October 2).

Assessments by international monitors reflect a gradual improvement in Azerbaijan's election process and practices, as observed in the course of the country's electoral cycles. This time, the gist of Western assessments consists of welcoming the progress achieved while offering assistance for further improvements of process and practices.

The joint election-observation mission of OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the European Parliament issued a nuanced morning-after press release and Joint Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. Acknowledging "significant progress in the conduct of elections" and regretting the boycott by some opposition parties, the joint mission also noted that the election "lack[ed] robust competition and vibrant political discourse, and thus did not reflect all principles of a meaningful and pluralistic democratic election." In a similar vein the joint mission's chief, Slovene diplomat Boris Frlec, concluded that the election "marks considerable progress toward meeting OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, but does not meet all commitments" (Turan, October 16, 17; New York Times, October 16).

The European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, "welcome[d] the progress shown in the conduct of the presidential election. I feel encouraged by the amendments [that had been introduced] to the electoral code and the efforts to create improved conditions for opposition candidates." The EU will support "further efforts to create a fair atmosphere and greater media freedom" (Turan, October 17, 18). The Chairman of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, Carl Bildt of Sweden, similarly "welcome[d] the conduct of the elections in a calm and peaceful atmosphere, welcome[d] the progress" while urging Azerbaijan to fulfill "all its commitments to the Council of Europe" (Turan, October 17).

These assessments also recommend a more balanced coverage of candidates by mass media in future elections and a greater use of televised debates among the candidates. They note that pre-election news coverage focused on the incumbent president's activities outside the framework of the

electoral campaign, such as inspection visits in the country and commissioning construction projects.

Given the intensive pace of the country's development, it was inevitable that such news coverage should redound to President Aliyev's advantage. Ultimately, those activities proved more convincing to the electorate than any conventional political campaign could have been.

Among the first foreign leaders telephoning their congratulations to President Aliyev on his reelection were Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as well as Presidents Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia (October 15), Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, and Dmitry Medvedev of Russia (October 16), Vladimir Voronin of Moldova (October 17), and Mahmud Ahmadinejad of Iran (October 18).

No significant challenges were reported on the part of domestic observers with regard to the vote-counting and tabulation. According to a team of IWPR journalists (often critical of the authorities), "the consensus among journalists was that the standard of the election was much higher than in previous polls," and occasional technical irregularities could not have altered the result. The National Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations of Azerbaijan concluded, "The vote [was] the most democratic in the recent history of the country" (IWPR, Caucasus Reporting Service, no. 464, October 16).

The traditional opposition parties abdicated their role and boycotted the election. International organizations and Western embassies in Baku, which had in previous years sympathized with those parties, but became fatigued of them, tried in vain to persuade them to participate in this election. At their post-election joint news conference, leaders of those parties announced that they did not recognize the election's results and regarded the state authorities as "illegitimate."

These leaders have taken this position after every election for more than a decade. Their misperceptions seem even greater this time, however. For example, Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli claimed that the voter turnout was "at most 20 percent;" and Musavat leader Isa Gambar declared that the people of Azerbaijan "became poorer" in recent years (Turan, October 16, 17).
