Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan: No Political Reforms to Expect

The recent elections in Uzbekistan have not changed the situation, but demonstrated the liberalization level in Uzbekistan, as experts say.

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On December 22, videos appeared on social networks, showing how unknown persons stuff dozens of ballots. The Central Election Commission and the General Prosecutor’s Office stated that they were studying the videos.

At the same time, international observers from among the representatives of the CIS countries agreed that the parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan were held in full compliance with the Constitution and legislation. “[Elections] were held on a multiparty basis, were free, transparent, competitive and aligned with generally accepted norms of democratic elections,” observers’ mission from the CIS resumed.

Observers’ mission from the SCO expressed similar opinion.
Meanwhile, the observers’ mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) stated in the Interim Report from December 13, that many specific features of past elections are also observed during the current elections.

The ODIHR believes that the legislation on the registration of new political parties remains “burdensome and open to arbitrary application”. The report also states that the election campaigns did not meet international standards.

“So far, very little evidence of outdoor [pre-election] campaign activities has been observed,” ODIHR Report states.

New Uzbekistan, Old Elections?

The slogan of the election campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2019 was “New Uzbekistan, New Elections”. For the first time, online cameras were installed in some voting stations as an experiment; it was also possible to find voting stations location on the CEC website. However, this feature malfunctioned: it showed some locations in Japan.

In addition, for the first time in the parliamentary elections, many observers from among local activists and candidate representatives were involved. However, the first parliamentary elections under the current president of the country Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who won the reputation of a liberal reformer in the international community, were marked by violations reports.
In the capital and regions, systemic violations were registered. Deputy Chairman of the CEC Mahmud Istamov spoke about the cases of pressure from the local authorities on election commissions consisting of employees of state-funded organizations (doctors, teachers) to promote individual candidates.

An observer from 168th electoral area anonymously told CABAR.asia that Naima Jabbarova, the deputy and chairperson of the citizens’ gathering of the Katta Karasuv mahalla of Mirzo-Ulughbek district, was the violator.

“Observers at this voting station, one of whom was Dilorom Umirzakova from the Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party, strongly recommended and advised citizens to vote for Jabbarova, sometimes even entering the voting booth,” said the observer.

During the election silence, on the eve of the election, observers recorded facts of illegal campaigning. In addition, in the morning, minor violations were reported, such as family voting, when one voter votes for all family members.

Major violations were recorded in the late afternoon. On some voting stations, protocol manipulations were detected. Some observers were not allowed to attend the protocol completion.

Repeat elections will be held in 22 areas, since candidates did not win enough (more than 50%) votes.
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“Without Stuffing, Election Turnout Would Be Lower”

Experts doubt the official data on election turnout. CABAR.asia interviewed 30 Tashkent residents and none of the respondents came to the polling station.

In addition, almost 1.7 million voters are abroad, most of whom are labor migrants in Russia. According to the CEC preliminary data, over 1.1 million migrants voted abroad. However, experts doubt that this population category was actively involved in the voting process.

Just as in previous years, self-governing bodies actively involved in the elections process called voters who did not want to come to the voting station.

_Election Day in Tashkent. Photo: CABAR.asia_
On election day in Tashkent. Photo: CABAR.asia

“They called and asked politely why I did not come to the voting station. I replied that this is my civic position. After these words, they said goodbye, once again asking if this was my personal decision,” says Tashkent resident Rustam. However, according to one of the representatives of the 598th electoral area in Tashkent, the main electoral base provided the high turnout: elderly and pensioners.

“Our turnout is high: about 60% of voters have already voted (by 3 PM – Ed.). There were only a few people under 20 years of age. To encourage them, we presented them books. The hard workers from the bazaars came as early as half past seven in the morning to make it to the morning trade on time. However, they had to wait for the station to open, listen to the anthem, and vote only then,” she says.

According to the interviewed by CABAR.asia citizens who deliberately refused to vote, the election commissions’ members stuffed ballots of the so-called ghost voters who already left the country and even changed their citizenship.

“My mother, who went and filled out the ballots, was not even required to submit a passport. That is, they [election commissions’ members] themselves could fill out ballots and stuff them. Without stuffing, I think, the turnout would be lower, at the level of 40-50%,” says Tashkent resident Rustam.

According Temur Umarov, expert from Uzbekistan and consultant at the Carnegie Moscow center, the recent elections demonstrated the regime’s liberalization level.

CABAR.asia: What are the advantages of the last parliamentary campaign in Uzbekistan?

Temur Umarov: From a procedural side, these elections are unique for Uzbekistan. First, the legal basis for all election events was created. We did not have it before. A single Electoral Code that regulates elections has been created. Previously, we had five separate laws, and some points contradicted each other, but now this is not the case. This has made a positive contribution. Among the advantages is the active work of the Central Election Commission, and an electronic voters list, which included almost 20 million Uzbeks. The quota for the environmental movement was removed.
Do you consider this as an advantage?

Absolutely. Parliament represents the people. If there is a request for an environmental movement, then it should be reflected in public opinion. If there is no request, then it is necessary to work on other issues, as I think.

Another advantage is the increase of the women’s involvement; at least 30% of each party members should be women. This is undoubtedly an advantage, especially considering the situation with women’s rights in our country and in the region.

This campaign was well covered in the media. People who previously had no idea what parties existed and what they were doing, now hear the voices of the parties, understand their programs and see parties’ leaders.

The leader of the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party Alisher Kadyrov solves the current issue of Uzbekistan and the EAEU. This is good. Various discourses and opinions have emerged, leading to debate.

Do you think the final data reflect the existing balance between the parties?

I believe they reflect the existing balance better than ever. Nevertheless, in fact, we saw for the first time how media reported violations, obvious violations, such as ballots stuffing. We always knew about this, but since this information never appeared in the media, we did not hear about it. We saw it during this election. All this happened, but it is impossible to discuss the total falsification of these elections. From a goal-setting side, why do the authorities need outright falsifications, if nothing depends on these elections? Seriously.

As we know, all five parties are pro-government and not one of them would cardinally change the course. Our parliament is harmless; this must be taken into account. The existing progress is clearly visible in terms of the procedures, but in fact, these elections have not changed the situation much.

The total outcomes: procedurally, the progress is enormous, but in reality, these elections actually demonstrated one of the main limits of the liberalization of Uzbekistan.

As soon as Shavkat Mirziyoyev took the power, all experts and media asked about the duration of this liberalization. Well, the elections showed one of its limits. That is, this limit indicates that political reforms are not expected; they will mainly focus on the economy, on improving relations with neighbors and foreign policy. In domestic politics, little will actually change. In practice, we see that power still belongs to a very narrow circle of
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people, which is concentrated around the president. It seems to me that this situation will not change in the near future.

“This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project”

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