



Election Environment Observation: Mission One

Mission Findings

Republic of Macedonia

June 9-15, 2002

Background

In an effort to contribute to free and fair elections in the Republic of Macedonia, the International Republican Institute is conducting three observation missions leading up to the parliamentary elections in September. These election environment observation missions are in response to requests from parties to be engaged in the electoral and political processes well before polls open this Fall. This report, in addition to other documents that may be produced for this or future missions, is meant to assist the political parties and their leaders in efforts to conduct credible and democratic elections.

From June 9 through 15, 2002, the first election environment monitoring mission was held in the Republic of Macedonia. Five teams, composed of experts from Europe and the United States, deployed throughout the country. They had meetings with local and national political party leaders, representatives of the media and NGOs. IRI teams met with representatives from all major parliamentary parties (governing and opposition) in all six electoral units. Twenty different municipalities were represented, not only major cities but also small towns and villages. A total of 57 meetings were held with 107 local and national leaders. This report represents the findings of the first mission.

General Findings

Overall, the election environment in Macedonia is tense, and the political parties are extremely concerned about their ability to campaign freely and fairly. Their concerns are focused on a few key areas: violence, intimidation, the media, and campaign financing. While very little campaign-related activities have yet begun, parties have started the process of becoming organized for the election. However, trust in the electoral system, in political parties, in the judicial system and in the government is very low. There is little confidence among the governing parties, the opposition, or the public that this election can be conducted within international democratic standards. Governing parties believe that the opposition will steal the election through manipulations of voter cards, electoral lists or the media, or through the use of violence. Opposition parties believe that ruling parties will steal the elections through violence, intimidation, the misuse of state-run media, or through direct election fraud; they are already preparing for civil disobedience. While to date there are few credible allegations of actual misconduct in the pre-election period, the high levels of anxiety and the widespread lack of trust in any institution or organization means that the campaign in general — and election day in particular — will be seen as de-stabilizing events and fraught with physical and political dangers. Instead of describing the election as a positive opportunity to voice one's opinion about who should lead the country, voters and political leaders express fear for election day and what it means for them, for their parties and for the country.

Potential Problems

- **Violence**

Findings:

Because of the proliferation of weapons and the presence of armed groups in all areas of the Republic of Macedonia, political parties fear the use of violence for political purposes. Both opposition and governing parties (as well as journalists and NGO leaders) feel that the potential for violence is a major threat to a free and fair election. The conflict of 2001, as well as the entrance into the political environment of combatants, has caused concern that members of armed groups may try to force their will upon the electorate or at the very least poison the pre-election period with implied threats of violence. Also, because of violent incidents in the last two national elections—incidents that the judicial system failed to address—preparations to “defend” party activists against violent incidents could itself precipitate clashes on election day, even if there were no premeditated attempts to disrupt voting. The fear of violence at polling sites could also suppress the vote and may well distort the outcome of the election if voters are not assured of their safety well before election day itself. Efforts to arm political activists for security or other purposes, something suggested by a few party leaders, will only heighten the potential for conflict. Moreover, the use of violence in any form during the campaign and on election day can do nothing but damage the integrity of political parties and the electoral process. Security to protect voters, election commissioners or candidates is solely the obligation of police.

Recommendations:

Party leaders need to communicate to their members and supporters, as well as the general public, on the need for peaceful, non-violent elections. They should ensure that no one affiliated with their party will use violence or the threat of violence to affect the campaign or elections.

- **Illegal Enticement/Intimidation**

Findings:

There are widespread allegations by both the governing and opposition parties (as well as other observers) that voters will be given positive enticements to vote for a particular party (cash, employment, gifts, etc.). Or that intimidation will be used (threats of loss of employment, of violence, of slander, etc.) to frighten voters into supporting a particular party. Some contend that voters are already being bribed in order to secure their (and their family’s) vote. Some allege that this is being done through cash payments or through promises of employment. There are serious risks of enticement and intimidation in the upcoming elections. As long as the secrecy of the vote can be assured, these efforts, while clearly illegal and unethical, cannot change someone’s vote. However, since voters do not trust the electoral process, and therefore they fear their vote will not remain secret, illegal enticement or intimidation could have an effect on the outcome of the vote.

Recommendations:

Party and government leaders should direct all party and governmental officials to abide by the spirit and the letter of the election law and actively work against illegal enticement and intimidation.

- **Media**

Findings:

While virtually every local party leader said that his or her party would be able to effectively communicate with the voters, much concern was addressed about the lack of objectivity in the media and the absence of journalistic standards or legal framework to prevent libel and/or slander. In addition, some local media were concerned that governmental agencies would cut services to their operation in an attempt to silence them during the election campaign.

Recommendations:

National and local media should implement strict internal guidelines to prevent libel or slander during the election campaign and to ensure objective and balanced reporting. Also, government officials at the national and municipal level should ensure that no decisions about the continuation or cessation of services are being made for political purposes.

- **Campaign Finance**

Findings:

Most party activists were deeply concerned about the lack of control over campaign and party financing. There were many allegations by both governing and opposition parties of improper donations to political parties. While party and campaign financing is the least likely to be transparent and open to scrutiny, it is essential that government resources—whether they be municipal or national, financial or human—not be used for political purposes.

Recommendations:

All government officials and business leaders should make sure that their organizations are abiding by the letter and the spirit of laws that don't allow the misuse of public or private resources for political purposes.

International Involvement

There was virtual unanimity among party and community leaders that the international community has a constructive role to play in the September elections. The most important

suggestion was for international election observers to remain in a single polling station from before the commencement of voting at 07.00 until all the votes have been counted and protocols signed sometime after 19.00. Leaders felt that mobile observers were not as effective at observing or preventing fraud as static units.

Unfortunately, there was also a sense among party leaders that the international community will be the prime vehicle for ensuring democratic elections. Absent the will among citizens for free and fair elections, it is not possible for the international community, no matter how well intentioned, to impose free and fair elections on Macedonia. The vast majority of citizens in Macedonia truly want free and fair elections, but they must take responsibility for the elections. Government employees, public prosecutors, police, businessmen, judges, election officials, party leaders and other responsible citizens must not allow intimidation or illegal activities to affect the outcome of the election.

Conclusion

With elections in two months, it is important for all political leaders to ensure discipline among their activists and supporters. With a relatively unhealthy election environment and rampant cynicism, political leaders must stay focused on the need for free and fair elections and not become tempted by illegal means of winning votes. It is obviously in the interest of governing and opposition parties alike, not to mention the country as a whole, to have free, fair and democratic elections this fall. Parties should be focusing all of their time, resources and efforts on building their campaign organizations, delivering their message to the voters and otherwise ensuring an election of the highest standards.