

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

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## The Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan

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Despite difficulties during its early years of independence Azerbaijan through well-counted domestic and foreign policy succeeded in gaining constant economic growth and building up democracy. In this context, the democratic life of the country is a vital element of the political process with elections to be the culmination of the processes of democracy.

To understand to a certain degree the evolution that has taken place in Azerbaijan, we must take into account the political past of the country as a part of Soviet Union as well as its present economic profile. Having this in mind it is possible to compare contemporary developments with those of the past; the result of this comparison is positive for democracy in Azerbaijan today and in the future regardless of any shortcomings.

The first successful attempt to establish a democratic and secular republic in the entire Muslim world was taken in Azerbaijan on May 28, 1918 when the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was established. But this attempt was interrupted after 23 months by the Soviet invasion and occupation of Azerbaijan. In 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union Azerbaijan restored its independence and again opted for a democratic path. But aspirations in this direction cost Azerbaijan dearly: an imposed war with neighboring Armenia which resulted in occupation of 20% of Azerbaijani territories and about 1 million refugees as well as internally displaced persons. Besides these war consequences during its early years of independence Azerbaijan had to face with internal political instability and economic and social crisis.

Economically Azerbaijan has achieved significant growth and continues to develop financially. This economic growth has social and political dimensions, as unemployment is low and the living standards of Azerbaijanis are growing (6.4%). While investments in the country (19%) and the increase in activities and funds in the economy except the energy sector (10%) reflects the momentum of the economic development in Azerbaijan. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that that economic development has an impact to the social ferment and political process. It could actually be suggested that economy is a criterion for a significant portion of the political preferences of Azerbaijanis, as these are reflected in the electoral and opinion poll results.

Having covered a significant part of the emergence of democracy the key pillars of political life in the country, the recent elections have worked constructively towards this direction. The writer as an international observer in the context of Non-Governmental Organizations of the Organization of the Black Sea countries visited Baku and had the opportunity to stay in the capital of Azerbaijan and visit a number of polling stations there. The impression about the

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electoral process on October 9 is related to different areas of the electoral process in its execution and transparency of procedures.

For instance, the organizational level of the elections was rather high. The arrangement of centers was meticulously organized with a specific number of voting booths which are normally located in spacious polling stations. The same applies to the ballot boxes ballots, etc. The number of registered voters for each polling station was stable as far as the electoral committees were concerned. General systematic was the standardization of equipment, tools used for both the layout and the equipment of polling stations.

Regarding the atmosphere of the election it could be described as mild among the candidates and their supporters. The state organization and attitude is considered as moderate in relation to the conduct of elections. Azerbaijan has made significant stride toward setting the framework for free and fair elections. Actually most of international organizations and bodies observing last presidential elections assessed these elections as free and fair, e.g. the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Although the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE PA) joined these organizations in its assessment, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights highlighted certain deficiencies in these elections, urging Baku to continue reforming process. Some experts doubted about the ballot counting but the results of all exit-polls have nearly coincided with the official results of elections. Baku did not exclude the possibility that there were certain violations and shortcomings during the elections. Yet these shortcomings could not cast a shadow to final results, and should not discourage aspirations of a young democracy.

This is viewed as a realistic development, if someone takes into account the progress the country has made in this area. Therefore an important element in the conduct of the recent elections is the progress made by the country in matters of electoral transparency and organization in relation to the past. This progress is also the basis for the further development of political process in the country. This development is positive and promising in the context of gradual change which will ensure the existing stability of the domestic political scene of Azerbaijan as well as the enhancement of the country as a pillar of geopolitical stability in the Caucasus region and beyond..

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