



Broad public trust in Armenian elections needs to be preserved through further electoral reforms, international observers say

YEREVAN, 10 December 2018 – The 9 December early parliamentary elections in Armenia were held with respect for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust that needs to be preserved through further electoral reforms, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. Open political debate, including in the media, contributed to a vibrant campaign, although cases of inflammatory rhetoric online were of concern, the statement says.

The general absence of electoral malfeasance, including of vote buying and pressure on voters, allowed for genuine competition, the observers said. Despite the shortened timeframe, the elections were well administered, although the integrity of campaign finance was undermined by a lack of regulation, accountability and transparency.

“Democracy cannot proceed without trust, so I am pleased that broad public trust was the central characteristic of this election,” said Peter Osusky, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Now that voters have delivered their message, it is up to the political leadership of Armenia to ensure that this momentum is maintained, and that further reforms are implemented to fully consolidate the positive assessment we are making today.”

Contestants were able to campaign freely, and fundamental freedoms of association, assembly, expression and movement were fully respected, the statement says. The official campaign period was very short, but campaigning started earlier, which is not prohibited by law. Election day proceeded calmly and free of pressure on or intimidation of voters, and voting, counting and tabulation were assessed positively by almost all observers.

“I congratulate the Armenian people. The 2018 peaceful so called ‘Velvet’ revolution, in conjunction with the political will of the current authorities, enabled the holding of democratic elections,” said Aleksander Pocij, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. “PACE has observed every election in Armenia since 1995 and, despite the complex electoral system and reported instances of intimidation via social media, the recurring electoral irregularities which tainted many elections in the past were absent. It is up to Armenia’s elected representatives to launch legal reforms to consolidate the democratic process in the country.”

The CEC conducted a comprehensive voter education campaign to encourage voting, explain voting procedures and warn against vote-buying. To prevent pressure on public employees and the misuse of state resources, the authorities ran an awareness-raising campaign on these issues for local officials, school principals, health workers and others. Officials, contestants and voters themselves expressed their commitment to discouraging the selling and buying of votes.

“These elections were very well organized, with minimal irregularities and free of pressure on voters. I am very happy that, as a result, public trust in the electoral process was high” said, Heidi Hautala, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament. “We congratulate the Armenian authorities and participants in these elections and encourage the government and National Assembly to further improve the legislation ahead of future elections. The European Union, including the European Parliament, will continue to assist in this process.”

Amendments to the Election Code in May expanded the list of those prohibited from active campaigning, lifted restrictions on media observers, and increased penalties for electoral offences, including by making it

a crime to force individuals to take part in campaigns or to facilitate vote-buying. While this addressed previous recommendations, others related to campaign finance, the submission of complaints, candidacy requirements and the threshold alliances must reach to win seats remain unaddressed, the observers said.

The media environment is diverse and the freedom of expression, guaranteed by the Constitution, was respected. Television is the primary source of political information, while the use of online media and social networks is also significant. Media monitoring showed that the broadcasters made an effort to cover all contestants, contributing to a diversity of information allowing voters to make an informed choice. Many private outlets appear to be strongly associated with political parties, with some demonstrating a clear preference, while public television provided reasonably balanced coverage, the statement says. Public television organized genuine debates that included candidates from all the contestants.

Despite the limited timeframe, the Central Election Commission (CEC) conducted its work professionally and met all legal deadlines, and there was general confidence in it and in territorial commissions. Voters were identified on election day by devices containing electronic copies of voter lists. The devices scanned their IDs to confirm they were registered at the polling station and to prevent multiple voting. Despite data privacy concerns, the CEC is required to scan and publish online lists of those who have voted that contain personal data and their signatures, in order to prevent impersonation.

Campaign funds may include contributions from voters, candidates and political parties, with limits set on the levels of both contributions and spending. Reporting requirements for contributions and spending prior to the official start of the campaign are ambiguous. In addition, some candidates confirmed they were directly financing their campaigns, which bypasses official campaign funds, in contravention of the law. Organizational expenses such as office space, communications, transportation and staff are not considered election related and may, therefore, remain unreported, undermining transparency, the observers said.

All candidate lists met the 25 per cent gender quota requirement and 32 per cent of the 1,444 candidates were women. This quota does not, however, ensure the same proportion of women's representation in parliament, partly because half of the seats are distributed according to preferential votes. Parties rarely featured women candidates in their campaign – women only occasionally campaigned on their own and rarely appeared as speakers in rallies observed. Some women candidates were targets of disparaging gender-based rhetoric.

“Politics has historically been a man's world but, as women are more than half of the population, this should be reflected in politics as well,” said Nahima Lanjri, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “I hope to see reforms that will encourage more women in politics and to ensure that the next elections are fully representative of both men and women.”

The statement also highlights that, while there was general confidence in the accuracy of voter lists, those declared incapacitated by courts are not entitled to vote, contrary to international standards on the political rights of persons with disabilities. Contrary to previous recommendations, the right to file election-related complaints is largely limited to party proxies and commission members. The statement also notes that the prohibition of those holding multiple citizenship from being candidates is in contradiction to OSCE commitments and case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

“Our assessment of these elections highlights that fundamental freedoms were respected, along with many other positives,” said Ambassador Urszula Gacek, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “The confidence invested in the authorities brings responsibility to ensure that these positives are safeguarded. ODIHR stands ready to help Armenia address remaining shortcomings so that good elections become the norm.”

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