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Apathy Tarnishes Azeri Vote

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President Ilham Aliyev voting with his wife, Mehriban, at a polling station in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, on Sunday. **Vugar Amrullaev**

BAKU, Azerbaijan — Voter apathy and opposition allegations of fraud tarnished parliamentary elections Sunday in Azerbaijan, with the ruling party of President Ilham Aliyev assured of victory.

By mid-afternoon, official turnout was 38 percent in a lackluster election that the opposition claimed featured cases of multiple voting and ballot stuffing.

Rights groups accuse the ruling New Azerbaijan Party of curbing democratic freedoms, cushioned against Western criticism by the country's strategic importance as an oil and gas exporter and transit route for the U.S. military in Afghanistan.

"In this district it's decided in advance that the ruling candidate will win," Nader Aliyev, 58, said at Baku's main market after voting.

Ilham Aliyev has firmly consolidated power since succeeding his father, long-serving leader Heidar Aliyev, in 2003. Heidar's portrait and words still adorn schools and public buildings

across the country.

Polls opened to the sound of the national anthem, and Aliyev voted with his wife but did not speak to media. A spokesman for the ruling party, campaigning under the slogan "Strong state, strong welfare," said the party was "very satisfied" with the conduct of the vote.

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have expressed concern over what they describe as credible reports of intimidation and the disqualification of candidates.

"Unfortunately, these elections are heading for mass falsification," opposition Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli told reporters after voting.

Opposition Musavat leader Isa Gambar said the vote "resembled the elections of the late Soviet period."

The government says projects by oil majors including BP, ExxonMobil and Chevron have brought better living standards for all, but the International Monetary Fund has urged diversification of the economy away from heavy dependence on oil revenues.

"I voted for the ruling party candidate because I'm happy with all the rejuvenation going on in Azerbaijan," said Firudin Ismailov, 50.

The authorities also argue that they also have brought long-term stability. But Western diplomats are unnerved by a 90 percent hike in military spending ordered by Aliyev for 2011, with Azerbaijan locked for two decades in an unresolved conflict with neighboring Armenia over the rebel region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ethnic Armenians in the mountain enclave broke away from Azerbaijan as the Soviet Union collapsed, and Azerbaijan frequently threatens to take it back by force. The past two years have seen the worst skirmishes on the front line since a cease-fire ended all-out war in 1994.

Preliminary results are expected Monday.

"It's unlikely my vote will make any difference," said Vladislav Semenov, 41. "The same people with a thirst for profit will end up in the parliament, far removed from the ordinary people."

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