



Azerbaijan Parliamentary Election

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



PETER GOLDRING

As a member of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Peter Goldring has represented Canada by attending 11 elections in Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, Guyana and Haiti. In November 2010 once again he represented Canada for the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, observing in the mountainous region approximately 100 miles northwest of the capital, Baku.

ELECTION IN AZERBAIJAN

The Republic of Azerbaijan is in the South Caucasus region of Eurasia, bordering Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Iran. After a brief period of independence following WW I, Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet Union from 1920, gaining independence in 1991.

Political stability has been difficult to establish in Azerbaijan (as in some other countries in the region). Nagorno-Karabakh – formerly an autonomous region within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic

– declared its own independence in 1991, triggering a three-year war between Azerbaijan and eth-

nic-Armenian Karabakh separatists, backed by Armenia with Russian sympathizers and support.

Nagorno-Karabakh is still occupied by Armenian troops, accounting for nearly one-fifth of Azerbaijan's territory. No country, including Armenia, recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state. Access to the territory for Azerbaijanis is through Iran.

The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the US, was established in 1994 to work towards a peaceful resolution of the Azer-

baijan conflict; however progress has been painfully slow. Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to maintain mutually unacceptable negotiating positions, particularly around the modalities for determining the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, the Minsk Group co-Chairs continue to engage with the Armenian and Azerbaijani leadership in efforts to reach mutually acceptable conditions for



While visiting this polling station, arguments broke out involving 20-30 people. Peter intervened, separated the two groups, consulted with each group and recorded concerns. That seemed to diffuse the situation.

peace.

Canada strongly supports the OSCE Minsk proc-



ess, and believes that dialogue and compromise through this process is the primary way to peacefully resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Azerbaijan's previous parliamentary elections were held in 2005, and immediately following the vote international observers expressed serious concerns about how the voting had been conducted, stating that the election did not meet a number of OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) commitments and Council of Europe standards and commitments for democratic elections. There was uncertainty regarding key elements of the process, such as voter registration and restriction on freedom of assembly.

Similar problems were noted for the 2008 Presidential election.

President Ilham Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party claimed immediate victory in the Parliamentary elections, with the opposition denouncing the results, claiming the vote was fraudulent. The New Azerbaijan Party appeared to have won 70 seats out of 125, with the remaining seats being captured by independents who had expressed loyalty to the President. The main opposition coalition appeared to have been shut out of Parliament completely.

Ilham Aliyev became president of Azerbaijan in 2003, appointed by his father who had held the post the preceding 10 years and who stepped

aside due to failing health.

Formerly part of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan makes maintaining positive relations with Russia a priority, but also recognizes the importance of building positive relations with the West, particularly the EU and the US. The country is of considerable strategic importance due to its oil and gas reserves.

As part of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, Canada supports civil society development, including human rights (with a focus on women's rights), democratic development, youth, and poverty reduction in Azerbaijan. A small but growing number of Azerbaijani students are undertaking undergraduate studies at Canadian universities supported by an Azerbaijani state fund.

Azerbaijan held presidential elections in

2008. Although these elections unfolded peacefully, the final report of the OSCE Election Observation Mission concluded that there was a lack of robust competition, a lack of vibrant political discourse, and a restrictive media environment. On this basis, the 2008 election was judged not to have met many of the basic criteria necessary for a meaningful and pluralistic democratic election.

While Azerbaijan may be improving on the technical aspects of holding elections, restrictions on freedom of assembly and freedom of expression



Travelling in the mountain regions, two hours north of Baku was arduous. Four-wheel drive vehicles are necessary for the tire track roads to access remote villages.



in particular severely limit the ability of opposition politicians to campaign effectively and present an alternative to voters. Despite positive revisions to the Law on Freedom of Assembly in 2008, which brought it into line with international standards, the authorities continue to interpret the law in a restrictive manner. This limits the freedom of opposition parties in particular to hold rallies in central locations where they would attract attention.

On the whole, OSCE observers said the 2010 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were characterized by a peaceful atmosphere and all opposition parties participated in the political process, but the conduct of these elections overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in the democratic development of the country.

Negative aspects of the process included:

Domination of public and political life by one party; the deficient candidate registration process at the constituency level led to the registration of almost all nominated candidates of the majority party and less than half of the opposition candidates. Lack of balanced and absence of unbiased reporting in the electronic media, resulting in an absence of alternative views, scarcity of critical print media. Unresolved cases of imprisoned journalists. Unequal access of political parties to resources necessary for effective campaigning. Allocation of unsuitable campaign venues and prevention of political gath-

erings by opposition candidates outside of these areas. Credible allegations of intimidation of voters and candidates, and a misuse of administrative resources. Last-minute changes in legislation to shorten the campaign period. Recommendations on legislation identified in previous OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission reports remain unaddressed. Continuation of the dominance of pro-government forces in the

election administration because of the formula for the composition of election commissions. Legal remedies against decisions on election-related complaints are often untimely and ineffective and lack legal reasoning.

Positive aspects of the process included:

In a welcome departure from the past, the run up to the elections and the voting day was peaceful and not marred with violent inci-

dents. All political parties participated in the elections, in contrast to previous elections. All opposition members took their seats at the Central Election Commission (CEC). The CEC held frequent open meetings, completed all requirements within legal deadlines and elaborated regulations well in advance. The CEC decided to allocate four minutes of airtime in roundtable discussions on public TV to all candidates. Forty three of the 172 candidates who had been denied registration and appealed, were reinstated.



It was reported that a man was assaulted at this polling station. Peter went to it, assessed that the man was thought to be inebriated and reported the issue to the satisfaction of concerned poll workers.

A very high number of international and domestic observers were registered; international observers enjoyed good cooperation with the CEC. Members of national minorities were represented among candidates of all main political parties. The share of female candidates increased from 10 to 13 per cent compared to the last parliamentary elections.

The observers noted that the Central Election Commission overall administered the technical aspects of the electoral process well. But limitations of media freedom and freedom of assembly, and a deficient candidate registration process further weakened the opposition and made vibrant political discourse almost impossible. This and a

restricted competitive environment created an uneven playing field for candidates, making it difficult for voters to make an informed choice. On the positive side, voters had the opportunity to check the centralized voter register and request correction or inclusion, and the CEC conducted a voter education campaign, including in the media. Voting on election day, was assessed positively in almost 90 per cent of the polling stations visited, while serious problems were noted in 10 per cent. Counting deteriorated with almost a third of polling stations observed rated bad or very bad, with worrying problems like ballot box stuffing noted in a number of places.

Update: The Azerbaijani Central Election Commission (CEC) was required to submit the results of the parliamentary elections to the Constitutional Court by November 29. The voter turnout hit about 50.14 percent (roughly 2.48 million voters) according to the CEC's Elections Information Center.

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This brochure series is intended to highlight special issues that Member of Parliament, Peter Goldring, has been involved in. If you wish to comment, please take a moment to fill out the survey below, write or call to the address above.

Your Opinion Matters...

Do you think there is a benefit to Canada in helping develop democracy in Eastern Europe?

Yes No

Do you think Canada should develop an arms-length democratic development agency as a resource for other countries wishing to develop their democratic institutions?

Yes No

Comments: _____

Name: _____
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