

## Reuters: Monitors Fault Azeri Vote Won By Aliyev Loyalists

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But the United States and European Union will tread carefully because Azerbaijan, an oil and gas exporter, is key to Europe's hopes of reducing its energy dependence on Russia and is a transit route for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

The mainly Muslim country of 9 million people is located at a strategic crossroads, bordering Iran, Turkey and Russia at the threshold of Central Asia. It hosts oil majors including BP, ExxonMobil and Chevron.

Monitors cited an "uneven playing field" for candidates, limitations on media freedom and freedom of assembly, instances of ballot stuffing and vote count irregularities.

The conduct of the elections "was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in the democratic development of the country," monitors from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and European Parliament said in a statement.

The head of the OSCE observation mission, Ambassador Audrey Glover, criticised "restrictions of fundamental freedoms, media bias, the dominance of public life by one party, and serious violations on election day."

### KARABAKH CONFLICT

With almost all votes counted, Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party had increased its share in the 125-seat parliament to at least 71 seats from 64 previously, and a host of small parties and "independents" loyal to the government took almost all the rest.

The leading opposition party, Musavat, failed to win a single seat and criticised the vote as "illegitimate".

Opposition Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli told reporters: "It's a challenge to the democratic Western community."

The ruling party said the vote was "free and fair" and the Central Election Commission said: "No serious violations were registered that could affect the result."

Aliyev has steadily consolidated control since succeeding his father, long-serving leader Heydar Aliyev, in 2003. Votes were cast on Sunday beneath portraits and busts of Heydar, the focus of a personality cult in the seven years since his death.

Ilham Aliyev's rule has coincided with an oil-fuelled economic boom, spawning rapid construction in the capital Baku and the emergence of an opulent jet set. Critics say the Baku facelift masks rampant corruption, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a steady shrinking of democratic freedoms.

Besides economic growth, the government argues it has also brought long-term stability to the country in a volatile neighbourhood. But Western diplomats are unnerved by a 90 percent hike in military spending ordered by Aliyev for 2011.

The country remains locked with neighbouring Armenia in an unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, where ethnic Armenians broke away from Azerbaijan as the Soviet Union collapsed two decades ago. The past two years have seen the worst skirmishes since a ceasefire was declared in 1994.

Aliyev did not speak to media when he voted on Sunday, addressing instead the burial of two Azeri soldiers repatriated from Nagorno-Karabakh. He repeated a threat to take the mountain enclave back by force, saying "we do not want to conduct negotiations for the sake of negotiations." (Reuters)