



*NHC intervention to the 2007 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting*

WORKING SESSION 14, DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Democratic elections, citizenship and political rights

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Chairman, delegates, NGOs

On behalf of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee I would like to address the upcoming presidential elections in Uzbekistan and access to media in the election campaigns.

On September 18, Uzbek officials announced that presidential elections will be held on December 23.

Six persons have announced their candidacy, challenging President Islam Karimov. The candidates are Dildor Tashmukhamedova, Jahongir Shosalimov, Ahtam Shaimardanov, Abdulla Tajiboi-ugli, Sukhbat Abdullaev and Akbar Aliev.

But many of them say that given the all-compassing control Karimov holds over security services, the Central Election Commission and the media, their chances of being given a fair run for the presidency are non-existent.

It lies in the nature of any democratic election that the government will be criticized for its policies, and that opposition will attempt to expose the ruling party's weaknesses and faults. The opposition then presents an alternative to the electorate, who considers the arguments and cast their vote in favor of their candidate.

In a functioning democracy, this process largely takes place in the media.

Although Uzbekistan's presidential candidates have found ways to express their opinion via the Internet, this is far from a satisfactory way for them to reach their electorate. Internet is still inaccessible to the average Uzbek population.

During a recent visit to Uzbekistan, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee found the country's newspapers and television channels to be completely controlled by the authorities. They are an outlet for presidential statements, propaganda concerning economic progress, and a show-case for government policies.

Articles or programs critical of the current government, or suggesting alternatives to government policy are non-existent.

In addition, the Uzbek Criminal Code contains regulations that make it practically impossible, even illegal, for oppositional candidates to take part in an open debate with the authorities and the electorate.

These include paragraph 158(3) which prohibits “offending the honor and dignity of the President” – a law which is used to clamp down on any criticism of government policy.

(In addition, paragraph 159 of the Criminal Code, concerning “conspiracy to overthrow constitutional order” has been repeatedly used in mock trials in Uzbekistan to sentence human rights activists, journalists and dissidents to jail.)

We remind the Uzbekistan authorities that they have agreed through the OSCE Copenhagen declaration to hold free and fair elections. They have also agreed to ensure law and public policy to permit political campaigning to be conducted in an atmosphere in which neither administrative action, violence nor intimidation bars the parties and the candidates from freely presenting their views and qualifications.

It is the concern of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee that presidential candidates in Uzbekistan will not be given the chance to present their platforms in the media in the run-up to the elections on December 23rd. We are also concerned that well-founded criticism of President Karimov, and presentation of alternatives to his regime will be interpreted by the authorities as being in violation of the law.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee calls on the Uzbek representatives present at this meeting to state exactly how presidential candidates will be given access to printed media and television, and how a space for real debate about Uzbekistan’s future will be created in the run-up to the elections.

Thank you for your attention.