

Observers Call Azerbaijan Vote Unfair, Opposition Plans Challenge

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Jamil Hasanly, the opposition presidential candidate, holding up voting ballots at a news conference Thursday. **David Mdzinarishvili**

BAKU — Opponents of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev said Thursday they would go to court to challenge his election for a third term, rejecting the result of a vote that international monitors said was seriously flawed.

Aliyev, who succeeded his father a decade ago as leader of the oil-producing nation on the Caspian Sea, won a third five-year term with nearly 85 percent of the vote in Wednesday's election.

Standing before a national flag on state television, he thanked Azeris for their support and said he would ensure security in the South Caucasus, where tensions still simmer with neighboring Armenia over a disputed territory.

Opposition candidate Jamal Hasanli said he would seek to challenge the official result in the country's Constitutional Court, alleging violations including ballot stuffing and multiple voting. "This election was neither free nor fair," he said.

Aliyev, 51, has overseen an economic boom that has raised living standards in the country, which pumps oil and gas to Europe, bypassing Russia. He has allowed Washington to use it as a transit point for sending troops to Afghanistan.

But he has faced criticism at home and abroad over his treatment of opponents. The media is tightly controlled, protests quashed, and one rights group said a pre-election crackdown had doubled the number of political prisoners.

International monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, said the vote was marred by a "restrictive media environment" and allegations of intimidation of candidates and voters.

"The limitations placed on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression; the lack of a level playing field; the allegations of intimidation, all came in the lead-up to an election day that our observers found to be seriously flawed," OSCE official Tana de Zulueta said.

Monitors reported clear indications of ballot stuffing at 37 polling stations, and said the counting was assessed negatively at an unprecedented 58 percent of stations observed.

An OSCE news conference degenerated into chaos as journalists from pro-government media drowned out the observers and shouted "The OSCE is biased."

Hasanly, 61, a former lawmaker who has united Azerbaijan's fractured opposition for the first time in a presidential election, told journalists: "When [officials] announce the final official results of the election and declare Ilham Aliyev as the president, we will address the Constitutional Court with a demand to cancel the election results."

A gaping divide between the rich and poor and allegations of corruption, which Azeris say pervades many aspects of life, has led to an increase in protests, and the opposition is planning a rally Saturday.

But few expect sustained protests over a vote whose results many saw as a foregone conclusion because of Aliyev's tight grip over the South Caucasus nation of 9 million.

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