

Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center



INTERIM REPORT

On the results of observation on the Pre-Election Campaign in
the Early Presidential Election, 7 February 2024

Baku - February 2, 2024

I. Summary

The Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting free and fair elections, protecting civil and political liberties, fostering civil society development, and strengthening democratic institutions in Azerbaijan.

The observations carried out by EMDS during the preliminary phase of the early presidential election set for February 7, 2024, encompassing candidate nomination and registration, as well as the pre-election campaign activities, are based on official reports, documents, information collected from publicly available sources, and the accounts of registered observers.

EMDS considers that scheduling the presidential election 14 months in advance, for February 7, 2024, posed challenges for the participation of all stakeholders in the electoral process, including political parties, presidential candidates, and engagement of civil society organizations, and international election observers.

Despite the three-year gap since the last parliamentary election, EMDS emphasizes that Azerbaijani government have not demonstrated political political will to study and implement prior recommendations from both local and international observers, including the OSCE Bureau of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights that aimed at improving electoral legislation and process.

EMDS expresses regret in reporting that on the eve of the February 7, 2024 early presidential election, the crisis in the protection of political freedoms has deepened in the country, restrictions on freedom of expression, free assembly and association have not been ceased, and the number of politically motivated arrests has increased. Furthermore, the number of political parties has halved, independent civil society organizations and media outlets face bans on their activities, and journalists and social activists face persecution. Consequently, the absence of a conducive democratic environment hindered the active engagement of civil society organizations and political parties in the early presidential election on February 7.

During the pre-election period, the presidential candidates' campaigns failed to create genuine competition among opposing political forces, depriving voters of the opportunity to choose from a variety of political perspectives. Consequently, the essential condition of free and fair elections, a political alternativity, remained unfulfilled.

EMDS emphasizes the significance of conducting the upcoming phase of the February 7, 2024 presidential election - the voting and vote-counting processes, in adherence to established legal standards. EMDS calls upon Azerbaijani authorities to exhibit political will in preventing any

interference by executive bodies and other state institutions in the electoral process, while also ensuring the independent functioning of election commissions.

II. Introduction

This report is compiled from the long-term observations carried out by the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS) on the upcoming early presidential election to be held on 7 February 2024.

EMDS is a non-governmental organization, is dedicated to promoting free and fair elections, safeguarding civil and political liberties, and supporting the growth of civil society and democratic institutions in Azerbaijan. EMDS was officially re-established on December 1, 2008, by the founders of the previously dissolved Election Monitoring Center (EMC). It worth to look back on the events of May 14, 2008, when the registration of EMC (the former name of EMDS) was revoked by the Khatai District Court, following an unsubstantiated claim by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In response to this, EMDS, continuing the mission of EMC, applied for state registration with the Ministry of Justice in 2009. The application was, however, denied, leading EMDS to seek legal redress through applying to court. The case eventually reached the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), as the Azerbaijani judicial system failed to approve the state registration requests for both EMC and EMDS. The ECHR ruled on December 2, 2021, for EMC¹, and on January 12, 2023, for EMDS², recognizing these denials as violations of Article 11 of the European Convention, which addresses freedom of association and assembly. Despite these decisions, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan has yet to take the necessary legal actions to comply with the ECHR rulings and grant state registration to EMDS.

EMDS (formerly known as EMC) has monitored 15 elections in Azerbaijan since 2001. The organization has conducted over 600 training sessions for more than 14,000 citizens on election monitoring, providing essential legal and technical support for their accreditation in election commissions.

EMDS is an active member of several prominent international networks, including the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) which brings together civil society organizations from OSCE member countries, the Civil Society Forum of Eastern Partnership countries, the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), and the Global Network of Local Election Observers. EMDS' operations adhere strictly to the principles outlined in the Global Declaration of Local Election Observation Organizations³.

¹ See: Case of of Election Monitoring Centre and others v. Azerbaijan (Application no. [64733/09](#))

² See: Case of of Election Monitoring and Democracy Education Centre and others v. Azerbaijan (Application no. [70981/11](#))

³ Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations, <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles/>

III. Pre-Election Legal and Political Environment

a) Declaring early election

On December 7, 2023, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, issued a decree in accordance with Part I of Article 101 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Article 179 of the Election Code to conduct an early presidential election in the country.⁴ It is important to note that the provision for calling an early election was incorporated into national legislation following the referendum held on 26 September 2016. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, in its review of the amendments made during this referendum, raised concerns. The Commission pointed out unclear motives behind the changes, the exclusion of parliament in discussing the referendum act, and criticized the lack of a regulated procedure for the enactment of the constitutional amendments.⁵

In its response to the announcement of the early presidential election, the EMDS notes that the issuance of decree on the holding of the early presidential election without substantial political justification and open public discussions has complicated the involvement of all election stakeholders, including political parties, presidential candidates and hindered the adequate preparation of civil society organizations and international election observation groups for the election.⁶

b) Pre-Election Legal Environment

Following the parliamentary elections in 2020, neither the parliamentary nor the central executive power showed a political will for legal initiatives towards the improvement of the Election Code.

Instead, new restrictive legal norms have been introduced into the national legislation, particularly concerning the media and political parties, adversely affecting the electoral process and the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association in Azerbaijan.

The "Law on Media," adopted in February 2022, mandates the establishment of a unified registry for media entities and journalists, introducing several new regulations for media operations. Independent journalists have interpreted the enactment of this law as an attempt to take a control of free media in the country. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, in its expert opinion, expressed concerns that this legislative act would further limit the already constrained space for independent journalism and media in Azerbaijan, creating an additional "chilling effect."⁷ The Commission also noted that the law falls short of European standards for freedom of expression. It should be noted that, unlike to previous elections, the adoption of this law will

⁴ The text of the presidential order, <https://president.az/az/articles/view/62417>

⁵ The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe -Opinion, [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2016\)029-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2016)029-e)

⁶ EMDS Statement, 12 December 2023, <https://EMDSaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EMDS-b%C9%99yanat-12122023.pdf>

⁷ Draft Joint Opinion on the Law on Media: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL\(2022\)017-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL(2022)017-e)

now make it impossible for all journalists to cover the early presidential election. Only journalists registered in the media registry will have the opportunity to follow the voting process on election day.

In January 2023, 29 out of the 58 political parties operating in Azerbaijan ceased their activities within six months after the new law "On Political Parties" came into effect. Some parties attributed this to the restrictive circumstances created by the new law. It should be noted that under the new law, the minimum number of members required for party registration has been increased to 5,000.

According to the law, if the number of members in a state-registered political party falls below 4,500, its legal status can be revoked through a court decision.⁸

The joint opinion of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission on the Law on political parties notes that new rules on political parties give rise to serious concerns with respect to the right to freedom of association which is guaranteed both in international human rights documents and the national Constitution.⁹

c) Pre-election politically motivated arrests

Before the election, a report from human rights organizations highlighted that over 200 individuals had been imprisoned for political reasons in the country.¹⁰ Also, according to the information collected by EMDS through open sources, 85 people were brought to criminal responsibility with political motives, and the measure of arrest was chosen against them in 2023.¹¹ Simultaneously, during the same year, 39 people were administratively arrested on political grounds.¹²

It should be noted that among those who were arrested on various charges in 2023 are the Chairman of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Party, renowned economist, and scientist Gubad Ibadoglu, and a member of the National Council of Democratic Forces, former political prisoner Tofiq Yagublu. According to some observers Gubad Ibadoglu's arrest prevented him from participating in the early presidential election as a representative of the opposition political forces.

Prior to the election, there was a significant escalation of political and legal pressure targeting employees of the new online media platforms "Abzas Media" and Kanal13 TV.

⁸ Law on Political Parties, <https://e-qanun.az/framework/53163>

⁹ Joint opinion on the Law on political parties, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)007-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)007-e)

¹⁰ New list of political prisoners includes 254, VOA, 1 Dec. 2023, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7380030.html>

¹¹ EMDS Annual Fact-Summary on Politically Motivated Arrests - <https://EMDSaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/fakt-xulas%C9%99-2023.pdf>

¹² Ibid

Since November 20, a wave of arrests started against employees of Abzas Media. Over the course of a month, this series of arrests resulted in arrest of Abzas Media's director, Ulvi Hasanli, chief editor Sevinj Vagifqizi, deputy director Mahammad Kekalov, as well as journalists who collaborated with the media platform, namely Nargiz Absalamova, Elnara Gasimova, and Hafiz Babali. These arrests were carried out within the framework of a criminal case primarily invoking Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code, which deals with smuggling perpetrated by a premeditated group of individuals. A criminal case was initiated against them mainly under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code (smuggling committed in collusion with a group of persons).

Aziz Orujov, the head of Kanal13 internet television, was indeed arrested on November 28, and he was charged under Article 188.2 (Unauthorized construction or installation work on land without the right of ownership, use or lease established by law) of the Criminal Code. On January 18, Mehriban Rahimli, the country coordinator of the German Marshall Fund, confirmed that her personal bank accounts were seized in connection with the criminal case against Aziz Orujov, the head of Kanal13 TV.

Since 2020, no significant progress has been made concerning the cases of the Mammadli group which is connected with politically motivated arrests in Azerbaijan and falls under the supervision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The Mammadli group encompasses cases of political persecution and arrests involving civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan from 2013 to 2016, all of whom were targeted due to their activities and critical stances against the government. The group includes cases of Anar Mammadli, Intigam Aliyev, Khadija Ismayilova, Giyas Ibrahimov, Bayram Mammadov, Arif and Leyla Yunus.¹³

In the context of this group's case, wherein the violation of Article 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights is acknowledged, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has consistently stated that the government employed the abuse of criminal legislation to persecute and arrest its critics, including civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders and demands the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan for an independent judiciary to establish a consistent national legal precedent against politically motivated arrests, ultimately seeking to quashing the convictions of all the applicants within this group.

d) The state of civil society

The restrictions imposed on civil society organizations (CSOs) have not abated, owing to the inclusion of restrictive provisions in laws governing NGOs and grants for 2013-2014 years. These restrictive laws have hampered the establishment of NGOs, their capacity to function

¹³ Mammadli Group cases v Azerbaijan - <https://shorturl.at/botKO>

independently, and their ability to secure financial support for their public initiatives from both domestic and international donors.

In addition to these legal restrictions, the years since 2013 have witnessed political repression and smear campaigns targeting civil society activists. This has resulted in the fragmentation of independent citizen groups within the country, a shift towards government control, a loss of institutional expertise, and increased emigration among civil society actors.

In addition to the legal norms, since 2013, political repression and smear campaigns against civil society activists have led to dismantling of independent citizen groups within the country, a transition toward government's political control, the erosion of institutional expertise, and emigration.

The arrests of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev¹⁴ - a founder of Caspian PlatForum and members of the Working Table Trade Unions Confederation, Afieddin Mammadov,¹⁵ Elvin Mustafayev¹⁶ and Aykhan Israfilov,¹⁷ prior to the early presidential election are regarded as part of a broader pattern of political repression targeting civil society activists in recent years. For instance, public figure Araz Aliyev was detained on December 24 and subsequently subjected to a 25-day administrative arrest. Following his release, he informed that he had been interrogated about the purpose and activities of the newly established Third Republican Platform during his time in police custody.¹⁸

As a result of measures of total political control over civil society, holding open public discussions in the regions and Baku has been restricted. Only pro-government NGOs and public groups have been given the opportunities to operate freely in the regions and in Baku, thereby systematically continuing political discrimination against independent CSOs.

IV. Candidate Registration Process Results

Following the announcement of the early presidential election on December 7, 2023, the process of accepting applications for the nomination of presidential candidates has begun at the Central Election Commission.

According to the Election Code, at least 40,000 voter signatures must be collected to support a presidential candidacy. Voter signatures must be collected with at least 50 voter signatures in the territory of at least 60 constituencies.

For the support of the election, a minimum of 40,000 voter signatures must be collected to support a presidential candidacy. It is envisaged that these voter signatures should be distributed

¹⁴ More details- <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbajjan-63947666>

¹⁵ More details - <https://turan.az/az/cemiyyet/isci-masasi-hemkarlar-ittifaqlari-konfederasiyasinin-sedri-afieddin-memmedov-768135>

¹⁶ More details - <https://turan.az/az/siyaset/mehkeme-hemkarlar-ittifaqi-fealini-3-il-azadliqdan-mehrumetme-cezasina-mehkum-edib>

¹⁷ More details - <https://turan.az/az/cemiyyet/ayxan-israfilov-hebs-edilib-yenilenib-768346>

¹⁸ More details - <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7444096.html>

within no less than 60 election districts, with at least 50 voter signatures planned for each electoral district.

According to information published on the official website of the Central Election Commission, 17 people have applied for presidential candidacy, and all of them have been provided with the signature sheets to support their nominations.¹⁹

The New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) nominated the current head of the country, Ilham Aliyev, and announced that it supported him to lead the country for the fifth time. In addition to the NAP, some political parties have declared that they support the candidacy of Ilham Aliyev in the presidential election, and that they did not nominate a candidate.²⁰

Opposition parties, including Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), have decided not to participate in the elections. In the statement of both parties, it is noted that it is impossible to hold free and fair elections in the current atmosphere of repression, mass arrests and fear.

According to the official information provided by the CEC, out of the 17 individuals who had taken signature sheets for presidential candidacy, 10 did not return their signature sheets.

However, three individuals on the list—Matlab Mutallimli, Namizad Safarov, and Sarvan Karimov—filed a collective application with the CEC, contending that their presidential candidacy applications were not timely accepted. They argued that because their applications were not processed within the legally stipulated timeframe of 5 days leaving them with insufficient opportunity to fill the signature sheets.

Moreover, they claimed that individuals who had supported their candidacies were contacted by authorities and subjected to threats.

No.	Presidential Candidate	Registration date
1	Ilham Aliyev	30.12.23
2	Zahid Oruj	06.01.24
3	Razi Nurullayev	06.01.24
4	Fazil Mustafa	09.01.24
5	Gudrat Hasanguliyev	09.01.24
6	Fuad Aliyev	09.01.24
7	Elshad Musayev	09.01.24

It's worth noting that among the registered candidates, only Elshad Musayev, the chairman of the Great Azerbaijan Party, is taking part in the presidential election for the first time. The other candidates have all repeatedly participated in the past presidential elections. For instance, Gudrat Hasanguliyev, the chairman of the Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, is running for president for the fifth time alongside NAP chairman Ilham Aliyev.

¹⁹ Elections Information Center's information, <https://www.msk.gov.az/az/elections/view/1193>

²⁰ See - <https://report.az/daxili-siyaset/azerbaycanda-bir-sira-siyasi-partiyalar-ilham-eliyevin-prezidentliye-namizedliyini-destekleyibler/>

Interestingly, along with Gudrat Hasanguliyev, four other candidates—Zahid Oruj, Fazil Mustafa, Fuad Aliyev, and Razi Nurullayev—had secured minimal votes in the presidential elections held between 2003 and 2018, significantly fewer than the current head of the country, Ilham Aliyev.²¹ Nonetheless, they did not contest the results of those elections and were known for their loyal political stance towards the government during inter-election periods. This raises doubts about whether the pre-election campaign phase of the presidential candidacies of these individuals in the extraordinary presidential election on February 7, 2024, will occur in an atmosphere of genuine political competition.

V. Pre-Election Campaign

According to the Election Code, the pre-election campaign period starts 23 days before voting day, spanning a total of 22 days and ceasing 24 hours before the voting day begins.

For the early presidential election scheduled for February 7, 2024, the official pre-election campaigning starts on January 15 and concludes on February 6.

Pre-election campaigning, as permitted by law, encompasses activities like broadcasting via mass media, hosting public gatherings (including assemblies and meetings with citizens, public discussions, conversations with citizens and etc.), and disseminating printed and audio-visual materials, among other legally allowable methods.²²

a) Organization of Pre-Election Campaign on Public Television and Radio

The Central Election Commission, through a lottery process, established a schedule for presidential candidates to receive free airtime on the Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Company. Per the established schedule, candidates used airtime on television and radio in a Round Table format three times a week. Across these appearances, a total of 10 sessions were allotted, with each session providing 8 minutes and 57 seconds of airtime to the candidates on both television and radio platforms.

All candidates, excluding the current head of the country, Ilham Aliyev, participated in the Round Table discussions aired during the free broadcast slots and delivered speeches. However, outside of these discussions, appearances and speeches by candidates other than Ilham Aliyev on traditional TV channels remained infrequent throughout the pre-election campaign period.

The Round Table sessions, hosted by an Azerbaijani public broadcast service - ITV, as a rule, orbited around pre-determined topics.

EMDS' analysis of 6 TV debates aired on ITV revealed that none of the other 6 candidates attempted to challenge the current head of state, position themselves as a formidable opponent, or embody an alternative political force with aspirations for power.²³ Consequently, this lack of

²¹ the total number of votes collected by these persons was 618,000

²² Election Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Article 74

²³ Infographic information on the results of the TV debates observations of the TV debates is attached to this report.

contrast in the debates denied voters the chance to discern distinct political perspectives and agendas.

b) Organization of Pre-Election Campaign on social media

For the February 7, 2024, presidential election, the landscape of social media campaigning showed a notable shift from previous years, with increased opportunities for candidates to engage in digital campaign. However, only a few candidates have been active on these platforms. Among the presidential candidates, the activities of presidential candidates Ilham Aliyev and Razi Nurullayev, including meetings, speeches, and statements, received extensive coverage and dissemination across major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, all of which enjoy a large user base within the country.²⁴ Other candidates, Gudrat Hasanguliyev and Fuad Aliyev, did not use their social media accounts throughout the pre-election campaign period.

c) Public Events and Meetings with Voters

The CEC announced a list of designated venues for the pre-election campaign's public meetings. This list encompasses 281 venues for candidate-voter meetings, split between 139 open-air and 142 enclosed spaces.²⁵

Observations by EMDS-affiliated monitors across 27 constituencies note that the majority of these allocated venues are apt for meetings with voters. Nonetheless, they point out that some open-air meeting locations are inconveniently situated far from residential communities.

During the pre-election campaign, observers noted that local executive power structures were involved in the organization of meetings between some presidential candidates and voters within the boundaries of 8 constituencies.

On January 18, an instance was noted where officials from the Nasimi district's executive branch, along with students from Baku Asia University, brought to the meeting of presidential candidate Fuad Aliyev. This event took place within Nasimi-Sabail electoral district No. 23 and was hosted at the Baku Asia University.

Following the observed pattern of local executive involvement, on January 17, it was noted that employees from state institutions within the Imishli district were seen transported to a meeting between presidential candidate Razi Nurullayev and voters in the Imishli electoral district No. 81. Furthermore, on January 11 in Sumgait, schoolteachers, parents, and students from Sumgait State University were actively involved in a meeting organized by local executive authorities with presidential candidate Gudrat Hasanguliyev.

²⁴ The results of the monitoring of candidates' social media accounts are attached to this report.

²⁵ Elections Information Center, CEC - <https://www.msk.gov.az/az/elections/view/1250>

Participants in the meetings with presidential candidates Gudrat Hasanguliyev and Fazil Mustafa, held in Sumgayit on January 16 and January 17, respectively, informed observers that they attended the meeting of both candidates at the insistence of local executive structures.

Overall, at this point in the campaign, open spaces were scarcely used for large-scale gatherings of candidates with voters. There were no instances of candidates holding rallies or mass meetings that attracted thousands. Thus, the pre-election campaign across the country was marked by a lack of enthusiasm and failed to ignite a political activism.

d) Campaign Through Printed Materials

The election constituencies established a list of designated locations for posting campaign posters, with one board specified for display in each polling station area.

Additionally, monitors cooperated with the EMDS documented instances of destruction of the campaign materials of candidates across six constituencies throughout the pre-election campaign period.

VI. Management of election commissions

After the announcement of the early presidential election, the Central Election Commission started implementing a number of election measures, adopted a number of instructions, decisions and a Calendar Plan.

a) Registration of domestic observers

During the reporting period, a significant deficiency in the operations of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and Election Constituencies has been the absence of effective and simplified procedures for registering domestic citizen observers. Referring to the practice from prior elections, EMDS has consistently advocated for the establishment of an electronic-based registration system for local observers. Despite the Election Code not explicitly barring such an approach for observer registration, the CEC has yet to take relevant measures to address this need. Consequently, individuals wishing to serve as observers across multiple electoral constituencies and polling stations face considerable logistical and technical challenges in registering with both the Central and District Election Commissions. This situation impedes their ability to swiftly and simply complete the registration process.

It is important to highlight that Article 40.13 of the Election Code stipulates that only observers who have obtained special authorization from the CEC are permitted to attend the meetings of the election commission until the day of voting.

Similar to previous elections, in this early presidential election, no public announcement was made about the lottery of the CEC or the disclosure of a list detailing the observers endowed with such rights. This practice of selecting observers via lottery prior to voting day inherently

establishes a legal foundation for a dual approach, potentially leading to inconsistencies in the application of observer rights and privileges.

It should be noted that international observers are afforded the ability to register electronically and attend election commission meetings without needing a special permit, in stark contrast to local observers. Such a double standard hampers the effective organization and execution of local observation during the pre-election phase.

b) Verification of Voter Lists

The Precinct Election Commissions are tasked with making voter lists accessible to the electorate at least 35 days prior to election day, ensuring that voters have opportunity to review and request any necessary corrections. Observers have identified issues, including instances where individuals were registered at multiple polling stations within the same electoral district and cases where voters remained listed at old addresses despite having relocated years earlier.

Persistent skepticism surrounds the accuracy of voter lists provided by the CEC has not waned over the years. For instance, the CEC's most recent disclosure indicates that over 6 million citizens are eligible to vote, a substantial increase from the 5,238,000 voters reported in the early parliamentary elections three years prior. This significant growth of more than 1 million voters in such a short period lacks a clear and rational justification, further fueling doubts regarding the integrity of the voter registration process.

c) Investigation of Complaints

According to the Central Election Commission, the complaint filed by Matlab Azizulla oglu Mutallimli, an independent candidate in the early presidential election, was forwarded to the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan for detailed investigation on January 19, 2024. As of now, the General Prosecutor's Office has not released any statements regarding the progress or results of the investigation into Mutallimli's complaint.

VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

Following analysis of the pre-election socio-political situation and observations on the progress of the campaign stage for the early presidential election set for February 7, 2024, the EMDS reaches the subsequent conclusions:

- On the eve of the extraordinary presidential election, the crisis in the protection of political freedoms in the country has deepened, restrictions on the freedom of expression, free assembly and association have not ceased, the number of politically motivated arrests has increased;

- Recommendations made by both local and international electoral observation organizations aimed at improving electoral processes have not been implemented since parliamentary elections of 2020;
- Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights regarding politically motivated arrests, violations of the right to free trial and the right to free elections were not implemented despite the persistent calls of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe;
- Legal reforms suggested by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, targeting the Electoral Code and legislation concerning NGOs, media, and political parties, have not been undertaken;
- Since the 2020 parliamentary elections, the political landscape has seen further stagnation, with the number of political parties decreasing by half. Restrictions on independent civil society organizations and media and persecution of journalists and activists have increased. As a result, there was no favorable democratic environment for the active participation of civil society organizations and political parties in the early presidential election on February 7;
- The pre-election campaign period, the campaigns of presidential candidates fails to provide a genuine contest among opposing political forces, ultimately depriving voters of the opportunity to choose from a diverse range of political poles and views;
- Televised discussions among presidential candidates on Public Television and radio falls short of promoting political pluralism and fails to adequately discuss the desires and needs of the electorate.
- The process for registering local election observers relied on old-fashioned methods, undermining the capacity for effective public oversight of the electoral procedure.

EMDS presents the following recommendations for the organization of the upcoming stage of the February 7, 2024, early presidential election - the voting and vote-counting process, in adherence to legal standards:

- Election commissions must ensure the provision of suitable conditions to prevent any form of coercion or pressure on voters, observers, and representatives of candidates on election day.
- Government must demonstrate political will to prevent the intervention of executive structures financed from the state budget in the processes of voting and counting of votes on the election day and respect the independence and objectivity of election commissions.
- Efforts should be undertaken to investigate and eliminate any legal infringements that occurred during the pre-election campaign period.

Contact:

Phone: (+994) 50 333 46 74

Email: emc.az2001@gmail.com

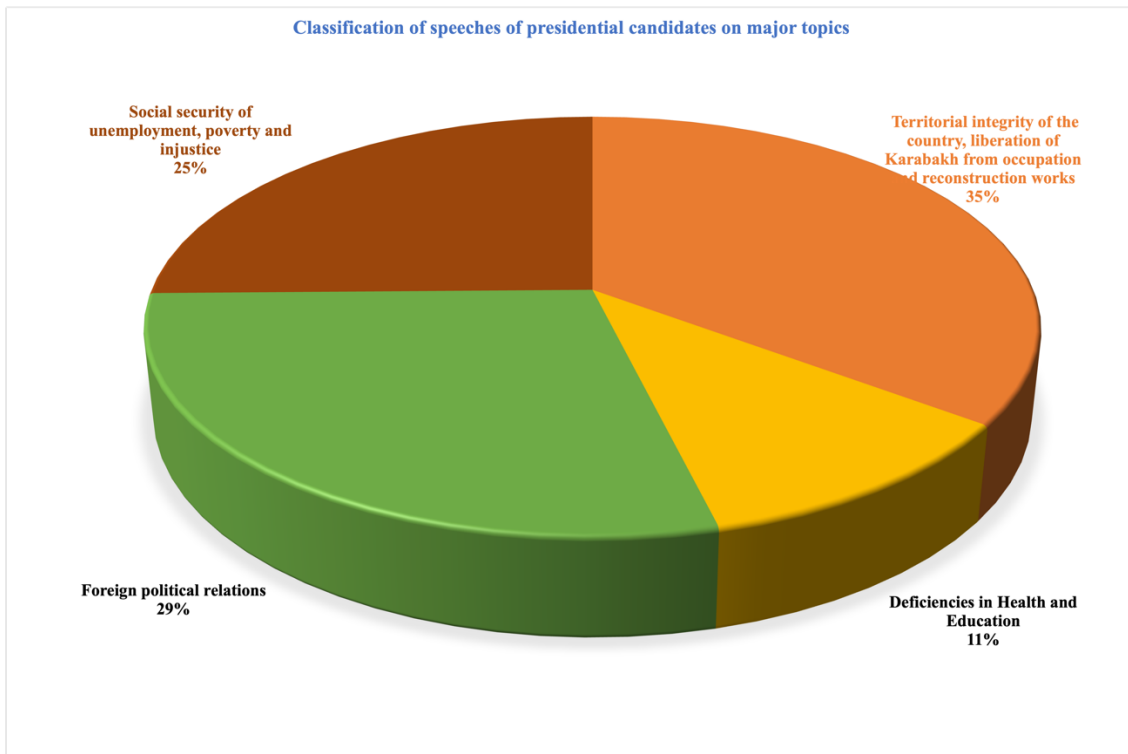
Web: www.EMDSaz.org

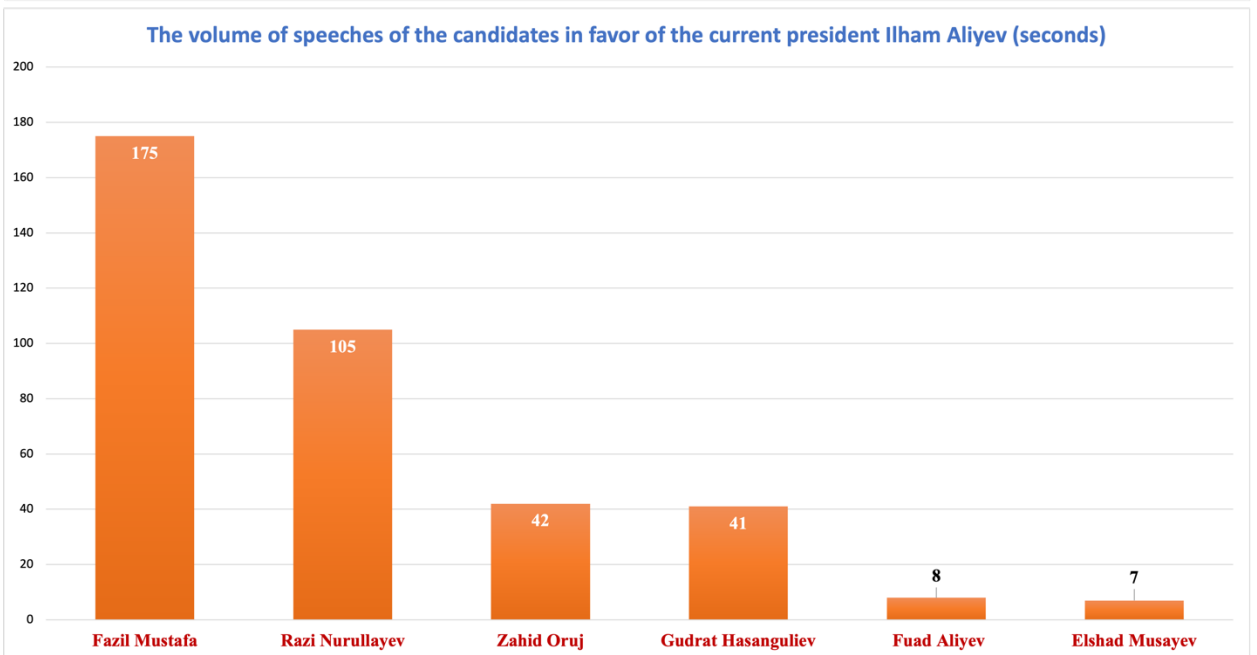
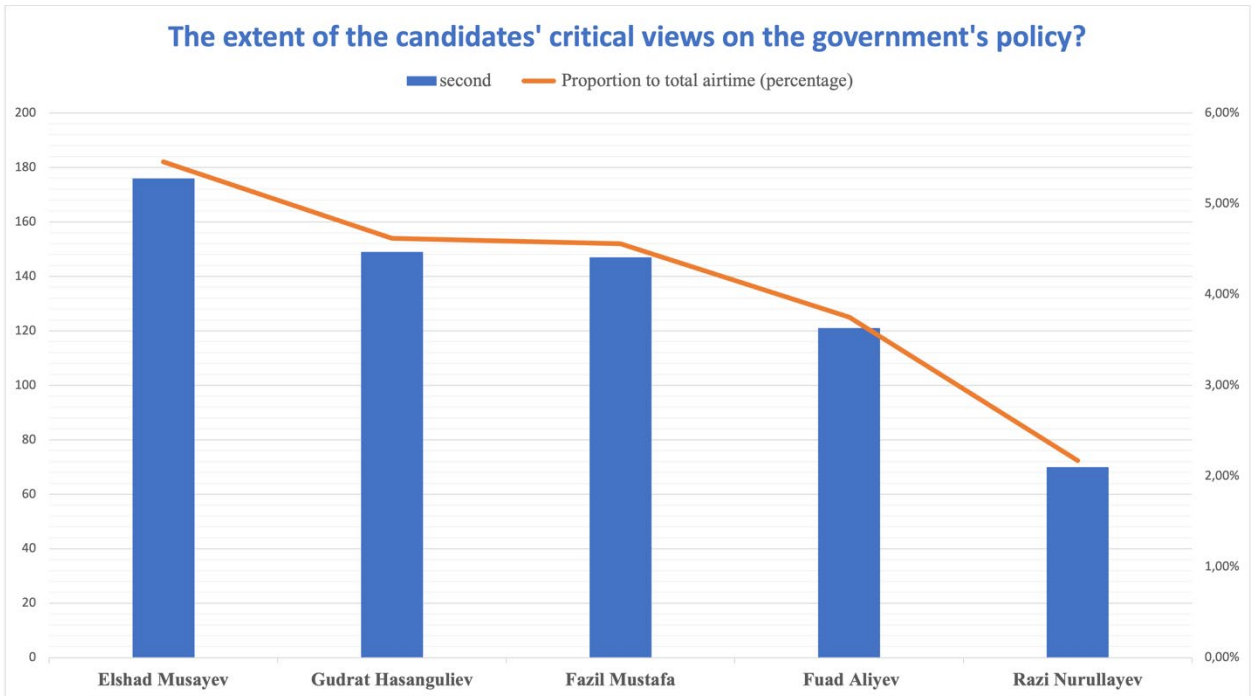
Twitter: [@EMDS_EMDS](https://twitter.com/EMDS_EMDS)

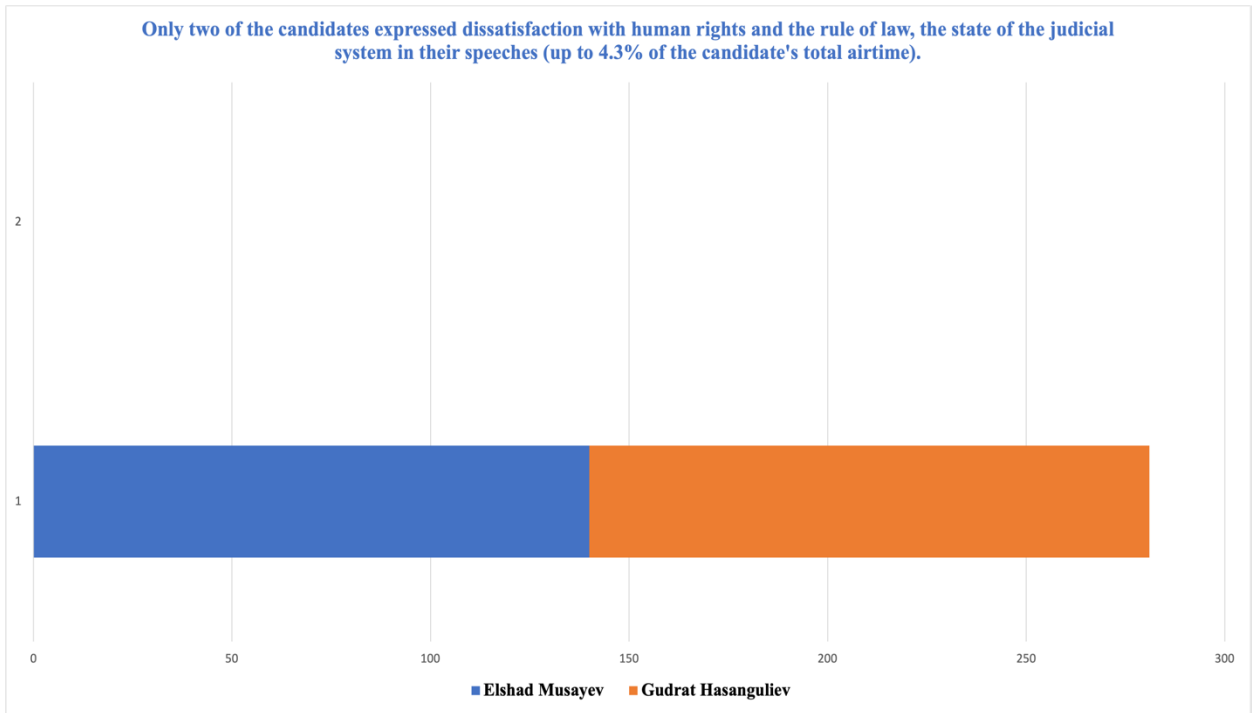
Facebook: [@AZElections](https://www.facebook.com/AZElections)

Appendix:

1) Findings of Monitoring Round Table Discussions Among Candidates on Public Television

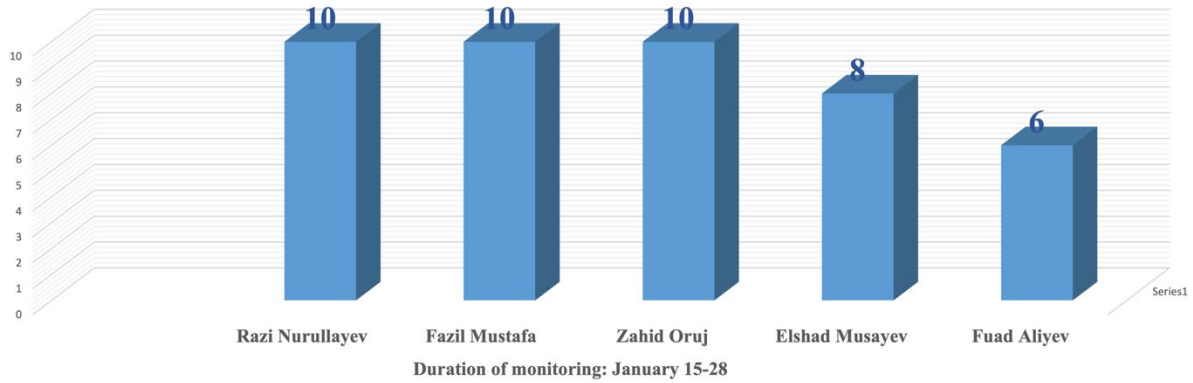






2) *Findings from Monitoring the Campaign Activities of Candidates on Social Media*

Candidates' meetings with voters and other groups
(Source: Facebook social media accounts)



Number of presentations of candidates' meetings with voters and other groups on social media (Facebook, X and Instagram accounts)

