

Below, please find the text of NDI's pre-election assessment statement released on Friday. The pre-election mission took place from September 22 to 28, in advance of the October 20 local elections

Albanian

Local Elections
Pre-Election
Assessment Statement

October 1996

The following statement is based on findings of an NDI delegation that recently visited Albania to assess the political climate prior to the October 20 local elections. NDI plans to sponsor a larger international delegation to observe the elections.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has worked to support the democratic process in Albania since 1991. In addition to monitoring the 1991, 1992 and 1996 parliamentary elections, NDI has provided material support and technical advice to the Society for Democratic Culture, a nonpartisan Albanian civic organization. NDI has provided its assistance through seminars for Albanian citizens, civic organizers, legislators and local councillors, and through the continuous presence of a resident representative in Albania since 1993.

The delegation visited Albania from September 22-28 and consisted of the following individuals:

Gerard Murphy: Chairman of the County Council, Cork County, Ireland; election supervisor and former member of the National Executive of Fine Gael, the current governing party of Ireland;
Lisa McLean: NDI Senior Program Officer for Political and Civic Organization;
Jonas Rolett: NDI Senior Program Officer; and
Mark Mullen: NDI resident representative in Albania

The purpose of the delegation's visit was to gather information for the NDI international delegation that will observe the October 20 local elections. The delegation assessed the pre-electoral political environment and legal framework, evaluating in particular changes made to electoral legislation following flawed parliamentary elections in May. The delegation met with political party leaders, the chairman of the Central Election Commission, local and prefect officials in Durres, Elbasan and Shkoder, and leaders and volunteers of the Society for Democratic Culture.

The delegation notes with satisfaction the stated commitment of government officials and leaders of all principal parties to ensure that fair and transparent elections occur on October 20. It also notes that positive changes have been made to the election law which could substantially enhance public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. These changes include the appointment of an opposition representative in the leadership of electoral commissions at all levels. The multiparty composition of electoral commissions will provide a deterrent to abuses, expedite resolution of conflicts and strengthen citizen confidence in the electoral process.

While positive electoral reforms have been adopted, these reforms alone will not guarantee that the kinds of abuses observed by international and domestic observers during the May elections will not recur. As the local election approaches, the delegation notes that all participants in the electoral process--particularly all the participating parties and government officials--have a special responsibility to ensure that recent electoral agreements are communicated to and implemented by electoral administrators, other responsible government officials and political party representatives at all levels, including the smallest commune. National political leaders across the political spectrum should ensure that their activists carry out electoral tasks in the spirit of tolerance and dialogue required in a democratic process and provided for in the amended electoral legislation. The proper implementation of election rules and procedures will enable all Albanians to make a free and informed choice on election day, and will contribute significantly to domestic and international confidence in the vote and its outcome.

The importance of citizen confidence in the electoral process cannot be overstated. The legitimacy of resulting governing bodies, and the success of the democratic system itself, depends on a free and fair process. Confidence in the electoral system and the perception of fairness are as important as the letter of the law.

One example of a confidence-building measure would be for the Central Election Commission to publish election results from each polling station as soon as possible, so that independent election monitors and candidates' representatives can verify their own observations.

By monitoring elections since 1992, the Society for Democratic Culture has provided Albanian citizens with an independent assessment of the conduct of elections. Domestic observers in any electoral process are vital to public confidence. In fact, their role is recognized by the member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, the effectiveness of domestic observers depends on the availability of information about electoral legislation and election commission decrees, and

on unimpeded access to voting and counting processes at **all levels**. The degree to which electoral regulations facilitate domestic observers will be an important measurement of **the transparency and integrity of the elections**.