



International Eurasia Press Fund (IEPF)

Observation mission of IEPF in the extraordinary
Presidential election of the Republic of Azerbaijan
held on February 7, 2024

REPORT

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General Information

Extraordinary presidential elections were held in Azerbaijan on February 7, 2024. This election is significant as it marks the first time in the history of Azerbaijan's independence that elections were conducted nationwide.



The Republic of Azerbaijan operates under a presidential system of governance, with presidential elections regulated by the Constitution and the Election Code. The president is elected for a term of 7 years, as determined by a referendum held in 2016, through the participation of citizens in voting. The president proposed and adopted the most recent constitutional amendments in a referendum held in 2016. The Constitution ensures fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of assembly, expression, association, and access to information, as well as the right to participate in political life. Azerbaijan is a signatory to key international and regional agreements about the conduct of democratic elections.

IEPF and observational activities

The International Eurasia Press Fund (IEPF) is an independent, international non-governmental organization registered in Azerbaijan in 1992. It holds membership in the NGO section of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with General Consultative Status. For over 30 years, the main focus of IEPF's activities has been the implementation of social-humanitarian projects in regions affected by war and liberated from occupation, assisting refugees and internally displaced persons residing there, and facilitating visits by foreign diplomats, journalists, and students, among others. Leveraging its status, the organization regularly disseminates objective and timely information from conflict zones, hosts a variety of events and parallel sessions, issues statements, and establishes new cooperation agreements in UN offices located in Geneva, New York, and Vienna. IEPF has been instrumental in initiating and executing numerous nationally significant projects aimed at media and civil society development, peacekeeping efforts, refugee and internally displaced person issues, community development and education. As an independent entity, IEPF has directly contributed to the formation of election coalitions in 2008 and 2013 and possesses extensive experience in the electoral process.

The first meeting of the Board of Trustees of the International Eurasia Press Fund took place on January 7, 2024, with a focus on reviewing the accomplishments of the previous year and outlining plans for the current year. Following discussions during the meeting, a decision was reached to deploy a 50-person observer team from IEPF

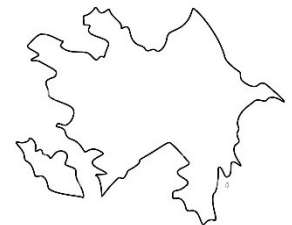
for the forthcoming extraordinary presidential elections scheduled for February 7, 2024. Leveraging its extensive electoral experience and personnel resources gained from previous elections, IEPF actively engaged in the extraordinary presidential elections with its observer team. The primary objective and mission of the organization are to conduct impartial and timely activities during the elections and to compile a comprehensive report on the electoral process.

On January 10, 2024, the IEPF, according to Article 1.1.19 of the Election Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (observer — to observe elections (referendum) during elections (referendum) by political parties, non-governmental organizations, referendum campaign groups, candidates appointed and registered in the relevant election (referendum) commission according to this Code) applied to the Central Election Commission (CEC) officially and submitted a list of 50-member observer team. IEPF's application to serve as an observer throughout the entirety of Azerbaijan was reviewed and confirmed by the Central Election Commission, with the specified number of observers approved. Furthermore, based on the provided list, it was stipulated that IEPF's observation team would operate in a total of 23 different cities, spanning over 30 districts. On January 19, a meeting was convened at the IEPF headquarters, attended by the organization's management and 21 observers. During the meeting, the observers were presented with their certificates, which were approved by the CEC. Additionally, comprehensive information regarding the rights and responsibilities outlined in the "Guidelines for Observers" handbook, prepared by the Central Election Commission (CEC), was provided. This handbook, compiled by the provisions of the Election Code and various instructions, explanations, rules, and other regulatory documents endorsed by the CEC, elucidated several fundamental concepts related to elections, outlined the principles of observation, and delineated the rights and duties of observers.



Current political situation.

The people of Azerbaijan will be selecting their president 14 months earlier than scheduled in the extraordinary presidential elections on February 7, 2024. Following President Ilham Aliyev's victory in Karabakh, which altered the political dynamics in favor of Azerbaijan within the region, public trust in his decisions has increased among the Azerbaijani population.



Candidates from several opposition parties participated in previous presidential elections, contributing to heightened pressure for the establishment of a democratic environment. They often cited the unresolved Karabakh issue as the primary rationale for advocating presidential change in the country. Notably, this year's election campaigns appear to lack such rhetoric. Several opposition parties, including the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AXCP), Musavat Party, National Independence Party, and Republican Alternative Party (REAL), have opted not to participate in the elections due to various reasons. Among them, the Azerbaijan People's Front Party has called for a general boycott of the elections, citing insufficient democratic conditions for the election campaign and the limited time available for election preparation.

Pre-election preparations

The presidential elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan are overseen by the Central Election Commission (CEC). Objective, efficient, and fair conduct of the election process is paramount. This year's extraordinary presidential elections are administered by 125 District Election Commissions (DSC) and 6319 Precinct Election Commissions (PEC), organized under the auspices of the CEC. The Central Election Commission has been diligently preparing for these elections, as it does for every election cycle. It has ensured the establishment of high-standard conditions at constituencies and polling stations, considering the convenience of voters. However, certain concerns need to be addressed and rectified. Specifically, the availability of crucial statistics and information about pre-election processes have not met the desired standard. Another noteworthy issue relates to the inundation of SMS notifications received by citizens on their mobile phones regarding participation in the elections.



Special emphasis should be placed on a significant innovation for Azerbaijan in preparation for the elections, which involves holding them for the first time in the liberated territories. To facilitate this, 29 polling stations have been established in the Karabakh region, including polling station No. 14 situated in the city of Khankendi, now under Azerbaijan's control following the operations of September 19-20, 2023.

Candidates and campaigns

This tendency continues among those currently running for the presidency of the country. Although a real competitive environment was created in the extraordinary presidential elections, Ilham Aliyev's superiority was felt. It should be recalled that a similar situation occurred in Azerbaijan during the 2008 and 2018 elections. In those elections, candidates of some opposition parties did not



participate in the elections and decided to stay out of the elections. However, the main difference between the elections held this year and those elections is that the supporters of Ilham Aliyev, the main candidate and current president in the 2024 elections, are much more than in previous years.

The candidates' campaign officially commenced on January 15, 2024, with their posters uniformly displayed on billboards designated by the CEC. Research indicates that candidates were more active in utilizing their allocated airtime and less involved in conducting face-to-face meetings to the desired extent. The primary reason for this lies in the satisfaction of citizens with the current president, leading them to perceive the activities of other candidates as inadequate. An illustrative example is a survey conducted by the League of Citizens for the Protection of Labor Rights in collaboration with the "Oracle Advisory Group," a US-based organization that conducts exit polls during elections. According to the results of the pre-election survey, 85% of citizens expressed satisfaction with the current president, with 97% of them stating their intention to vote for Ilham Aliyev again.

Local and international observers

The Election Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan outlines provisions for both domestic and international election observation. Additionally, each candidate has the right to appoint authorized representatives and observers throughout the election process. According to Article 1.1.19 of the Election Code regarding observation, local observers can be registered as individuals or representatives of registered candidates, parties, or NGOs. As per official information from the CEC, over 65 thousand observers have been registered, including more than 800 international observers. Another significant aspect is the active engagement of NGOs and coalitions in the early presidential elections. The analysis of the data collected on the basis of information spread on social media and internet resources shows that 3 coalitions of NGOs were announced to monitor the elections, and more than 7,000 representatives from 83 NGOs acted as observers.

In addition to local organizations and individuals, members of international platforms will also observe the elections. According to information from the CEC as of February 6, this mission comprises a total of 266 individuals. Furthermore, it was announced before the election that representatives from the CIS Parliamentary Assembly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the US and Great Britain embassies, the Organization of Turkish States, and other international organizations would also be observing the elections.

IEPF's meeting with the OSCE mission

Representatives of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), including long-term observers Noemi Arcidiacono and Oljas Akhanov, were guests at the head office of the IEPF. Unfortunately, the meeting did not meet the expected standards of professionalism. Inconsistent dialogue and unrelated questions revealed issues hindering effective communication and collaboration between the two teams, despite initial hopes for cooperation. It seemed as though the observers had predetermined the election's outcome and implementation process, treating it as a mere formality. Such behavior is highly improper and unacceptable.

Elia Varela-Serra and Jurgen Speidel, two other long-term observers of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), were guests of the Tartar regional office of the IEPF. Unlike the meeting held in the Baku office, this meeting ended positively.

Election day – February 7, 2024

- On February 7, at 08:00, the election process began throughout the country with the opening of polling stations. 6 million 478 thousand 623 voters across the country had the right to participate in the election.
- The 50-member observation team of the International Eurasia Press Fund started observation activities under the supervision of the head office in Baku and the regional headquarters of Tartar, Fuzuli, Beylagan.
- All members of the observation staff participated in the opening of polling stations in a total of 22 different districts.
- 10 members of the 50-member observer team of IEPF conducted the observation mission in the liberated territories - Khankendi, Shusha, Lachin, Khojaly, Aghdere, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan və Gubadly regions. They visited 19 stations including 7 districts in those regions.
- The observers assigned to Baku participated in 10 districts, while those in the regions took part in 14 districts (excluding the districts in the liberated territories).
- The observation team of IEPF carried out the observation mission in 224 polling stations, including 31 districts across the country.

- The observers diligently followed the processes until the end of the election day and meticulously documented their observations on the precincts. The observation team of IEPF captured over 1600 photos and videos throughout the election process.
- On February 7th, at 19:00, the election process concluded, and the opening of the ballot boxes commenced in all polling stations.

Results

Final remarks regarding the election process encountered and observed by the IEPF observation team in the early presidential elections:

1. Unlike previous elections, there was a significantly higher voter turnout. From the onset of polling, crowds were witnessed at each of the 38 stations we attended and observed. This sudden increase began in the morning and persisted for at least 2-2.5 hours. In some polling stations, voter density persisted for more than 5-6 hours. Towards the end of the process, there was a noticeable increase in the number of participants, as evidenced by the statistics of registered voters by precincts. Observations indicate that voter turnout reached 85-90% in some precincts. Notably, the voter turnout observed in precincts located in internally displaced people's settlements and liberated territories was documented extensively by our observers.
2. According to the notes of our observers, the election process was conducted in a transparent and objective manner. Necessary conditions were created for the activity of both observers and the media and everything was in sight. Observers easily monitored the process of the opening of polling stations, the conclusion of the election and the counting of votes. Only in one station, the places reserved for observers are located far from the ballot boxes and the voting process. Based on the observations of our team, the election process was conducted transparently and objectively. Adequate conditions were provided for the participation of both observers and the media, ensuring full visibility throughout the process. Observers were able to closely monitor the opening of polling stations, the conclusion of the election, and the counting of votes with ease. It is worth noting that in only one station, the designated areas for observers were situated far from the ballot boxes and the voting process.
3. Throughout the election process, our observers did not detect any violations of the rules that could have impacted the election results. The elections were conducted fairly, with minimal instances of election violations compared to previous elections.

According to the observations recorded by our team, only minor mistakes occurred, none of which had a significant impact on the election process.

4. According to observers, inadequate training of personnel at various levels in certain stations resulted in delays and congestion during the election process. Additionally, despite having an ample number of polling booths, voter registration in precincts was managed by only 1 or 2 precinct employees, leading to unnecessary crowding. We believe that increasing the frequency of training sessions for polling station employees could significantly alleviate this issue and enhance the efficiency of the election process.

5. From the first minutes of the election, active participation of mainly women and the elderly was observed among the voters. According to the notes of our observers, middle-aged women were the most distinguished in voter participation.

6. Before the elections, the installation of cameras in 1000 polling stations by the Central Election Commission is highly appreciated. Nevertheless, deploying this surveillance system across all polling stations can enhance election transparency and demonstrate its effectiveness.

7. The activities of the Central Election Commission, election preparation and establishment are highly appreciated by our observers. In particular, the minimization of acts of violations compared to previous years is one of the main points to be noted.

Based on our observations and analyses, it is evident that the February 7 elections were conducted in a free, fair, and transparent manner. These elections accurately reflected the will of the Azerbaijani people and showcased their unwavering stance.