



## PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

### on the Results of Monitoring of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections by Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center

#### I. SUMMARY

Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre is a non-governmental organization working for holding free and fair elections, as well as the development of civil society and democracy in Azerbaijan.

EMDS carried out long-term and short-term observation of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections. The organization produced two interim reports on the results of the long-term observation covering the registration of candidates<sup>1</sup> and election campaigning<sup>2</sup> periods. EMDS carried out the long-term observation with the support of 18 trained observers while the election day was observed by 198 observers. On the election day, observers cooperating with EMDS were deployed to 150 randomly selected polling stations representing all regions of the country and carried out Statistically Based Observation.

Restrictions of political freedoms, in particular freedoms of assembly, association and expression, were not lifted prior to the elections. The government failed to demonstrate a political will to release more than 100 people classified as political prisoners by domestic human rights organizations.

The government failed to address recommendations of domestic organizations, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, Committee of Ministers and the Venice Commission on the improvement of the Election Code, in particular with regard to the composition of election commissions to allow for equal and fair representation of various political forces.

EMDS did not note widespread violations during the first stage of the election process – nomination and registration of candidates. However, illegal interference of local executive authorities and pressure against some nominees were observed.

EMDS notes that election campaign period was marred by lower public interest and discussions in comparison with the previous parliamentary elections. There was no discussions or debates featuring opposition or independent candidates on TV, while candidates did not discuss local and national level issues. In some constituencies, registered candidates carried out very low profile election campaign. As a result, the election campaign was characterized more as a race between individual candidates at the district level rather than a national competition.

On the election day, EMDS recorded violations occurred in previous elections – one person voting multiple times, bussing of voters, ballot-box stuffing, and voting without registration. Observers

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<sup>1</sup> EMDS's first interim report on the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, <https://bit.ly/2H7f5Mc>

<sup>2</sup> EMDS's second interim report on the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, <https://bit.ly/39jRoMI>

cooperating with EMDS noted that in 12% of polling stations, the results of the voting were not accurately reflected in the final protocol. Furthermore, a copy of the protocol was not displayed outside of the polling stations in 24% of cases.

Observers recorded the cases of physical and verbal abuse of representatives of candidates and observers. Such illegal actions were committed by members of election commissions, local executive authorities and police towards observers protesting violations.

EMDS believes that violations recorded during all stages of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections made it impossible for the elections to be fair and free, violated the national legislation and international standards, and failed to reflect the free will of the people of Azerbaijan.

EMDS calls all election commissions to investigate all complaints and reports of election violations without a delay and to carry out necessary measures for holding officials responsible for the violations liable and inform the public about accordingly. EMDS believes that the government should take steps towards building public trust in the state in order to end the ongoing crisis of political freedoms, and should release all political prisoners, and to improve the Election Code based on recommendations of domestic organizations, OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

The Preliminary Statement covers the results of the election day monitoring of the 9 February 2020 early Parliamentary Elections by Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS) and provides a summary of the long-term observation of the elections.

EMDS carried out long-term and short-term observation of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections. The long-term monitoring covered the registration of candidates and election campaigning period. The organization produced two interim reports based on results of the monitoring carried out by 18 trained observers in 80 election constituencies. EMDS also collected information from election commissions, political parties, candidates and their representatives.

EMDS provided legal assistance to 287 citizens in their accreditation as election observers with the Central Election Commission (CEC) and Constituency Election Commissions (ConECs) in order to carry out the short-term observation of the elections. 212 of the registered observers joined the Code of Conduct for observers developed by EMDS and took part in trainings on Statistically Based Observation methodology. EMDS deployed 150 of these observers to randomly selected polling stations across the country while 28 observers conducted mobile observation in the territory of 72 election constituencies. In total, EMDS received five reports from 147 polling stations on the election day, including the opening, voting, vote counting and voter turnout. EMDS will continue the monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections until the announcement of the final results of the elections.

EMDS is a non-governmental organization working for holding free and fair elections, as well as the development of civil society and democracy in Azerbaijan. It was established by founders and members of Election Monitoring Centre (EMC), the registration of which was annulled by the

Khatai District Court of Baku on 14 May 2008 upon an illegal claim of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

EMDS (former EMC) has conducted monitoring of 15 elections in Azerbaijan since 2001 and has trained more than 14,000 citizens in 600 training sessions on election monitoring and has provided them with legal-technical assistance for their accreditation in the election commissions.

EMDS is a member of European Network of the Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO), which brings together civil society organizations of the OSCE member states, Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership countries, European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) and Global Network of the Domestic Election Observers. EMDS conducts the election observation based on the principles of the Global Declaration of the Domestic Election Observation Organizations.

### **III. PRE-ELECTION POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

In comparison with the previous Parliamentary Elections held in 2015, the early 2020 Parliamentary Elections garnered more public interest with a higher number of independent and opposition candidates joining the race. Some opposition groups, however, chose to boycott the elections citing widespread violation of political freedoms prior to the election and the lack of democratic environment. The most notable of these is the National Council of Democratic Forces established prior to the 2013 Presidential Election.<sup>3</sup>

Restrictions on political freedoms, particularly on freedoms of assembly, association and expression remained in place during the pre-election period. Political parties and citizen groups did not attempt to organize a large-scale assembly during the election campaign period. The broadcast media, including the state-owned television, did not organize or air any public discussions or debates about the elections.

On 11 December, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe published a report based on her visit to Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> The report stated that “journalists and social media activists, who had expressed dissent or criticism of the authorities, were continuously detained or imprisoned,” “no progress had been made with regard to protecting freedom of expression,” activists faced travel bans “in circumstances which give rise to justifiable doubts about the lawfulness of such bans,” and human rights lawyers were removed from the Bar Association for politically motivated reasons.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) referred to the report of local human rights organizations, which talked about the existence of more than 100 political prisoners in the country, in its resolution adopted on 30 January 2020. The resolution was based on the report by the PACE’s rapporteur on political prisoners in Azerbaijan Torhildur Sunna Evarsdottir<sup>5</sup> and urged the government of Azerbaijan to release political prisoners in accordance with the definition adopted by the Council of Europe, take a holistic approach, addressing problems relating to the judiciary, the Prosecutor General’s office, the police, the detention system and administrative detention together in a coherent and coordinated way, so as to ensure the non-repetition of politically motivated arbitrary detention, as required by the European Court of Human Rights.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://bit.ly/2tXMTII>

<sup>4</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-azerbaijan-from-8-to-12-july-2019-by-dunja-mija/168098e108>

<sup>5</sup> <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=28584&lang=en>

Blocking of the access to several independent and opposition websites, including news websites, from the country imposed on 2017 remained in place. The websites of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Meydan TV could be accessed on some occasions but the websites of Azadlig newspaper, Turan TV and Azerbaijani Hour along with 40 other websites are blocked. The Parliament granted the power to the Ministry of Communications, High Technologies and Transport to block access to any website without a court decision by adopting changes to the law in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

Legal and political restrictions on the operation of civil society organizations have not been lifted. Amendments to the laws on NGOs and grants adopted in 2013-2014 have severely limited the operations of NGOs and their financing from foreign sources. The amendments have also made it nearly impossible for NGOs to receive donations or carry out activities without state registration. In addition to the restrictive legislation, the Ministry of Justice routinely refuses to register independent NGOs while local executive authorities interfere with activities and events (seminars, trainings, meetings, etc.) organized by independent organizations and civic groups.

The authorities have increased the administrative detentions and fines against political activists. Such measures are particularly directed at participants of peaceful assemblies as noted in a special report by EMDS published in 2019.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, participants of assemblies faced torture and mistreatment at police stations.<sup>8</sup>

### **III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **a) Declaring early Parliamentary Elections**

According to the Constitution of Azerbaijan, Milli Majlis (Parliament) is the legislative branch of the Government. It consists of 125 deputies elected for a five-year term.

With an initiative from the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP), the Parliament adopted an appeal to the President on 2 December 2019 asking him to dissolve the legislature. Reviewing a request from the President, the Constitutional Court ruled that it was in line with Article 98-2 of the Constitution for the President to dissolve the Parliament. Subsequently, the President signed a decree dissolving the Parliament which resulted in the appointment of the early Parliamentary Elections on 9 February 2020 – nine months earlier than scheduled.

The President obtained the power to dissolve the Parliament as a result of the 26 September 2016 Referendum. However, various experts and political organizations have diverging opinions about the Constitutionality of the decision. Some experts claim that because the Parliament does not have the power to dissolve itself, the President's decision to do so based on an appeal from the Parliament was against the Constitution.

#### **b) The Election Law**

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<sup>6</sup> <http://e-qanun.gov.az/framework/3525>

<sup>7</sup> <https://smdtaz.org/en/politically-motivated-administrative-detentions-in-azerbaijan/>

The Parliamentary Elections are regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Election Code, Law on Political Parties, Law on Freedom of Assembly, Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, the Code on Administrative Offences and other relevant legislative documents.

The recommendations put forward in the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR which carried out long-term observation of the 2010 Parliamentary Elections and recommendations of the Venice Commission<sup>9</sup> on the improvement of the Election Code have not been addressed and no advancement has been observed during last 10 years.

In its last meeting, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe discussed the execution status of the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on Nemat Aliyev group.<sup>10</sup> The Committee noted that no progress was made with regards to the improvement of the Election Code and urged the government to implement the judgments of the ECtHR in order to ensure the independence of election commissions and courts.<sup>11</sup> The ECtHR has ruled 23 judgments based on more than 60 complaints lodged after 2005 Parliamentary Elections.<sup>12</sup>

#### **IV. PRE-ELECTION DAY SITUATION**

##### **a) registration of candidates**

The nomination and registration of candidates started on 6 December 2019 and continued until 17 January 2020. According to the CEC, 1,774 nominees returned signature collection sheets and 1,637 of them were registered as candidates. 321 candidates withdrew from the race later on while the CEC annulled the candidacy of 2 persons. On the election day, 1,314 candidates' names appeared on ballots across 125 constituencies.<sup>13</sup> Most of the candidates were not nominated by any parties while 305 candidates were nominated by 19 parties.

In comparison with the previous elections, political parties were underrepresented in terms of the nomination of candidates. Five political parties (NAP, Musavat, Umid, Whole Popular Front and Citizens' Solidarity parties) and two informal blocs (REAL Republicans and the Movement blocs) nominated more candidates than other parties and groups. The number of candidates nominated by political parties and informal blocs was much lower than independent candidates in comparison with previous elections.<sup>14</sup>

EMDS noted the cases of undue interference, intimidation and harassment of independent and opposition candidates and their family members by local executive authorities and state-funded employers. In some cases, voters were forced to withdraw their support signatures. For example, Teymur Mammadov, nominated for the 91st Ujar ConEC by Musavat Party, noted that some of the voters who had given their signatures in his favour had been pressured to withdraw. The head of the ConEC Abdulrazag Abbasov told the nominated person that 15 people had applied to withdraw their signatures after Teymur Mammadov submitted the signature sheets.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/41715>

<sup>10</sup> <http://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-1773>

<sup>11</sup> [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168098f832](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168098f832)

<sup>12</sup> <http://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-1773>

<sup>13</sup> <https://bit.ly/2OFohf2>

Some people withdrew their candidacy under the pressure of local executive authorities. Ruhiyya Yagubova, the independent candidate from the 57th Kurdamir ConEC, was forced to withdraw her candidacy by the head of the ConEC Abulfat Mikayilov and the Kurdamir local executive power.

The representatives of the Aghsu local executive power pressured and demanded independent candidates from the 87th Aghsu-Ismayilli ConEC Kamil Hamidov, Ayaz Gojamanov and Aytan Piriyeva to withdraw their candidacies. Teyyub Huseynli, candidate of the National Liberty Party from 88th Goychay ConEC, faced similar issues and his relatives were intimidated in an attempt to discourage him from running as a candidate.

Observers reported 21 election constituencies where candidates were forced to withdraw their candidacies. 44 candidates reported that they had to withdraw from the race under the pressure of local executive authorities.

#### **b) election campaign**

Election campaign starts 23 days before the election day and ends 24 before the opening of polling stations and thus lasts 22 days. The election campaign stage of 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections officially started on 17 January and will end on 8 February.

According to the Election Code, election campaigning can be conducted through the means of mass media, public events (gatherings and meetings with voters, public discussions etc.), distribution of print, audio, video and other campaign materials and any other means that are not prohibited by law.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the previous elections, opposition parties did not register with the CEC as election blocs. The Election Code stipulates that an election bloc can be created by at least two political parties. Political parties and blocs with candidates registered in more than 60 election constituencies have the right to use free airtime on channels of publicly funded TV and radios.<sup>16</sup>

All of the 123 candidates nominated by the ruling NAP were registered giving the party the right to use the free airtime. The party, however, refused to use the free airtime stating that other parties and blocs did not have the same opportunity. Due to very high prices<sup>17</sup>, paid airtime on Public TV was not accessible for many candidates. Discussions on television and broadcasting were not sufficient to ensure political pluralism and to guarantee impartial coverage of the electoral process. Consequently, the vast majority of candidates organized their election campaign over social media platforms – Facebook, Youtube and Instagram. Independent and opposition candidates were especially notable in this regard. Some of them, however, faced cyber-attacks. On 3 February, Musavat party's Facebook pages along with that of a media outlet close to the party "Basta" were hacked and many of followers were deleted.

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<sup>15</sup> The Election Code, Article 74

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Article 80

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.msk.gov.az/az/newsmsk/1103/>

In some constituencies, registered candidates organized very low profile campaigns or did not carry out any campaign activities altogether. 170 candidates across 57 election constituencies did not carry any campaign activities.

Analysis of the competition between opposing political forces and individual candidates suggests that the election campaign did not yield a competition at the national level but was marred by a race among individual candidates at the constituency level.

Observers cooperating with EMDS reported cases of illegal interference with electoral processes by local executive authorities and the abuse of administrative resources. Local executive authorities brought voters under pressure or direction to meetings with candidates in 63 election constituencies while in 27 constituencies, venues allocated for meetings with voters were not suitable for the purpose. Campaign materials of candidates were destroyed in the territories of 46 election constituencies.

### **c) voter lists**

The PECs must inform the voters and prepare the list of voters for public display for additional update and verification or create necessary conditions for such display 35 days prior to the election day.<sup>18</sup> Though the law stipulates that the voter lists must be displayed on information boards outside the voting premises where they are easily visible and accessible in terms of transport, the place and structure of the information boards did not meet requirements of the law at some PECs. Such cases were observed in the PEC no. 14 of the 15<sup>th</sup> Yasamal First ConEC, the PEC no. 2 of the 16<sup>th</sup> Yasamal Second ConEC, the PEC no. 30 of the 31<sup>st</sup> Surakhani Second ConEC, and the PEC no. 7 of the 45<sup>th</sup> Absheron ConEC.

At some polling stations, voters were not able to find their names in voter lists while in many polling stations names of deceased and emigrated citizens were on voter lists. These cases were recorded in the PEC no. 10 of the 36<sup>th</sup> Khatai Fourth ConEC, the PEC no. 2 of the 12<sup>th</sup> Garadagh-Binagadi-Yasamal ConEC, the PEC no. 10 of the 59<sup>th</sup> Salyan ConEC, the PEC no. 8 of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Nasimi-Sabail ConEC, the 8<sup>th</sup> Binagadi Second ConEC and the 99<sup>th</sup> Shamkir Village ConEC.

### **d) activities of election commissions**

The main shortcomings in the activities of election commissions noted by observers were violations of the principle of transparency. In a number of constituencies, representatives of candidates were obstructed from attending the meetings of ConECs by not informing them in advance and limiting the number of representative able to attend the meetings. Observers noted such cases in the 21<sup>st</sup> Nasimi First ConEC, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Lankaran city ConEC, the 74<sup>th</sup> Lankaran village ConEC, the 36<sup>th</sup> Khatai Fourth ConEC, the 15<sup>th</sup> Yasamal First, the 9<sup>th</sup> Binagadi ConEC, 34<sup>th</sup> Khatai Second, the 26<sup>th</sup> Sabunchu First ConEC, and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Sabirabad First ConEC.

The CEC's Secretariat refused applications from citizens to attend the meetings of the CEC without providing any reasonable grounds. For example, the executive director of EMDS Mammad

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<sup>18</sup> The Election Code, Article 48

Mammadzada, its volunteers Abulfaz Gurbanli and Tural Aghayev appealed to the CEC on 19 January to attend its meetings but were not granted to do so as of the election day.

Though the CEC has worked in a timely manner in accordance with the law, the online information centre of the CEC has failed to work during the nomination and registration of candidates. In particular, the process of updating the list of registered candidates was prolonged until the end of the registration process.

EMDS has submitted an information request to the CEC inquiring why the CEC had not displayed this information on its website but it has not received any response. The relevant information was uploaded to its website on 11 January. This, however, did not include the dates of candidates collecting signature sheets, returning them or their registration.<sup>19</sup>

## **V. THE ELECTION DAY**

### **a) The methodology and deployment of observers**

EMDS has been employing an advanced and proven election monitoring methodology that uses statistical principles and rapid response technology to systematically assess the quality of opening, voting, closing and counting processes on election day at a national scale. During the election day, EMDS deployed 150 observers to a nationally representative random sample of polling stations throughout the country. This enables EMDS to provide the public with accurate and comprehensive information about the conduct of the elections.

EMDS' sample is drawn from the entire universe of approximately 5400 polling stations at random, which means that every polling station had the exact same chance of being selected; this approach removes bias. EMDS' sample is stratified so it covers every region and most ConECs in the country, and the distribution of observers is proportionate to the percentage of polling stations in each ConEC; this approach makes it representative.

EMDS trained 212 citizens individually registered as observers with the CEC and ConECs on Statistically Based Observation methodology. During the trainings, the observers learned about rules regulating the voting, vote counting and reflection of voting results in final protocols, how to file a complaint and opinions about observed violations, counting voter turnout and the Code of Conduct of non-partisan observers. EMDS received reports on opening and layout of polling stations, voting, vote counting and voter turnout from observers deployed to 150 polling stations five times during the election day. The reports were verified and analysed. This document reflects the preliminary results of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections.

As part of this observation, EMDS will collect specific and actionable information for improving the process in the future.

### **b) Layout and opening of polling stations**

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/millimeclis2020.aspx?i=6&dsk=15>



Observers noted minor irregularities in the layout and opening of polling stations. In 8% of polling stations, the commission members did not show that the ballot boxes were empty before sealing them. The number of registered voters, however, was not announced in 24.8% of polling stations. Similarly, in 27.6% polling stations, the number of ballots was not announced. The layout of polling stations did not offer adequate conditions for free observation of voting in 15% of polling stations while the voting started late in 8.3% of polling stations.

**c) Voting**

Observers cooperating with EMDS recorded violations during the election day similar to the previous elections. These violations were widespread and appeared to be deliberate actions aimed at breaching the law. As a result, the violations had a negative impact on the legality of the electoral process and overall results of the elections. Violations recorded by EMDS can be grouped as follows:

Violation	The percentage of polling stations (%)
Failure to check voters fingers for invisible ink	48.6
Voting by non-registered voters	47.9
Violation of the secrecy of voting	35.2
One person voting multiple times	29.6
Ballot-box stuffing	21.8
Bussing of voters	42.3
Voting without signing voter list	18.3

**d) Vote counting**

Observers noted the following serious violations during the vote-counting process which had a significant impact on the quality of the electoral process:

Violation	The number of polling stations (%)
Failure to destroy unused ballots	30.8
Incorrect reflection of results in the protocol	53.3
Vote counting carried out in a closed manner	39.2
Observers were denied a copy of the protocol	37.7

**e) Voter turnout and Data Transparency**

In its sample of polling stations, EMDS observers counted each voter that cast a ballot. Turnout figures counted by observers were **significantly lower** than the figures the CEC officially released on their website throughout Election Day. Unlike in previous national elections, the CEC did not provide PEC level turnout information, only turnout by DEC. This is a significant step backwards in transparency of the process and of key electoral information.

It should be noted that in 2018 presidential elections EMDS was able to identify substantial discrepancies between turnout data reported by observers and officially reported PEC level turnout data. However, the current absence of PEC level turnout data, especially in light of this history, further undermines the credibility of the CEC's figures

**f) Cases of pressure against observers:**

- Sarvin Aslanov, observer in the **8th polling station of the 21st Nasimi first ConEC** identified that the group of the people in front of the polling station were not registered in the territory of the given polling station and asked them to leave. Following this, the people in plain clothes standing nearby approached him, presented themselves as the officers of law enforcement forces and demanded him to leave the area.
- **In the 16th polling station of the 113th Shaki city ConEC**, observer Natig Israfilov was called by his workplace and instructed to leave the polling station. He was threatened with necessary steps being taken about him otherwise.
- Kazim Hasanov, observer in the **21st polling station of the 75th Lankaran-Masalli ConEC**, faced the pressure applied against him by the head of the precinct election commission when he prevented voters who were not in the voting list from voting.
- **In the 20th polling station of the 28th Sabunchu second ConEC**, observer Atabay Maharramazada protested when the voter wanted to vote on behalf of her mother with a 'power of attorney' and explained the officials that it is illegal. Following this the head of the precinct election commission called the police in the polling station and made the observer leave
- Mirjavid Aghalarov, observer in **42<sup>nd</sup> polling station of the 125<sup>th</sup> Zangilan-Gubadli ConEC**, was insulted by Mahammad Mammadov, the member of the precinct election commission when he made remarks on the voter who voted in the station but was actually registered in Nakhchivan.
- **In 9<sup>th</sup> polling station of the 16<sup>th</sup> Yasamal second ConEC**, observer Gunay Bodurova was attacked and had his cellphone taken by her by the head of the precinct election commission – Sadagat Seyidzada – when she wanted to capture the video of voter who had the ink in their finger and were still allowed to vote.
- Adham Lachinov, observer in the **22<sup>nd</sup> polling station of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Nasimi second ConEC**, was attacked by the head of the precinct election commission who attempted to take his phone forcefully when he protested the voters who were brought to the polling station in groups and tried to capture a video.
- **In 5<sup>th</sup> polling station of the 67th Jalilabad city ConEC**, observer Anar Malikov was not given the protocol when he asked for. He has gone to the ConEC to file a complaint, however, the ConEC has not take his complaint seriously and even called the police. Police took Anar Malikov to the police station. He was later released around 9-10 pm.

For more information on Election day incidents, follow our website.<sup>20</sup>

## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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<sup>20</sup> Smdt.org/en

**EMDS has come to the following preliminary conclusions about the results of monitoring:**

- Restrictions imposed on political freedoms, in particular on freedoms of assembly, association and expression did not allow for the establishment of a free and democratic election environment. Repressions of political activists and journalists have not stopped, while more than 100 political prisoners remained behind bars.
- Although serious violations were not recorded during the registration of candidates, the authorities artificially increased the number of candidates abusing its administrative resources in an attempt to demonstrate a competitive race.
- Independent and opposition candidates faced obstacles while organizing meetings with their voters during the campaigning period. On the other hand, local executive authorities took part in conducting meetings for the candidates of the ruling party with voters abusing administrative resources. As a result, conditions for the equal and fair political competition were not ensured.
- Similarly to the 2015 Parliamentary Elections, public discussions were not held on TV and voters were not properly informed about the electoral process. The election campaign was characterized more as a race between individual candidates at a district level rather than a national level competition.
- Majority of elections commissions, including the CEC, did not attempt to ensure transparency of the electoral process. The CEC did not properly inform the public about the registration of candidates and did not provide voter turnout figures for the polling stations violation the principle of transparency of the electoral process.
- On the election day, EMDS noted many cases of election violations including bussing of voters, one person voting multiple times, and ballot-box stuffing which brings the official results of the elections into question.
- Violations recorded during all stages of the 9 February 2020 Early Parliamentary Elections made it impossible for the elections to be fair and free, violated the national legislation and international standards and failed to reflect the free will of the people of Azerbaijan.

**EMDS proposes the following recommendations based on the results of the monitoring:**

- ConECs and the CEC should investigate all complaints and reports of election violations without a delay, carry out necessary measures to hold officials responsible for the violations liable and inform the public about accordingly.
- In order to end the ongoing crisis of political freedoms, the government should take steps towards building public trust in the state and should release all political prisoners.
- The authorities should ensure political pluralism in the publicly-funded television and the government should demonstrate a political will to guarantee people's freedoms of assembly, association and expression.
- The government should reform the Election Code based on recommendations of domestic organizations, OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.
- The CEC should take steps towards establishing online registration of observers, should provide more detailed information about the registration of candidates and voter turnout.

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10 February 2020

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