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CENTRAL ASIA REGIONAL ELECTION OFFICIALS CONFERENCE

FINAL PROJECT REPORT
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Almaty, Kazakhstan

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International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES)

Final Project Report
Central Asia Election Officials' Conference
Almaty, Kazakhstan
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INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ELECTION SYSTEMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In keeping with its efforts to promote election systemic reform at all levels, the International Foundation for Election Systems, in cooperation with OSCE, UN/UNDP, and the SOROS Foundation offices in Central Asia, sponsored a three-day conference titled "Election Administration: Regional Experience and Comparative Perspectives" in Almaty, Kazakhstan from November 17-20, 1998. The conference was conducted for Oblast-level election officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Representatives of the parliament and Central Electoral Commission of each republic were invited as well.

The event was designed as a training as well as a networking opportunity for the officials, who had not previously had the chance to meet and discuss common issues and goals. The training focused on improvement of election administration, voter education, and overall communications with the goal of preparing the officials for the next nationwide elections, per country, in the coming eighteen months. IFES was prepared to follow up the event with ongoing technical assistance in each of the countries except Turkmenistan. IFES had already been engaged in providing technical assistance to the Central Election Commissions of the Central Asian Republics, but determined, with the support of the central authorities, that more needed to be done in the way of training the next level of election officials, at the Oblast level. The strategy reflected IFES' approach to work at all levels to bring about positive change in the conduct of elections, including the aforementioned work with the Central Election Commission as well as working with polling station officials, individual candidates, and NGO representatives monitoring the elections. It was felt that working with Oblast-level officials would assist in their professionalization, help improve the level of accountability in the election process, and allow IFES and other international observers and assistance providers to better monitor elections on a local level by using the newly-created relationships with Oblast Election Commission chairpersons.

II. OFFICE AND PERSONNEL

IFES organized and conducted the Regional Election Officials' Conference out of its Almaty office in Kazakhstan, let by Project Manager Thomas Leckinger. The IFES/Almaty office

arranged logistics for the event on behalf of co-sponsors UN and OSCE/ODIHR, and provided communications access to the international partners. IFES local staff from the other republics traveled with the country delegations and provided additional administrative and logistical support.

IFES, the UN and OSCE sent a number of elections experts to Almaty to participate in the conference. IFES sent election law expert Robert Dahl, voter education consultant Marliela Lopez-Vargas, voter registration consultant Enrique Saltos, and civic education expert Ed Morgan and a team of expert practitioners from Bosnia to the event.

Each expert consultant participated in general, plenary sessions as well as leading small group training sessions.

III. PROGRAMMATIC ACTIVITIES

The primary goal of the conference was to increase the level of professionalism at the Oblast and lower levels in the following areas: overall standards of election administration, resolving electoral disputes through transparency and openness, and developing effective approaches for voter education. Thus there were several topics in particular which attracted the interest and attention of the delegates, including; issues of candidate registration, adjudication of grievances, campaign finance, special voting procedures and targeting voter education.

One of the greatest successes of the conference was the collaborative relationship-building that took place between and among members of the country delegations. Many delegates reported that this was their first experience meeting counterparts from other countries in the region, as well as other Oblast election officials from their own country. The desire for greater contact and cross-border cooperation was expressed by many, including holding regular meetings to discuss and compare electoral experiences. One immediate result was the integration of ideas on how to train lower-level election officials within each country and better administer and resolve problem issues in individual Oblasts.

Upon conclusion of the conference several individual country participants indicated that they would work upon returning to their home countries to undertake improvement in voter education, training of lower-level election officials, conditions for domestic monitors and international observers, and use of special voting procedures (foremost among them the use of the mobile ballot box), while at the same time pushing for change in the election code. Of greatest importance was increasing the performance of local election commissions (city, precinct) and strict implementation of electoral regulations.

Overall, the conference presented the opportunity for interaction and contact among the Central Asians themselves and with international experts and other observers. Some of the representatives from both national and Oblast levels were quick to point out that elections in their respective republics already meet international standards, but far more admitted that they have a long way to go in order to achieve what one participant referred to as "real, meaningful" elections.

IV. MATERIALS PRODUCED

- Participant briefing book from Conference for Regional Election Administrators of the Central Asian States. *Election Administration: Regional Experience and Comparative Perspectives*; Almaty, Kazakhstan, November 17-20, 1998. -- AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST IN IFES/WASHINGTON, D.C.

V. IMPACT & EVALUATION

The Election Officials' Conference was viewed by participants as a necessary and timely training exercise that afforded them the opportunity to improve their administrative and communications skills. The Conference took on added relevance when considering the forthcoming presidential elections in Kazakhstan, and national elections scheduled throughout the region in 1999. The event set an important tone by facilitating the convergence and interaction of regionally-based election officials, creating an atmosphere of professionalism and legitimacy, and casting critical attention on transparency and openness. The Conference can be seen as an initial foundation towards creating a *regional* sense of duty and responsibility for ensuring a fairly run election process. All of the region's national election commissions are hierarchical in structure, with very little in the way of autonomous authority and decision-making power allocated to the Oblasts or Autonomous Regions. IFES and its international partners encouraged the regional officials as well as the national-level election officials to consider de-centralization of the election system to the extent appropriate and necessary. The rigid, top-down approach and limited professional development opportunities for regional and lower election officials inhibited their growth and prevented the maturity of the election systems in each of the country.

Many Conference participants reported that this was the first real opportunity to meet other regional election officials, both from their own country as well as neighboring Central Asian republics. While not necessarily representing the prelude to creation of a Central Asian election officials' association, the event nonetheless afforded participants the opportunity to "compare notes" and discuss challenges and common problems endemic to all countries. One of the biggest topics of discussion was the running of elections for local legislatures or other local representative bodies. It appeared that direct elections of local Akims (or the equivalent of local-level executives) was still some time away, though Kyrgyzstan was preparing to undertake a series of pilot local elections in the coming months.

IFES intended to follow up with the election officials as it prepared to conduct national elections support programs in each of the countries in the coming months. IFES was able to develop relationships with many of the Oblast officials during the elections period in 1999-2000, engaging them and receiving support for regionally-based programs conducted in training domestic election observers, executing voter education programs, and conducting pollworker training.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS & CHALLENGES

While the November Regional Conference received the full support and backing of the Central Election Commission, a number of problems emerged with the CEC, in particular Chairwoman Zagipa Balieva, regarding the parallel issue of the January, 1999 presidential election. On numerous occasions IFES Regional Project Manager Tom Leckinger personally engaged Chairwoman Balieva in frank discussions concerning the problems and issues in the pre-election process resulting from the calling of early elections and the imposition of an unduly restrictive anti-corruption policy adopted earlier in the year. IFES had gone on record with the Majilis (national parliament), Chairwoman Balieva, and U.S. Ambassador Elizabeth Jones in suggesting that the anti-corruption statute ought to be reconsidered, for the sake of legitimacy of future elections in Kazakhstan. It should have come as no surprise to Chairwoman Balieva when the international community heavily criticized the candidate registration process, though Balieva reacted with shock and dismay. Be it in her power or not, the failure to consider the concerns of the international community, first conveyed by IFES in a series of private meetings, cast a pall on the presidential election from the outset and rendered election day itself (to which Balieva invited international election observers) essentially meaningless.

The November Regional Conference was in no way intended to be viewed as an event created in support of the presidential election; the conference was, in fact, organized many months before the calling of early elections. Nonetheless, it was IFES and USAID's perception that there was an attempt by Chairwoman Balieva to publicly link the two events, a notion which had the potential to damage the credibility of the organizations involved in organizing the conference. The Chairwoman later denied it, and President Nazarbayev himself distinguished the conference and election as separate during a public meeting with the conference sponsors.

IFES recommends continued engagement with the Oblast-level (and lower) election officials as a priority in the forthcoming period leading to national and local elections. During the domestic observer training project conducted in 1999 in Kazakhstan, Oblast officials provided a high degree of support for training efforts, and were continually and readily accessible to international and domestic monitoring groups. Progressive officials at this level need to continue to be nurtured through targeted program in their regions. The Central Election Commission of each country should still be engaged, but electoral technical assistance programs should make a point of working with Oblast and lower-level commissions on a parallel basis to the degree possible. Pilot regions, such as those identified by IFES for targeted assistance activities during by- or local elections, should be strongly considered based on the level of openness of the local officials. Working substantively with local election officials will still require the approval of the Central Election Commission, though skills development and informational outreach projects can have a high impact on local officials and be conducted successfully without significant CEC oversight or interference. One of the main problems of elections in the region has been a lack of transparency and accountability, particularly at local levels. Programs featuring targeting training of election commissions under the purview of the Oblast commission, together with parallel training for observers, would go a long way in improving transparency and efficiency, and lead to a greater overall accountability of Oblast level commissions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The election officials' conference targeted key areas of administrative improvement, professionalization, skill building, communications and outreach strategy development, voter education strategies, and allowed networking and partnership-forming to take place among participants as they assessed and discussed the level of electoral development and issues faced in each of their countries. The three-day event was the first to bring together Oblast election officials from the countries of Central Asia, and most took advantage of the opportunity to network and build relationships with their counterparts. For some, it was the first opportunity to meet other Oblast election officials from within their own countries and compare and contrast their experiences and preparations for upcoming elections. Some countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (who sent a delegation of only one person from the CEC) clearly were less productively engaged at the event than counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan (owing to the status of elections in those two countries), though all participants did openly discuss the problems in election administration faced since independence. The scope of the event was large, and could have only been conducted successfully thanks to close coordination by IFES, OSCE and the United Nations. Ten international consultants were brought in to lead individual discussion sessions, along with support staff from IFES offices in other countries, all of which required meticulous logistical coordination.

It was discussed conceptually that the event could serve as a springboard to the creation of an association of Central Asian election officials, thought realization of that suggestion remained far off. What was more practical and attainable was conducting regular sessions with Oblast election officials on a country-by-country basis with support from the CEC. This was more possible in some countries than others, with training events in fact taking place with officials from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and to a lesser degree Tajikistan. But the future of elections work clearly relies on engaging Oblast and lower-level election officials more closely and imparting them with the skills and motivation to improve the conduct of elections and meaningful participation of voters in the democratic process, thereby creating a greater degree of confidence and accountability in the election system.