Monitors Fault Azeri Vote Won by Aliyev Loyalists

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BAKU, Azerbaijan — International monitors on Monday criticized weekend parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan that tightened President Ilham Aliyev's grip on power.

Aliyev loyalists swept the board in Sunday's election, described by one Western diplomat who observed voting as an "absolute sham."

"The conduct of these elections overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in the democratic development of the country," monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe and European Parliament said in a statement.

The head of the OSCE observation mission, Ambassador Audrey Glover, criticized "restrictions of fundamental freedoms, media bias, the dominance of public life by one party, and serious violations on election day."

With almost all the votes counted, Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party had increased its share in the

125-seat parliament to at least 71 seats from 64 previously, and a host of small parties and "independents" loyal to the government took almost all the rest.

The leading opposition party, Musavat, failed to win a single seat in the assembly, and it criticized the vote on Monday as "illegitimate."

Opposition Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli told reporters: "It's a challenge to the democratic Western community."

The ruling party said the vote was "free and fair," and the Central Elections Commission said "no serious violations were registered that could affect the result."

Besides economic growth, the government argues it has also brought long-term stability to the country in a volatile neighborhood. But Western diplomats are unnerved by a 90 percent hike in military spending ordered by Aliyev for 2011. The country remains locked with Armenia in an unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, where ethnic Armenians broke away from Azerbaijan two decades ago.