



2030 M Street, NW
Fifth Floor
Washington, DC 20036

Tel: (202) 728-5500
Fax: (202) 728-5520
<http://www.ndi.org>

AZERBAIJAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2003 ELECTION WATCH REPORT

Report Three, October 10, 2003

Presidential Elections 2003

On October 15, 2003, voters throughout Azerbaijan will go to the polls and cast their ballots to elect a president. This is the third in a series of reports on the campaign in Azerbaijan as the country approaches these critical elections.

NDI's programming in Azerbaijan is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Less Than One Week Until Election Day

With less than one week until the October 15th presidential election, events in Azerbaijan continue to unfold. This edition highlights campaign activities of the various candidates, the role of the district and precinct election commissions, the election monitoring activity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), plus media coverage.

Latest developments

President Heydar Aliyev Withdraws

On October 2, incumbent President Heydar Aliyev withdrew from the presidential race. His written statement was read on the state-run AZTV. The statement did not explicitly give a reason; however, for some time there have been rumors that, because of his failing health, Aliyev would drop out of the race. The president's statement quoted the elder Aliyev as saying that his son, Ilham Aliyev, was now the only viable option.

Three other candidates also withdrew their candidacies. Yunis Aliyev (no relation to the president) of the National Unity Party, and

Abutalib Samedov of the Alliance for the Sake of Azerbaijan Party both, upon their withdrawals, asked their supporters to back Ilham Aliyev. In addition, Ali Karimli of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), withdrew and is now supporting fellow oppositionist Etibar Mammedov. There are now a total of eight remaining candidates who will appear on the ballot.

Campaign Activities

Campaigning by the remaining candidates has intensified in the final days before the election. The candidates drawing the largest crowds throughout the country are Ilham Aliyev, Etibar Mammedov (Azerbaijan National Independence Party/Popular Front) and Isa Gambar (Musavat Party). Both Mammedov and Gambar have been outspoken opponents of the current regime. As such, they have often faced difficulties while attempting to conduct public rallies, such as encountering blocked roads leading into the town in which they are to campaign and authorities refusing entry to those interested in attending the event or rally. So far, there has

not been a repeat of the violent clashes seen in September.

In the last week, the capital city of Baku has not seen much campaign activity of any candidate, even though it accounts for one - third of the national vote. The view is that the vote in Baku is largely fixed, so candidates are now looking to the regions for votes which might offset the expected fraud in Baku. Ilham Aliyev in particular has been spending most of his time in the regions, since he is not as well known outside the capital.

Government Official and Candidate?

Under Azerbaijan law, government officials must suspend their official activities if they are also candidates for office. In addition, executive branch officials, such as the prime minister, may not serve in parliament. Ilham Aliyev submitted documents taking a leave of absence from his post as prime minister, which has allowed him to be a member of parliament. However, a member of parliament qualifies as being a government official, and Aliyev has done nothing to separate himself from his duties as a parliamentarian.

The younger Aliyev has not shied away from using his position as a government official in ways that appear to advantage his candidacy. This week Aliyev held a major campaign rally at the government owned Olympic training center. Huge campaign posters have been displayed on government buildings when he appears for partisan events at these facilities. He has met with visiting delegations and traveled abroad in his capacity as prime minister and then used television footage of these official events in his campaign commercials.

Election Commissions

The governing body which conducts elections is the Central Election Commission (CEC). It is this agency's responsibility to form District

Election Commissions (DECs) and Precinct Election Commissions (PECs).

The Formation of DECs

The formation of district election commissions (DECs) has raised questions about the impartiality of the commissions themselves and the prospects for fair administration of election laws. The election code calls for the DECs to include at least one member of each of the three minority parties currently in Parliament – Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), Citizen Consolidation Party (CCP), and the Communist Party (CP). There are 124 DECs in the country and it was previously agreed that 41 positions would go to each the APFP and the CCP, and 42 to the CP. However, it was reported that the APFP received only 27 positions, the CCP 41 positions, and the CP 56 positions. These numbers indicate a departure from the electoral code.

The Formation of PECs

The formation of precinct election commissions (PECs) has also been problematic. For example, in many election precincts of the Sumgayit-Absheron district, the chairmen of the PECs are school directors employed by the state. As government employees, these precinct election representatives may be subject to bias.

CEC Training of DEC & PEC Members

In early September, the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) began assisting members of the CEC to conduct trainings for the DECs on the articles of the election code and their responsibilities. In turn, the DEC representatives began to conduct trainings for members of the PECs in Baku and the regions. These trainings are expected to cover all 124 DECs and over 5,000 PECs and will include approximately 30,000 commission members.

IFES has prepared posters, public service announcements (PSAs), and numerous print materials on voter education, election day, and election observation activities. These materials are being widely distributed throughout the country and are being used by many local and international NGOs.

Voter Lists Not Made Public by PECs

Article 48.1 of the election code states that the PECs should post preliminary voter lists 65 days before election day outside the voting room in a place where the voters can see them. Final voter lists should have been posted by September 10. To date, only a few have been posted. The public has not had the opportunity to correct mistakes that may be on these lists. Such a practice in other countries in the region has resulted in a large number of “dead souls” voting.

Election observers and monitors

International Observers

Approximately 500 international observers are expected to monitor the upcoming election, under the coordination of the Organization for Security and Co-operations’s (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Observers will be from diplomatic missions, the Council of Europe, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) and the OSCE itself. Many of these observers have begun the process of being accredited by the Central Election Commission (CEC).

Domestic Observers and NGOs

Azerbaijani law dictates significant curtailments on domestic monitoring. The law states that members of groups receiving international funding cannot serve as election monitors. Most domestic monitoring groups have set up ambitious training programs anyway, in that the law does say that

individual citizens (those not representing an organization) are able to register as monitors. The Azerbaijan-based nonpartisan domestic monitoring organization For the Sake of Civil Society (FSCS) is NDI’s civic partner. They hope to deploy well-trained, experienced monitors to at least 60 percent of the polling stations in Azerbaijan. However, in 12 regions including Baku, approximately 1,400 observers have applied to the DEC’s yet only 600 have received badges so far.

The Organization for the Protection of Women’s Rights (OPWR) continues its NDI supported program “Participation of Women in the Elections.” OPWR educates women from different political parties and NGOs about their election rights and responsibilities.

The Election Monitoring Center of NGOs (EMC) is conducting citizen forums in six regions with funding from the US Embassy Democracy Commission. The forums outline rights and duties of candidates’ representatives, observers, commission members and voters during the election process, and are designed to encourage participation in the election process.

EMC is also implementing a joint domestic monitoring program with the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) that aims to mobilize approximately 1,500-2,000 citizens to be observers in the regions. A week ago, EMC reported that only about 50 of its observers have received their observer badges.

The “Inam” Pluralism Center is conducting a campaign called “Vote Yourself, Elect Yourself” among five refugee camps. The Center is distributing posters, calendars, and campaign T-shirts to encourage refugees to vote. “Inam” also plans to organize a rally of five cars to depart for the regions of Azerbaijan with campaign posters on them.

Media coverage and harassment

Positive steps

During this campaign, there have been some positive steps made in promoting fair and independent coverage by the media.

NDI and the Election Monitoring Center (EMC) are producing televised programs with the financial support of the Open Society Institute. The programs provide nonpartisan election-related information to a broad audience. They highlight the problems of civil society and encourage dialogue between the government and opposition parties. Party representatives participate in the debates, which increases public awareness of different political positions. The programs are broadcast twice a week during prime time.

Internews Azerbaijan and the Baku Press Club published a bulletin called “Presidential Elections – 2003” with the financial support of the Open Society Institute and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The bulletin reflects the views of parties, NGOs, presidential candidates, political experts and other specialists on important issues regarding the presidential elections.

The “Yeni Nasil” journalist union has conducted a journalist training project called “Mass Media during the Election Process.” The NGO Support Center for Democratic Elections has also done such trainings. The purpose of these projects was to educate journalists and representatives of mass media on their rights and responsibilities during the election.

On September 17, leading media representatives signed a memorandum agreeing to be objective and nonpartisan. Despite this agreement, the media continues to face pressure from authorities.

Harassment

During the month of September, the Azerbaijan Committee to Protect Journalists (RUH) reported 42 violations of journalists’ rights, including acts of violence. Examples of this kind of harassment have been seen nationwide.

In early September, copies of the newspaper “Baku Xaber” were confiscated by police in the territory of the Nizami District of Baku for publishing an article on President Aliyev’s absence from public life since falling ill earlier this year.

On September 21, police harassed several journalists in Masalli and Lenkaran while presidential candidates Etibar Mammedov and Ali Karimli were in town for meetings.

Also on that day, in Baku, a correspondent from “Yeni Musavat” was beaten by police after trying to report on a public meeting held by presidential candidate Isa Gambar. Police also reportedly broke the video camera of another journalist during the meeting.

Two correspondents from the Hurriyyat newspaper, Jasur Mammadov and Muslim Mammadli, were attacked by policemen while preparing reports on the Sabunchu Branch of the Garadagh Cement plant.

A correspondent from the “Azadliq” newspaper, Elnur Sadigov, was expelled from his university for writing about corruption in the Dashkasan region. While the official reason for his expulsion was that Sadigov had missed 54 hours of classes and been an irresponsible student, he spent seven days in jail for his article before being dismissed from the university on the order of the region’s executive. Despite a promise from the Education Minister, Sadigov has to date not been readmitted.

The “Yeni Nasil” union of journalists issued a statement calling on the Azerbaijan government to cease its harassment of journalists and maintain its obligations to the Council of Europe. “Yeni Nasil” also called on international organizations to defend the rights of journalists in Azerbaijan.

With less than a week to go, television stations have all but dropped any effort to appear balanced. All stations, including the nationwide government-run Azerbaijan Television (AZTV), run hours of coverage of Ilham Aliyev’s campaign events, plus programs extolling both Heydar and Ilham Aliyev. AZTV has been utilizing almost the entire evening prime time hours to show such coverage.

In contrast, other candidates have largely had to depend upon the 10 minutes per week of free time which is allocated to each candidate, as well as a weekly roundtable discussion for all registered candidates.

Election Day coverage

According to the country’s election code, journalists have the right to observe elections as long as they do not interfere with election commission members. Journalists are also allowed an original copy of the official vote tally sheet from the polling station. This provision allows journalists to play a potentially significant role in the election process. If pre-election harassment of journalists is any indication, however, these rights of journalists may not be recognized nor enforced on Election Day.

About NDI

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen

participation, openness and accountability in government.

NDI in Azerbaijan

NDI international delegations monitored the Parliamentary elections of 1995 and 2000, as well as the Presidential elections of 1998.

NDI has not to date received an invitation from the Azerbaijan government to monitor the upcoming election.

For more information on NDI programs in Azerbaijan, please call NDI’s Washington office at 202-728-5500.



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