



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Municipal Elections in Yerevan

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 11, 2009

Madam Chairwoman:

On May 31 Armenian voters in the capital of Yerevan went to the polls to elect members of the Yerevan city council and, indirectly, the mayor of Yerevan. We welcome the fact that, for the first time since Armenia's independence, these important offices were filled through an election process. We note there were some welcome improvements in the atmosphere surrounding the pre-election campaign. However, the conduct of the elections themselves raised concerns that many voters were unable to exercise freely their democratic rights.

We commend the Armenian authorities for an improved media climate that afforded all parties and candidates the ability to reach voters through the electronic media. Although some opposition parties received less overall coverage than parties in the ruling coalition, the coverage of the opposition—unlike in the 2008 presidential campaign—was generally neutral in content. Opposition candidates and their supporters were provided opportunities to make their case in extended interviews on various television outlets, including public television, and they took advantage of many of those opportunities.

It is true there were some unfortunate instances of violence against opposition supporters and among representatives of parties from the ruling coalition during the course of the campaign, which we urge authorities to investigate and prosecute. But we welcome the fact that all parties were generally free in practice to hold public meetings and rallies, and to convey their messages directly to the voters.

The voting process, however, presents a different story. Based on reports by election observers from our embassy in Yerevan and on our discussions with other local and international observers, we could only conclude that the voting process on Election Day was marred by widespread fraud and intimidation. We observed incidents of ballot-stuffing, multiple voting, falsified vote counts, intimidation of party proxies and observers, and the illegal presence of unauthorized and unidentified individuals in polling stations. These clear violations of OSCE commitments—and of the Armenian Election Code—were especially egregious in Yerevan's Malatia-Sebastia district, but were observed in other electoral districts as well. They unfortunately repeated a disturbing pattern of similar violations witnessed in previous elections in Armenia. We urge the authorities to implement recommendations made in previous OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Reports in order to bring the election process more closely in line with OSCE commitments.

We are pleased to see that the authorities have acknowledged fraud and irregularities in some areas, and have taken steps toward addressing them. The vote in some precincts has been recounted, and several arrests have been made. We urge the authorities to identify those responsible, and to prosecute them swiftly and aggressively. It is up to the authorities to send the clear signal that those who interfere with the democratic process will be punished.

Finally, in spite of the flawed election that I have described, we note that one opposition party won a significant number of seats on Yerevan's municipal council. Although we understand the disappointment that opposition supporters feel concerning the conduct of the vote, we urge opposition leaders to take up their mandates on the council and represent their voters through full and active participation in the governance of Yerevan. It is only through constructive engagement in the democratic process, with an eye to its continual improvement, that the democratic aspirations of Armenian citizens can finally be realized.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.