

**Polish Observation Mission
Tajikistan Presidential Elections
6 November 2006**

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

22-person strong Polish Observation Mission carried out the monitoring of Tajikistani Presidential elections in areas of Dushanbe and Khojand. Polish Observation Mission is a joint initiative of Polish NGOs and Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Preliminary assessment is based on reports of 20 short-term observers who visited 127 polling stations (76 in Dushanbe area and 51 in Khojand area) on the voting day and on the monitoring of pre-election period by two long-term observers, who arrived in Tajikistan three weeks before election day. The mission operated in 12 Territorial Election Districts, No. 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 15, 26, 27, 28, 29, 36.

Since our monitoring was limited to only two regions, our findings may not be representative to the whole country. We did, however, make all necessary efforts to ensure quality of the final outcome by applying consistent methodology, which draws on OSCE standards of observation work, as well as the experience of other independent observation missions. We provide references to numbers of TECs where we noted particular cases, however the list of examples included here is by no means exhaustive.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Elections were characterised by prevalent abuse of election procedures. These abuses included primarily family voting, inappropriate identification of voters and incorrect vote count. The failure to meet international standards on democratic elections does not necessarily distort the expression of political preferences by Tajik people. Irregularities that we observed in polling stations may have resulted from inadequate understanding of voting regulations as well as cultural and historical legacy of Tajikistan. Furthermore, the effective political competition in Tajikistan is limited which was reflected in the pre-election period and preliminary election results.

We appreciate openness of Tajik authorities toward international observers, hassle-free accreditation process, the readiness of election authorities and organs of local administration to assist both long and short-term observers. We noticed visible commitment and determination of government (and apparent complicity of the opposition) to ensure peaceful, non-violent course of elections. We noted a genuine effort of election authorities to limit the impression of the privileged position of the current president. Many of his posters and portraits were taken away before election day.

While acknowledging these positive trends, we identified the following shortcomings:

- in spite of considerable efforts by election authorities and international community the understanding of procedures for conducting elections is limited not only among the voters but also among the staff of election committees; furthermore, many election procedures are not sufficiently clearly explained from the onset;

- ❑ degree of genuine competition during elections has been limited due to marginalisation of opposition political parties and their inability to field candidates; pre-election campaign did not involve public debate on key political issues;
- ❑ natural advantage of media presence, acting in favour of incumbent, has been exacerbated by the pro-government bias of state-media and the general underdevelopment of private Tajik media;
- ❑ local NGOs are not allowed by current legislation to field observers during election day;
- ❑ there exists a widespread practice of family and proxy voting, which might stem from the clash of traditional systems of authority with modern democracy and universal suffrage; it also reflects somewhat pragmatic and overtly flexible attitude toward legal procedures;
- ❑ inappropriate identification of voters and issuance of ballots;
- ❑ irregularities concerning vote count and the process of filling in protocols;
- ❑ insufficient quality of voters' registers;
- ❑ while election turn-out is undoubtedly high, the high incidence of family voting, and low reliability of voters registers raises doubts as to the precision of official turn-out data.

Furthermore, the following issues could be recognised as positive developments, however, we found them ambivalent:

- ❑ Campaign meetings were organised by Central Election Committee with four presidential candidates. While it may be credited as an attempt to provide better opportunities for them to campaign and create an atmosphere of genuine competition, the conspicuous absence of main contender deprives this practice of credibility;
- ❑ The elections are considered as a major national holiday and attract huge interest of the population as evidenced by the high turnout. At the same time it seems that for many, elections are not seen as a choice of a leader in a competitive process but rather to express support to the current leadership in power;
- ❑ Candidates were allotted free air-time in state electronic media, however this could not alter the overall preponderance of president in the media;
- ❑ Work of "agitators" visiting voters in pre-election period may be considered as a useful tool of voters' mobilisation but on the other hand it could easily be used for biased campaigning.

OBSERVATIONS

The following are some of the particular observations made by Polish Observation Mission teams on the election day.

1. Functioning of polling stations

Polling stations seemed to be well prepared for elections. Election materials such as ballots and ballot boxes arrived in time to most of observed polling stations. However, some of the premises were small, which led to serious overcrowding in peak voting hours.

Understanding of election law and procedures was uneven among polling stations. Chairpersons of PSC with experience and good understanding of procedural details were not common. We noticed some instances when persons in the role of observers (e.g. from People's Democratic Party) or without formal affiliation to the commission were in fact

controlling the work of PSC (TEC 11, 15). In some cases such people without obvious affiliation were reluctant to disclose their identity.

The persons identified by PSC staff as 'agitators' or 'helpers' were seen assisting PSC in performing important functions, such as verifying identity of voters and issuing ballots. Most often they were subordinates of PSC chairpersons being teachers, students or doctors. Many of them were involved in pre-election period as 'campaigners'.

2. Issuance of ballots/identification of voters

We noticed widespread practice of issuing ballots exclusively on the basis of invitations to elections delivered to voters before the election day. There were cases where our observers saw situations when nearly all voters visiting a polling stations were given ballots without presenting passports. Inappropriate identification of voters was an irregularity present in all TECs that we observed.

3. Voters' registers

In some polling stations (in Dushanbe Region) we observed additional registers which added 5-10% to the original number of voters which indicates inaccuracy of the original registers. We also noticed instances when a voter arriving in the station has found out that a signature was already put beside his/her name which may have been the reflection of family or proxy voting (TEC 2 and 15). Such voters were asked to put their signature into the next free place on the list or entered into additional register. Such practices undermine credibility of registers and put precision of turn-out data in question.

4. Confidentiality of the vote

Overall, the polling stations were properly equipped with voting booths providing secrecy of the voting and their use was a standard practice. We noted however some cases involving two persons entering booth jointly (TEC 5, 36; some PSC tried to discourage voters from this practice). Occasionally voters solicited help from PSC members or observers. There were instances when PSC members, observers or even firemen made suggestions to voters disturbing them in the polling booth (TEC 15). In many stations the person responsible for turn-out statistics was sitting very closely to the ballot box; in some cases there was another person next to the box, responsible for the security of cast ballots (eg. TEC 26). The proximity of such persons to the ballot box might compromise the confidentiality of casting vote.

5. Family and proxy voting

Our mission noted family voting to be a widespread practice in all election districts that we monitored. This was so in spite of trainings and written instructions provided to PSC members by Tajik election authorities and OSCE information posters clearly explaining the inappropriate nature of that practice (regrettably many polling stations did not have them on display).

In some instances it was clear that PSC members were not aware that this practice is illegal. Family voting was happening openly in front of the observers. One chairwoman in a polling station in Dushanbe has explained to our observer that she had given her passport (ID) to her daughter so that she could vote on her behalf in the polling station (TEC 4).

On many occasions, however, PSC chairpersons were aware that family voting is inappropriate but were apparently not willing to prevent it from happening. In many polling stations we could find evidence of this practice taking place. In several instances we eye-witnessed voters being issued several ballots or stuffing several ballots. Examining the content of ballot boxes from the outside, we have frequently seen a number of ballots folded together. Moreover, in many polling stations we noted high number of conspicuously identical signatures put against names of members of same family. Our observer who understands

Tajik, has heard polling stations staff instructing voters in the queue who hold several invitations to come after observers leave the station. (TEC 5).

While legitimate explanations can be made that those were cases of illiterate family members being helped by their next of kin to make signature on their behalf this is hardly probable to account for all such cases.

Family voting often involved men voting on behalf of the women (some observers reported significantly higher number of men in polling stations).

As an alternative to one voter voting for several persons (*family voting*), the following practice was applied in a number of polling stations: When a voter came with IDs of other members of his or her family, the committee would issue to them only one ballot; however, their names would be marked (usually by a tick next to the name on the voters list). Such marks appeared to suggest that those persons were not coming to vote anymore. Importantly, in several cases the observers noted committee members (or "agitators") signing those marked spots on the voters list, the probable follow-up to which would be their voting for those absent persons. In fact in several instances we noted PSC members who stuffed several ballots (TEC 7).

In conclusion, it seems that the practice of family voting is deeply entrenched in the electoral tradition of Tajikistan. Voters denied such possibility were visibly disappointed and surprised. In an extreme case, one voter who came with five invitations and was turned down by PSC tried to make complaint to our observer that his rights were infringed (TEC 5).

6. Determination of results

Contrary to the provisions of election law, several PSCs during vote count considered votes cast against all candidates invalid (TEC 4,5, 7 and 15). There were also other cases of divergent interpretations concerning validity of the votes: votes marked only by "ticking" a family name or with two names left were in some cases considered valid.

Vote count was conducted in many cases in a simplified and hastily manner, i.e. only once without any form of verification. It resulted in many inaccuracies which PSC were often not able to resolve, which led to arbitrary decision such as announcing higher or lower number of invalid votes or declaring higher number of votes to one of the candidates. We did not however observe major distortions in the vote count.

In a number of TECs we witnessed a practice whereby PSC was presenting blank or filled with pencils protocols, duly signed by PSC members. The rough data was verified by TEC staff in order to make sure that all numbers add up properly. Only later were the figures written down with pen (TEC 4, 5, 15).

Dushanbe/Khojand 7 November 2006

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Polish Observation Mission to Tajikistan presidential elections is supported by a grant from Polish Foreign Ministry development program (Polish Aid). The mission is officially recognised by the Tajik authorities. Monitoring was conducted in two regions: Central (Dushanbe) and Sogd (Khojand), and their vicinities by 20 short and 2 long term observers. Recruitment of observers was made on a fully transparent basis with public announcements (including media) and usually highly competitive. We credited not only direct election related experience but also good knowledge of regional context and track-record of involvement in voluntary activities.

The observers underwent comprehensive training including a day in Warsaw before departure (Tajik elections' law, politics and culture of Tajikistan, the role of international election observer) and half day on the spot (briefing by LTO on the situation, logistics, observation procedure).

The monitoring was based on methodology developed on the basis of OSCE standards as well as experience of ENEMO and Polish Observation Mission in Ukraine. The teams of two short term observers participated in the opening of a selected polling stations, then followed with a number of 20 to 40 minutes visits to polling stations during the day and accompanied vote tabulation in one of them until all election materials were transported to Territorial Election Commission and results were duly reported. The observers filled standard forms and produced additional extensive reports containing their impressions and evaluation to report their findings. The preliminary report of the mission presented today will be followed by the full report in 15 days, published in English, Russian and Polish.