

Predicable Win for Ruling Party in Azerbaijan

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Local group judges vote “not free, not fair, not democratic and not transparent”.

The final tally was entirely predictable after Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev’s party went to the polls last week to cement its two-decade long grip on power.

The November 1 election was held amid an ongoing crackdown on civil society and independent media, and was shunned by the major opposition parties in Azerbaijan as well as by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has monitored previous polls.

Final results show Aliyev’s Yeni Azerbaijan party with 71 of the 125 seats in the single-chamber parliament. Another 12 seats are shared among 11 pro-government parties, and the remaining 42 went to nominally independent candidates seen as government loyalists.

Yeni Azerbaijan’s sweeping victory was anything but unexpected. It has won every election since parliamentary polls held in 1995-96, first under the late president Heydar Aliyev and then his son Ilham.

Opposition parties including the Popular Front, Musavat, the National Council for Democratic Forces, and the NIDA Civil Movement, cried foul and boycotted the polls, although some waited till close to election day to do so.

The OSCE declined to monitor the election, saying the Azerbaijani authorities had imposed restrictions on observer numbers that made credible monitoring impossible. On election day, Aliyev called the OSCE’s decision a “gross violation of its mandate”.

By contrast, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) sent an election observation mission, albeit consisting of only 28 members and no long-term observers. Although it noted “minor ballot stuffing” at a few polling stations, the mission issued a statement on November 2 saying that “the voting process was observed to be adequate and generally in line with international standards”.

However, three of the PACE mission members – German parliamentarians Ute Finckh-Kraemer and Frank Schwabe, and Michael McNamara from Ireland – dissented.

“The situation in the country with respect to political freedoms, freedoms of expression and media, and freedom of assembly and association does not provide conditions for holding free and democratic elections,” the three politicians said in a separate statement.

In Azerbaijan, the independent and opposition observers were vocal about the violations they saw on election day.

“Our observer Masud Asker was attacked by a member of the [election] commission at Polling Station 3 in the Narimanov Constituency; he was insulted and forcibly escorted off the premises,” NIDA spokesman Ilgar Valiyev said. “Everything that happened was captured on camera.”

Other observers, independent as well as from NIDA and the Musavat Party, found themselves ejected from polling stations.

Video footage posted on social networks and in independent media showed one person casting a vote at more than one polling station.

In the city of Shamakhi, 120 kilometres from the capital Baku, a group of residents protested against electoral fraud the day before the vote. Police used violence to disperse the demonstrators, who included election candidates Vafali Fatullayev and Qahraman Shahriyar, according to reports on social networks. Five people were arrested, some of them were beaten by police, and then released.

The Institute of Democratic Initiatives (IDI), a local non-government organisation, noted “violations at all stages of the campaign” including election day, and called for an immediate investigation of complaints and punishment for those responsible.

The vote was “not free, not fair, not democratic and not transparent,” IDI concluded. “The election was conducted without competition... and did not reflect the real will of the Azerbaijani people.”

IDI called for an end to the repression of civil and political activists and the release of political prisoners.

According to Amnesty International, freedom of expression in Azerbaijan was “under sustained and severe

attack” in the run-up to the parliamentary election. There are at least 20 prisoners of conscience in the country, locked up for criticising or challenging the authorities.

The US State Department expressed regret that the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) had been unable to monitor the polls.

“Without ODIHR participation, it is impossible for us to say that Azerbaijan has made progress on ODIHR’s previous election observation recommendations,” said spokesperson Elizabeth Trudeau. “We continue to have concerns about the restrictive political environment in Azerbaijan and urge the government of Azerbaijan to respect the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and independent voices including the media.”

The top-down nature of the country’s authoritarian system means that parliament and even the dominant Yeni Azerbaijan party wield little power, and exist mainly to rubber-stamp decisions made by President Aliyev and his ministers.

Azer Ismayil, adviser to the Musavat party’s chairman, says the fact that 11 other parties were awarded seats in this election does not count for anything – in reality, this is a one-party parliament.

“All these small parties are pro-government,” he said. “They are retained so that parliament and the political scene generally, appear to be multi-party. Even the supposedly independent members of parliament are pro-government. Many of them were re-elected, and had shown their true colours in the preceding period.”

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