

OSCE Slams Azerbaijani Elections

Azerbaijani opposition parties are refusing to recognise the nation's second democratically elected parliament

Opposition leaders in Azerbaijan are set to stage a mass demonstration in Baku to protest against alleged infringements during this month's parliamentary elections which saw a sweeping victory for the presidential party.

Several opposition parties have already voted to boycott the new parliament, which was elected on November 5, and are demanding a fresh round of elections. The rally, scheduled for November 18, is aimed at lending support to these demands. More than 10,000 people are expected to attend.

Meanwhile, the Baku city authorities are refusing to grant organisers permission to stage the event and the Azerbaijani interior minister, Ramil Usubov, has warned that any protest meetings will be dispersed by police.

The moves come hard on the heels of claims by international observers that the voting was heavily rigged by the ruling party whilst both opposition politicians and voters were subjected to open harassment.

Gerhard Studmann, of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, said, "We were very disappointed with these elections. We expected that there would be infringements during the count but we didn't expect such a primitive falsification of the results."

His opinion was echoed by Andreas Gross, head of the Council of Europe delegation to Azerbaijan, who said, "Despite the positive changes observed in Azerbaijan in recent years, the scale of the infringements doesn't fit into any framework. We've never seen anything like it."

The Council of Europe has already warned Azerbaijan that the conduct of the elections could have a direct bearing on the former Soviet republic's ongoing membership bid.

Journalists covering the elections for the local press highlighted a wide range of alleged infringements which included votes made on behalf of relatives or friends, voter harassment and incidents of observers been prevented from entering polling stations.

At one polling station, a girl asked me, "How many ballot papers do you want?" On hearing my ironic reply ("Do you issue them by weight, then?"), she said quickly, "Oh it's you Shahin! Sorry, I didn't recognise you!"

In another district, according to OSCE mission head Paula Kokkonen, a member of the electoral commission was caught dumping 150 pre-prepared papers into the ballot box.

Meanwhile, the opposition can barely contain its fury. Preliminary results have shown that, in addition to winning the bulk of the 25 seats distributed by proportional representation, President Heidar Aliiev's Yeni Azerbaijan party has won more than half of the 100 seats from single-seat constituencies.

Only one of the 12 other parties taking part in the elections - the Popular Front - was able to pass the 6 per cent barrier necessary to secure parliamentary seats.

Etibar Mamedov, chairman of the National Independence Party, said, "I cannot view the election results as being just and legal. They must be overturned. If not, the entire democratic world will turn away from us."

Isa Gambar, chairman of the Musavat Party, dubbed the new Milli Medzhlis a "toy parliament" which could not be considered legitimate.

The preliminary results were followed by a wave of protest meetings in the Kakhsy, Zakatalsky, Kusarsky and Geichaisky regions. Three protesters were arrested in Zakataly whilst, in Geichai, Ibragim Mamedov, deputy editor of the Azadlyg newspaper and a parliamentary candidate, was detained by police. The journalist was only freed after he had appealed to the demonstrators to disperse. He lost the seat to Anar Rzaev, chairman of the Union of Azerbaijani writers.

The hail of criticism has provoked a measured, non-committal response from the authorities. Mazakhir Panakhov, chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, commented, "If that's the way [the international monitors] are talking, then that means they saw something. They wouldn't lie to us, would they? But that doesn't mean the same is true of all the electoral districts."

Yeni Azerbaijan secretary Sivayush Novruzov said, "Azerbaijan has the best record for democratic elections of any country in the CIS. And the situation regarding human rights and social reforms is much better here than in other post-Soviet states."

However, there have been some signs of compromise. According to the Azadlyg newspaper, President Aliev has disciplined a number of officials over fraud claims while results in two electoral districts have already been declared null and void. Observers say Aliev is likely to sacrifice some seats in future rounds of voting in order to give the new parliament a semblance of legitimacy.

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