



## APRIL 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN AZERBAIJAN

On April 18, 2018, Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev was sworn in for the fourth term as the president of Azerbaijan after a landslide victory in a snap election that had been rescheduled from October 17, 2018, to an earlier date and took place on April 11, 2018. The inauguration marks the start of a seven-year term for the 56-year old president who has been ruling the energy-rich Caspian state since 2003. According to the presidential election results approved by the Constitutional Court of Azerbaijan on April 17, Aliyev secured more than four-fifths of the votes leaving the nearest competitor far behind. Extending his rule until 2025, Ilham Aliyev created favorable conditions for further strengthening his leadership, thereby narrowing the field of action for his political opponents.

Unlike the 2013 presidential election, in which Aliyev was challenged by another nine politicians, the Central Election Commission (CEC) registered eight candidates out of 15 people, whose applications had been submitted to the CEC. Six of the candidates were nominated by the political parties, including the incumbent president who represented the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP), one candidate was a self-nominee, while the eighth candidate was nominated by an initiative group. Right after President Aliyev, the NAP's chairman, signed the decree on an early election in the beginning of February 2018, he was officially adopted as the party's candidate for the April presidential election during the 6th Congress of the NAP held on February 8. The nomination of Aliyev was officially approved by the CEC on February 27. As a result, he became the first officially registered candidate.

Since the announcement of the NAP's intention to nominate Aliyev as a candidate for the presidency, there was little doubt that the incumbent president was going to win the April election. The only uncertainty was how big a gap between Aliyev and his closest contender would be. According to some expert estimates, more than 80% of the population was supposed to support Aliyev, while all other candidates were expected to get less than 2% of the votes each. The official election results issued by the CEC indicated that three candidates were able to overcome the 3% threshold, while the remaining four were not able to reach the target of 2%. The official protocol of the CEC

shows that incumbent President and Chairman of the NAP Ilham Aliyev gained 86.02% of votes in the April 11, 2018 presidential election. Chairman of the Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party Gudrat Hasanguliyev garnered 3.02% of votes, while self-nominee, member of the Milli Mejlis Zahid Oruj and Chairman of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party Sardar Mammadov gained 3.12% and 3.03% of votes, respectively. Other candidates, Chairman of Modern Musavat Party Hafiz Hajiyev, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party Araz Alizadeh, and Chairman of the National Revival Movement Party Faraj Guliyev, received 1.52%, 1.38% and 1.17% of votes, respectively, while Razi Nurullayev nominated by the Frontists Initiative Group gained 0.74% of votes.

It was noted that the voter turnout amounted to 74.51%, meaning that 3,962,123 out of 5,332,817 voters cast ballot in the election. On the voting day, 5,641 polling stations in 125 constituencies operated in the country. According to Deputy Chairman of the CEC of Azerbaijan Natig Mammadov, 41 polling stations were established outside the country giving opportunity for 13,820 Azerbaijani citizens to vote in the presidential election. The CEC of Azerbaijan registered 894 international observers representing 59 countries and 61 international organizations to monitor the April 11, 2018 presidential election. In addition, the CEC registered 58,175 local observers.

The distribution of votes among the presidential candidates clearly demonstrate that Aliyev's opponents have never enjoyed much support among Azerbaijani citizens. Taking into account the fact that the country's opposition politicians and activists boycotted the election, Aliyev's reelection appeared to be a highly expected outcome. In fact, most of Azerbaijani citizens who cast their votes support the policy carried out by the current leader of Azerbaijan. Indeed, during their pre-election campaign, the other seven candidates running for presidency placed special emphasis on the role of Ilham Aliyev in stabilizing the socio-political situation in the country, thereby showing an indirect support for the president. Therefore, it is not surprising that even despite the fact that President Aliyev as a candidate did not campaign himself, but instead made visits across the country in his

official capacity, he received the greatest endorsement from the population.

The results of the April 2018 presidential election gave Aliyev the fourth consecutive term in office, which does not contradict the country's Constitution and Electoral Code. In fact, since coming to power, Aliyev initiated two constitutional referenda. Under the 2009 referendum, a two-term presidential limit was eliminated, while in 2016 the constitution was amended by extending the presidential term duration from five to seven years. These developments coupled with the publication of reports on human rights violations made it problematic for international observers, especially, from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHR), to avoid criticism over the April 11 presidential election. Indeed, according to the Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions prepared by the ODHR, the 2018 early presidential election in Azerbaijan was held within a restrictive political environment and under a legal framework that curtails fundamental rights and freedoms. Such an evaluation prompted negative reactions on the part of the Azerbaijani authorities, which claimed that the CEC had not found any serious violations calling into question the legality of the election results.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the presidential election results fully reflect the will of the Azerbaijani people. In fact, all of Azerbaijan's last three presidential elections indicated the high level of support for the incumbent president given that the total number of residents who voted in favor of Aliyev was consistently above 80%, namely, 88.73% in 2008 and 84.54% in 2013. It was only in 2003 when Ilham Aliyev gained less than 80% – 75.38% of total votes. For today, the president's family enjoys great popularity among Azerbaijani citizens. In fact, it is reported that ordinary people really like their first lady, Mehriban Aliyeva, who is known for her social activities. She was appointed as the First Vice President in February 2017 becoming an adviser to the head of state on domestic and foreign policy issues. This has also played an important role in the positive image of President Aliyev. Therefore, there was no political risk for Aliyev in running for presidency since the possibility of being reelected was really high.

## Politics, Foreign Affairs and Security

- The Parliament of Turkey approved a new date for holding early parliamentary and presidential elections. As many as 386 parliamentarians out of 537 voted for holding both elections on June 24, 2018. President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for early elections to be held in June, more than a year ahead of the schedule, stating that economic challenges and the war in Syria meant Turkey must switch quickly to the powerful executive presidency.
- Prime Minister of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan has resigned after 11 days of mass protests. The demonstrations were sparked by Sargsyan's decision to take on the post of the prime minister after serving for more than a decade as the country's president.
- President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed an order on the new composition of the Cabinet of Ministers. Novruz Mammadov was appointed as the country's Prime Minister. In addition, Yagub Eyyubov was appointed as the First Deputy Prime Minister. Meanwhile, Ali Ahmadov, Ali Hasanov and Hajibala Abutalibov were appointed as the Deputy Prime Ministers.
- During the meeting held in Baku, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov and Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations Curtis Scaparrotti discussed the military activity of NATO and Russia in the European region, as well as the situation in Syria.
- During the meeting of the Defense Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states held in Beijing, the parties exchanged views on the topical issues of the international and regional security agenda focusing on joint measures aimed at responding to new challenges and threats in the SCO area of responsibility.
- The Parliament of Kyrgyzstan approved Mukhammedkalyi Abylgaziev as the country's new Prime Minister, a day after an ally of former President Almazbek Atambaev, Sapar Isakov, was dismissed. President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov disbanded Isakov's government after Kyrgyz lawmakers passed a no-confidence motion.
- During his official visit to Ankara, Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kairat Abdrakhmanov met with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss bilateral economic cooperation be-

tween the two countries. President Erdogan proposed to increase the trade turnover between Turkey and Kazakhstan to \$10 billion.

- During his official visit to Dushanbe, Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov met with Foreign Minister of Tajikistan Sirojiddin Aslov to discuss the current state and prospects for the development of bilateral relations in the political, trade-economic and humanitarian spheres.
- During his official visit to Tashkent, Deputy Interior Minister of Turkey Ahmet Avsar met with First Deputy Interior Minister of Uzbekistan Davron Nazarmukhamedov to exchange views on simplifying the visa regime for citizens of the two countries. In addition, proposals on the establishment of a mechanism for bilateral cooperation in the spheres of education, security, and crime prevention were discussed.

## Economy, Finance and Energy

- According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the inflation rate in Azerbaijan is expected at 7% in 2018 and at 6% in 2019. In the previous report issued in October 2017, the IMF forecasted the 8% inflation rate in Azerbaijan. It was also noted that the level of inflation in the country would be one of the lowest among the CIS energy exporting countries.
- According to Secretary of the Security Council of Tajikistan Abdurahim Qahhorov, two new frontier posts were built on the country's border with Uzbekistan in the northern Sughd province. It was noted that 23.4 million somoni (over \$2.6 million) had been spent on the construction of these frontier posts.
- According to the State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, the country's GDP amounted to nearly 17.2 billion manats (\$10.1 billion) in January-March 2018, which is 2.3% more than in January-March 2017. During the reporting period, the GDP per capita stood at 1,755.7 manats (\$1,030). In January-March 2018, the share of the GDP produced in the non-oil sector increased by 2.9%, while a 1.3% growth was observed in the oil and gas sector as compared to January-March 2017.
- According to Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade Minister of Belarus Vladimir Koltovich, the country's inflation rate will not exceed 6% in 2018. It was also noted that the core inflation for 2018 would be at 4%.

- According to the National Bank of Ukraine, the country's real GDP increased by 2.3% year-over-year in January-March 2018 due to a stronger domestic demand.
- According to the National Statistics Committee of Belarus, retail trade in the country in the first quarter of 2018 reached 9.8 billion Belarus rubles (\$4.87 billion). It is also noted that wholesale trade totaled 21 billion Belarus rubles (\$10.44 billion), up by 8.1% in comparable prices from the first quarter of 2017.

## Society and Culture

- President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed an order to make a one-off payment of financial assistance to veterans of the Second World War, widows of those killed in that war, as well as persons awarded orders and medals for working at labor fronts.
- According to the Civil Aviation Committee of the Ministry of Investment and Development of Kazakhstan, the Finnish air carrier Finnair will relaunch flights on the Astana-Helsinki route. Finnair plans to resume flights on the route starting from July 3, 2018. The flights are scheduled to be carried out on the Airbus 319 aircraft.
- The Government of Uzbekistan announced its plans to launch a pilot project in Tashkent on issuing identification (ID) cards instead of traditional passports until the end of 2018. According to the resolution on organizational measures for the accelerated integration of departmental information systems and the implementation of innovative projects, instead of the existing system of passports, birth certificates and other identity documents, a system of ID cards containing a single identification number for each citizen and his/her personal data should be introduced in the country.
- President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov met with the co-winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2015, Aziz Sancar. The famous Turkish biochemist was invited to Central Asia by the Eurasian Research Institute of Akhmet Yassawi University. Sancar is a Professor of Biochemistry and Biophysics at the School of Medicine of the University of North Carolina. The president thanked the Nobel Prize winner for the visit and noted that it would inspire students of Kyrgyzstan for new achievements in science.