

Statement on the General Election in the Republic of Azerbaijan

9th February 2020

1. Introduction

The delegation of 20 representatives of Member Organizations and Individual Members of LYMEC and IFLRY and partner organisations such as the Youth Participation and Intercultural Dialogue Association (YPIDA; Berlin, Germany) comprised the International Election Observation Mission in Azerbaijan. The delegates were part of the observation mission project to the Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan implemented by Citizen Public Union, with the support of the Social Cooperation Center of Youth Public Union. Many of our delegates were based in the city of Baku, while several others deployed to various regions of the country (namely Quba, Şamaxı, Qəbələ, Şəki, Gəncə and Sumqayıt).

2. General Synopsis

The general picture of the electoral process across the country demonstrated several discrepancies with international standards and expectations. There were numerous reports of irregularities observed on the local level, such as obscuring web-cams in polling places and lack of understanding of roles within the polling places (especially with regard to local/national observers). Such irregularities are explained in detail below. Turnout was low in all polling places observed.

3. Findings

Various issues arose in polling places across the country. These issues variously concern either the correct implementation of the law of Azerbaijan, or express breaches thereof. These findings are to be taken as general and observed in multiple polling places across the country, unless expressly stated otherwise.

3.1. Issues relating to the correct use of the electoral roll

At a number of polling places, the Mission observed voters registered at a different polling place being brought to an incorrect polling place to vote. Secondly, a large group of military personnel (around 65 individuals) in the Gəncə region arrived to vote in a civilian polling place; according to the electoral law of Azerbaijan, only military bases of fewer than 50 personnel may vote at civilian polling places, and all larger groups shall have their own polling place inside the military base. 75 military members were in the electoral roll in that polling place. Thirdly, at some locations, previously deceased voters were struck off the electoral roll in pencil, thus allowing later alteration.

3.2. Issues relating to ultraviolet (UV) ink recognition protocol

At a number of polling places, many voters were able to cast their ballot without first checking for the presence of UV staining on the thumb of the voter. Secondly, at some locations, voters did not have the UV ink applied at all. These issues significantly increase the risk of voter fraud by individuals voting multiple times.

3.3 Issues relating to polling place and ballot accessibility

At a number of polling places, there were no step-free provisions for limited mobility voters to cast their ballot. Secondly, at some polling places, no assistance was offered for individuals with limited or

no literacy, leading to confusion and misunderstanding between the voter and the commissioners present at the polling place.

3.4. Issues relating to police presence at the polling place

At some polling places, the Mission observed that the police were infringing on the 100-metre buffer zone outside of the polling place without due reason.

3.5. Issues relating to local and national observers

At some polling places, there was clear confusion about the role of local or national observer, with some politically-appointed observers expressing concern with the bias of other observers.

3.6. Issues relating to polling place surveillance

At several polling places with web-cams installed, it was clear that the webcams were either installed in such a way that they could not accurately view the whole polling station, or were otherwise obscured by the polling staff.

3.7. Issues relating to close-of-poll and vote counting

At several polling places, delegates from the Mission were asked to remain seated some metres away from the counting of ballots, while select individuals were able to observe the procedure from a closer proximity, while the majority of observers were seated further away. This undermines the principle of equal rights between local, national, and international observers, and between non-partisan and politically appointed observers.

3.8. Low turnout

The election as a whole was characterised by a low voter turnout across all regions. The inclement weather conditions notwithstanding, the turnout remained lower than otherwise expected.

3.9. Institutional trust

It was clear to observers in many polling stations that candidates exhibited great scepticism and mistrust toward the independence of the election and the Azerbaijani electoral commission at large. Candidates expressed frustration with perceived electoral malpractice and systemic bias. Furthermore, the lack of trust in the current electoral system affects the role of the international election observer, as candidates attempt to demonstrate electoral malpractices while observers are visiting their polling station.

4. Recommendations

Before issuing any recommendations, it is imperative to note that this Mission was working with limited resources and often were unable to see the electoral process from open of poll to close of poll at each individual polling station due to the relatively limited human resources of the Mission and the large number of polling places in each region. However, the Mission has consolidated its findings from across the country, and in so doing, recommends the following courses of action.

Firstly, and most crucially, the level of electoral transparency must be seen to increase. This is the only way to ensure fairer and freer elections, as well as restoring trust in the system for the political candidates and indeed the population at large. There are many ways in which this issue can be addressed; for example, all protocols surrounding fair practice within the polling station itself, such as the presence of web-cams, must under no circumstances be impeded or altered by the polling officials.

Secondly, after the close of poll, electoral precincts must allow observers rigorously to scrutinise the counting of ballots. As outlined in 3.7., there were discrepancies between who can observe the counting of the ballots and from what proximity. The Mission recommends first and foremost that all observers, be they local, national, or international, be afforded the same rights and privileges so as to perform their tasks effectively. Furthermore, the Mission recommends that this process be observed at far closer quarters than is currently the norm; in order to ensure the proper certification of ballots, all observers must be able clearly to see the counting taking place.

Thirdly, the UV ink distribution must be administered with greater consistency. All polling places must be seen to adhere to the rules whereby voters are first checked on entry for UV ink from a different polling place. This will ensure lower voter fraud than currently exists in Azerbaijan.

Annex 1: Polling Stations Visited during the Mission

Baku

20 Sayli Narimanov I Secki Dairesinin, 5 Sayli Secki Menteqesi
20 Sayli Narimanov II Secki Dairesinin, 33 Sayli Secki Menteqesi
19 sayli Narimanov Polling station #18 and #26
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 7 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 13 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 1 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 2 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 5 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
16 Sayli Yasamal II Secki Dairesinin, 6 Sayli, Secki Menteqesi
District 29, Polling station #4

Qabala

Precinct 116; Polling Stations #3, #4, #7.

Shamakhi

Precinct #85

Polling station 1. ConEC: 36, Address: Şamaxı, Megsən, PEC Chairman: Hübətov Vidodi

Polling station 2. ConEC: 2, Address: S.ə. Şirvani 61, PEC Chairman: Asgərova Ruhiyyə

Polling station 13. ConEC: MuSK 1, Address: A. Ahmədov 3, PEC Chairman: Rüstanova Dilarə

Ganja

Precinct 37 (Nizami); Polling station #24

Precinct 38 (Nizami); 2nd daire; Polling station #3, #10

Guba

Precinct 52; Polling station 72 and 3

Precinct 53; Polling station 4