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STATEMENT

On the growing concerns with the elections in Azerbaijan

Adopted by the Azerbaijani NGO "Democracy Monitor" Public Union

Since the independence Azerbaijan gained from the Soviet Union none of the elections held in the country were regarded as free and fair and met international standards. The elections were observed with the huge number of violation of laws, massive arrests of the politically active citizens, particularly oppositional political party members, and abuse of state resources by the authorities, buying voters, pressure on political party representatives and voters, violent dispersal opposition's pre and post election rallies and protest actions.

6 November 2005 was a disappointment for those who had hoped the elections would be free and fair. Expectations were high for the 2005 parliamentary elections, due to better registration procedures, improved media access for the opposition, and numerous public statements from the president committing to a free and fair process. However, as in the past election commission members and local executive authorities interfered illegally, and counting and tabulation of votes were seriously flawed. Under such climate pro-government parties got a majority of seats, with results giving the opposition only six seats out of 125.

The Election Commissions are totally under the control of the government since the overwhelming majority in the commissions is appointed under the strict control by the government.

Violations by election commission members, local authorities, and law enforcement officials, during the 2003-2005 election cycles have been carried out with impunity. With no fear of sanctions, and with no election commissions based on parity between pro and anti-government forces, election officials have had no motivation to clean up the process. The elections have done nothing to diminish the strong polarisation of the political scene. Indeed, fraudulent polls have led some in the opposition to believe that the only channel of appeal open to them is in the street. Azerbaijani citizens are clearly the greatest losers of all: indifferent to elections that do not reflect their will, having lost belief in their ability to effect change through the ballot box, less than half – 45 per cent -- even turned out on election day.

The development of new political elites, independent journalists and civil society activists has been stunted. The absence of a true government-opposition dialogue and power-sharing practices has made politics a zero-sum game, played out all too often in the streets rather than in state institutions. The biggest differences between Azerbaijan and those ex-Soviet states where post-election revolutions have happened in the past two years are the

lack of popular engagement in electoral politics and citizens' weak in trust to international community and belief in their ability to effect change.

Therefore, I propose the OSCE to urge the relevant member states to send significant signals to Azerbaijani government and use their mandates to pressure the government in establishment fair legal framework and free and fair election environment for the forthcoming presidential elections to be held in October 2008.

Sincerely,

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