



LIMITED ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION – UZBEKISTAN 2007

Strictly controlled Uzbek elections did not offer a genuine choice, ODIHR observers conclude

TASHKENT, 24 December 2007 – Yesterday’s presidential election in Uzbekistan was held in a strictly controlled political environment, leaving no room for real opposition, and the election generally failed to meet many OSCE commitments for democratic elections. The recommendations issued by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), after the 2004 parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan have not yet been implemented.

This is the conclusion of the OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission (LEOM), deployed on 5 December following an invitation by the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs..

“In the context of democratic development, it is notable that this time there were more candidates than in earlier presidential elections, including a female candidate and a non-partisan candidate nominated by an initiative group. But since all candidates in the present election publicly endorsed the incumbent, the electorate was deprived of a genuine choice,” said Ambassador Walter Siegl, who led the election observation mission.

The election campaign was hardly visible and characterized by the absence of any real competition of ideas and political views. The campaign materials, produced by the Central Election Commission (CEC), and mainly displayed in the premises of the election administration, provided only neutral information on candidates’ profiles and political programmes.

The coverage of the campaign in the media was very limited, without debates among candidates, direct speeches or the presentation of alternative views, which could help the electorate to make an informed choice. Despite fairly equal allocation of free airtime to the candidates, the LEOM media monitoring established that state television allotted over 80 per cent of their relevant news coverage to President Islam Karimov.

The mission recognizes that some positive changes have been introduced into the legislation since the previous presidential election, such as allowing candidates nominated by initiative groups to run and establishing *positive* voting for a candidate instead of against one or more candidates. However, the registration of political parties as legal entities and of candidates for presidential elections remains subject to excessively high requirements for supporting signatures.

The presidential election law is not in line with paragraph 7.5 of the Copenhagen Document as it bans registration of candidates of certain categories of citizens. In addition, while the legislation provides for international election observers, observation by domestic civil society groups - not fielding a candidate- was abolished in 1997, contrary to paragraph 8 of the Copenhagen Document.

The legislative framework and the existing administrative practices do not ensure the implementation of the Constitutional provision for freedom of assembly. The LEOM noted concerns expressed by many interlocutors regarding further violations of civil and political rights, as contained in the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is a signatory.

As the incumbent has been President since Uzbekistan declared independence in 1991, his registration as a presidential candidate raises legal issues in light of constitutional restrictions allowing only two consecutive terms.

The election administration at all levels showed commitment to their tasks and the Central Election Commission produced extensive training materials for the election officials. Regarding the administrative framework, important elements of the election procedures remain under-regulated. Vaguely framed early voting and homebound voting procedures raise concerns. Moreover, the rules fail to provide for full disclosure of CEC decisions or for publication of election results by polling stations.

The LEOM was received in a friendly manner by the members of the election administration and was overall supported by the authorities, but was not given access to all documentation, including CEC decisions. Despite repeated requests, the mission did not have an opportunity to meet and discuss with candidates, and was able to observe only one meeting between a candidate and the electorate.

While the LEOM did not conduct a systematic observation on election day, its members visited polling station in and around Tashkent and in five other regions. The observers noted a calm voting atmosphere, a frequent presence of law enforcement agents inside polling stations, a lack of uniformity in the preparation of voters lists and multiple signatures on voters lists indicating a pattern of proxy voting. During the vote count and tabulation, observers noted procedural problems and irregularities, such as adjustments of figures which could not be satisfactorily explained and protocols filled out in pencil.

The unusually high turnout of 90,6 per cent reported by the CEC, in particular in light of the small number of voters observed by the mission, raises further concerns regarding the accuracy of the reporting of results.

“The OSCE/ODIHR stands ready to assist Uzbekistan to live up to its commitment to holding democratic elections and underlines the need for a continued meaningful dialogue and commensurate political will to achieve this aim,” said Ambassador Siegl.