

Elections in Azerbaijan

Political Infighting and Strategic Interests of Great Powers

*Elkhan Nuriyev**

Two years after being elected President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev finds himself facing a mounting domestic political crisis. In the parliamentary election held on 6 November 2005, both the opposition and Western election observers recorded serious procedural violations and instances of election fraud. The government continues to maintain that all the conditions for fair, transparent, and democratic elections were fulfilled. After all, international organisations had made efforts to ensure that this was the case well in advance of the elections themselves. The United States, the most important external player in the region, let it be known that any attempt to tamper with the elections would prompt an unequivocal response on its part. But whereas international attention paid to the elections has focussed on the power struggles between the government and opposition forces, the dynamics within the ruling elite should not be neglected. Indeed, in the run-up to the elections, clear fault lines had formed within the government camp.

In October 2003, two months before his death in December that same year, Heydar Aliyev, who had ruled the country with an iron fist since 1993, made sure that his son Ilham would succeed him. Ilham Aliyev's rise to power triggered a fragmentation in Azerbaijan's political power structure with some members becoming engaged in open conflict. Indeed, the ruling elite split up more markedly than before into influential groups, and battles ensued to gain the ear of the President and his closest aides. There was nothing subtle about the clash between the Chairman of the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan, Kamalladin Heydarov, a known hardliner of the 'old guard', and

the Minister for Economic Development, Farhad Aliyev, who—probably not only for unselfish reasons—pushed for economic reforms. So whilst foreign observers continued to focus largely on a confrontation between the government and the opposition, the domestic political situation was actually being shaped more by the bitter struggle between the various groupings that had formed within the government camp.

The tension mounted as the parliamentary election drew nearer. The leading opposition parties became more vocal and the divisions between government factions grew ever clearer. The leaders of the oppo-

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Map of Azerbaijan



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sition threatened a 'colour revolution' if the government failed to guarantee fair and just elections. The ruling elite suppressed all attempts by the opposition to stage anti-government protests and rallies in central Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Some high-ranking officials, who had publicly stated their loyalty to the President and supported the governing party, unofficially established contacts with the opposition. The closer the day of the elections came, and the clearer it became that the population was expecting a 'colour revolution' to take place, the less these officials attempted to conceal their sympathies for the opposition movement. Whilst the security forces did everything they could to prevent any destabilisation, the leaders of the opposition were convinced that a revolution was the only way of toppling the Aliyev regime and gaining power for themselves.

Consequently, the political process in Azerbaijan cannot merely be characterised as a power struggle between the government camp represented by the party "New Azerbaijan" and the opposition block dubbed "Freedom", but also as a conflict between factions within the ruling elite.

A Conspiracy within the Ruling Elite?

In actual fact, the latest turbulence in Azerbaijan has more likely come 'from

above' than 'from below'. In late October 2005 there were growing indications of a power struggle within the government, culminating in a purge at the highest levels which came as a surprise to many. A joint declaration issued by the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of the Interior, and the General Public Prosecutor's Office spoke of 'uncovering a plot'. The alleged leader of this conspiracy was identified as former Parliamentary Speaker Rasul Guliyev, a former brother-in-arms of Heydar Aliyev who had fallen out with his one-time comrade and emigrated to the United States because the Azerbaijani authorities had issued a warrant for his arrest on allegations of embezzlement and corruption.

Along with Guliyev, other senior representatives of the government and the country's most influential oligarchs were accused of having mounted a coup and financing the opposition. This round-up of troublemakers peaked when measures were taken against disloyal followers, including the dismissal and arrest of Minister for Economic Development Farhad Aliyev (who is not a relation of President Aliyev), Health Minister Ali Insanov, Chief of Presidential Affairs Akif Muradverdiyev, and Rafik Aliyev, the CEO of Azpetrol, the biggest oil company in the Southern Caucasus. In addition, the authorities in Azerbaijan tightened their control over domestic affairs and stepped up their surveillance of all the country's strategic assets.

Many people were astonished to see such a young President—who had previously been thought of as weak—strike so firmly. Some observers even found Ilham Aliyev's actions reminiscent of his father's style of rule. There is the possibility that the President feared powerful ministers and oligarchs since they had considerable amounts of capital at their disposal and enjoyed good standing within social and political circles. Evidently he also feared that influential members of the government striving for more radical reforms might go over to the opposition. Indeed,

Aliyev did find himself faced with a rather tricky situation in which some prominent figures might have been prepared, under certain circumstances, to join the opposition in a bid to force a 'changing of the guard', or at least weaken the President's powers.

At the same time, Aliyev's preventive measures against influential factions within the government shifted the balance of power and upset the longstanding political equilibrium within Azerbaijan. So the purge of individuals undertaken in October duly triggered a political crisis. Such major political upheavals shortly before the parliamentary election, in addition to the official accusations levelled against ministers and oligarchs supposedly out to seize power, speak volumes about the relations within the ruling elite. Those who stand accused of preparing a coup against the current President have probably already been found guilty, and it is not difficult to imagine the methods that might be used to conduct the investigation or guess how objective they might prove to be.

Having said that, the purge did enhance the President's public image and damaged the opposition parties by establishing links between Guliyev, corrupt members of the government, and opponents of the regime. However, the standing of the government party "New Azerbaijan" suffered a severe blow because all the high-ranking officials who had been arrested had belonged to it. In the end, when former Health Minister Insanov confessed to his involvement in the coup, many supporters of the 'old guard' were chased out of the governing party. Now there is no ruling out the possibility that 'clean-up measures' will continue until all key posts in the country have been filled with new faces loyal to the President.

Most likely, a new battle for the redistribution of the private property of the former ministers and oligarchs will begin. The major holding, Azpetrol, will no doubt be the most sought-after prize, since it has infrastructure and sells almost 70 per cent of all petroleum products in Azerbaijan and

abroad. Azpetrol is one of the most successful companies in the region and earns massive dividends not just for its owners, but also for the state. Since the former Minister for Economic Development Farhad Aliyev and his brother Rafik Aliyev—who until recently headed up Azpetrol—are now out of the picture, the holding will probably either fall into the hands of a new oligarch or be nationalised.

Clearly, Aliyev felt that he had become a hostage of the representatives of his father's 'old guard', who may have sought to topple him at the next best opportunity. In that sense, he can be viewed as the victor in the first round of a power struggle, i.e., as a President who managed to tighten his control over the top political echelons in the period leading up to the elections. Nonetheless, the ruling elite still contains numerous representatives of the 'old guard', though they will have to step down sooner or later and make way for politicians belonging to a younger generation.

The Opposition

In recent years the opposition in Azerbaijan has become increasingly resolute in its attempts to induce radical change in the country and has developed a scenario of a change of government by revolution. On two occasions, once before and then also immediately after the presidential election held in autumn 2003, opposition leaders launched an unsuccessful bid to bring down the regime, but unlike the 'Rose Revolutionaries' in neighbouring Georgia, they failed to garner any substantial support from outside the country. After the presidential election, which was manipulated to ensure a smooth changeover and maintain the ruling Aliyev regime, the authorities smashed the opposition, which had simply run out of time. Those in government used every conceivable method at their disposal to gain influence over the domestic political situation in Azerbaijan. Subsequently, the leading opposition parties took a long time to get back on their

feet again and barely managed to mount a challenge in the local elections held at the end of 2004. Yet the defeat of the opposition did not result in the disappearance of protest voters amongst the electorate. The weakened opposition parties continued to bide their time and saw their next opportunity in the parliamentary election scheduled for November 2005.

Already long before the start of the election campaign, violent debates arose within the opposition about the new elections to the legislative assembly. The three most active opposition parties—the People’s Front, *Musavat* (Equality), and the Democratic Party—formed the opposition bloc *Azadliq* (Freedom). Two of the parties are led by former parliamentary speakers: *Musavat* by Isa Qambar and the Democratic Party by Rasul Guliyev, who lives in exile in the United States. In October 2005 he was unable to return to Azerbaijan after being threatened with immediate arrest if he tried to enter the country. The People’s Front is led by the young, reform-minded opposition politician Ali Kerimli. Together with their parties, these men constitute the radical opposition to the governing elite.

A few prominent politicians have joined another opposition bloc which calls itself *Yeni Siyaset* (New Politics). These included the former President of Azerbaijan, Ajaz Mutalibov, who is living in Moscow, the former Chairman of the National Independence Party, Etibar Mamedov, and the female leader of the National Unity Movement, Lala Shovket Hajiyeva. During the election campaign, her movement decided to work together with *Azadliq*. *Yeni Siyaset* moderately opposes the Aliyev regime, no longer calling for the fall of the President, but insisting on sweeping political and socio-economic reforms. *Azadliq* meanwhile is working towards a change of power and hoping for support from democratic forces in the West. As early as at the start of the election campaign, some representatives announced that there would be a ‘revolution’ if the parliamentary election was char-

acterised by widespread electoral fraud.

International organisations and leading Western powers called upon the Azerbaijani authorities to make sure that the election was “fair and free”. This encouraged the opposition to take an active role in the political arena once again. Consequently, the start of the election campaign was overshadowed by confrontation, with members of the opposition being arrested, demonstrations in the streets being prevented, and protests being brutally suppressed.

Under pressure from the West, the authorities softened their approach and the tension dissipated somewhat, especially after the President issued some decrees in May 2005 aimed at improving electoral practices. But whilst the public generally welcomed these decrees, the opposition remained distrustful and voiced substantial doubts about their actual implementation. The regime managed to weaken the radical opposition by issuing those decrees, carrying out the aforementioned purge at the highest levels of power, and above all by claiming that disloyal government officials had financed the opposition and plotted to bring down the government as well. All this diminished the threat of a ‘colour revolution’ in Azerbaijan.

The small, poorly organised, and insufficiently funded opposition proved no match for the ruling elite. At the same time, the opposition committed a serious error. Although it only had minimal resources at its disposal, it once again failed to put up a united front when it went into the elections and failed to thrash out a single political strategy for the elections that would have enabled it to propose a coherent, meaningful political platform. For instance, the opposition forces find it very hard to agree on the country’s approach to foreign policy, with some groups advocating closer ties with Russia, and others arguing in favour of a resolutely pro-Western policy, and in particular a pro-American foreign and security policy. But

opinions differ over domestic policy as well, especially as regards certain tactical aspects of the opposition's policy.

Another weakness of the opposition stems from its lack of an ideological basis which could assist in helping the electorate view it as a convincing alternative to the government currently in power. On top of this, some prominent opposition leaders like Isa Qambar and Rasul Guliyev are burdened by their political track records, for when they were in power in the early 1990s, Azerbaijan was in the throes of political and economic chaos, and the clash with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh was characterised by military failures. Even though the events of the early 1990s have already been forgotten by the majority of people and many young Azerbaijanis today are mainly concerned about the spread of corruption in the country, the opposition has not managed to capitalise on opportunities to mobilise the people against the regime on any large scale. For even though it is supported by pro-Western social groups inclined to mounting protests against the government and demanding democratisation and a pro-Western stance for Azerbaijan, the opposition cannot fall back on sufficiently broad popular support to prompt any potential 'colour revolution'. Furthermore, the situation in Azerbaijan fundamentally differs from the conditions in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan, where the security forces shunned a violent confrontation with the population, ultimately forcing the ruling elite to step down. In Azerbaijan the secret services and security structures are totally controlled by the government and determined to crack down as hard as they can on any attempted uprising.

Election Day and International Reaction

The elections held on 6 November were a tough test for the Azerbaijani authorities. Right from the start it was clear that the way the elections were held would be no

less important than their actual outcome. Whilst voting went off peacefully, the political situation already started hotting up the next day when the Central Election Commission announced its preliminary result, which gave the ruling party 63 of the 125 seats in parliament and the opposition bloc *Azadliq* 7 seats, with the remaining seats going to independent candidates and smaller pro-government parties. This result would have given the ruling party a solid majority and denied the opposition even a blocking minority. However, in 10 electoral constituencies, the results of an exit poll conducted by the American consulting company PA Government did not tally with the official election result.

The opposition immediately declared the results of the ballot a fraud and demanded new elections. Their leaders publicly declared that they would fight resolutely and jointly for their constitutional rights, but employ only peaceful means to do so. The authorities rejected claims of widespread election violations and issued assurances that voting had gone off without any problems. Nonetheless, OSCE observers and observers from other international organisations that had closely followed the elections on 6 November also voiced grave criticisms. After initially remaining silent, the US State Department also issued an unexpectedly scathing statement. American and European observers concluded that the proceedings had not complied with international electoral standards and called upon the Azerbaijani authorities to investigate and report back on any violations that had occurred. Once again the Election Observation Mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) refused to comply and recognised the elections as democratic and in line with legal requirements.

But in the end, the sheer mass of international criticism prompted the Central Election Commission to repeat the elections in 10 constituencies where the official results had proved particularly dubious.

Only when major protests against the election results were organised in the centre of the capital did the government take its first steps towards investigating election violations. In addition, the President dismissed a few officials who had been involved in manipulating the outcome of the ballot. Presumably, separate negotiations between the government and opposition blocs will be launched, mediated by Western diplomats, to prevent any upheavals reminiscent of those that took place in the winter of 2003.

The more elements which contest the official election result, the more encouraged the opposition feels to form a nationwide democratic front against electoral fraud. But does Azerbaijani society really want fresh elections? Judging from the widespread apathy amongst the population and the low level of democratic education, the answer would appear to be negative.

Both the pressure exerted on Aliyev's government by the West and criticisms of his regime have clearly intensified. This, too, has prompted the opposition to appeal to voters to insist that they exercise their legitimate rights. The serious errors committed by the government and widespread election violations associated with voting have left no other option to the opposition leaders. If the opposition persists with its demands, the authorities could very soon find themselves in a complex situation that could trigger a serious political crisis. Future events will be determined not only by what the opposition does, but also increasingly by how the government conducts itself. Another decisive factor will be the political behaviour of the superpowers, for Azerbaijan is of strategic interest to both Russia and the United States.

Positions and Interests of Great Powers

The United States in particular has extensive geopolitical and geo-economic interests in Azerbaijan. Just as Armenia was always a Russian outpost in the

Caucasus, Azerbaijan has become a geopolitical bridgehead for the United States in a strategically important region where the spheres of influence of the major powers overlap. Azerbaijan is particularly important to the United States for several reasons: for use of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline to secure oil exports from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, for helping to resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, for setting in motion sweeping democratic processes, and for possibly stationing American mobile forces on Azerbaijani territory.

US interest in Azerbaijan intensified even more when American troops were ushered out of Uzbekistan. This incident impacted on the balance of power in the region and also influenced President Aliyev's foreign policy course. Just recently, two American radar stations in Azerbaijan near the Russian and Iranian borders became operational. What is more, a military centre has been set up in Baku that is capable of monitoring all shipping and aircraft transport in and over the Caspian Sea. The growing dominance of the military component in US-Azerbaijani relations is also reflected in the frequent visits to Baku by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other American officials. Most importantly, the Pentagon—which would like to expand US military cooperation with Azerbaijan—has nothing to gain from any change in the status quo in this South Caucasian country.

At the same time, Russia too is making major efforts to increase its influence in Azerbaijan. In the post-Soviet territory, Russia traditionally plays an 'anti-revolutionary' role, serving as 'the power that maintains the status quo', and Azerbaijan is no exception. Moreover, Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev enjoy cordial relations. An important principle for Russia is that Aliyev should not allow the United States to have any military bases on Azerbaijani territory that would serve to protect the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline or exert pressure on neighbouring Iran. The desire on

the part of the leadership in Baku not to spoil its relations with either Moscow or Tehran places it in somewhat of a dilemma, having to manoeuvre between Moscow and Washington on the one hand, and between Tehran and Washington on the other.

It is surely no coincidence that in the final phase of the election campaign, two high-ranking foreign visitors travelled to Baku. The first was Sergey Lebedev, the Director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, and the second was US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried. Both men conducted talks behind closed doors with President Aliyev in which it is alleged they discussed the domestic political situation. It does not take much imagination to guess that the ostensible reason for Lebedev's visit was to support the President in his attempts to prevent a 'colour revolution' in Azerbaijan, whereas Daniel Fried's visit was no doubt meant to dissuade Aliyev from taking any further tough measures, at least against the opposition, if not against disloyal staff. By acting in this way, the US administration is not so much helping the opposition as using it to influence the President. Given the intensified power struggle in the wake of the elections, Washington would like to retain its influence in Azerbaijan. To all appearances, the United States is striving to come up with an evolutionary model for inducing political change there. Under such a model, the opposition could receive one-third of the seats in parliament and work together with the liberal members of the ruling party to help the President liberalise the political system and bolster the country's economic reforms.

It is patently obvious that the United States is not interested in any destabilisation of the domestic political situation in Azerbaijan. It may have sought to weaken the authoritarian regime, but did not set out to overthrow the government. Just lately, Washington appears to have understood that 'colour revolutions' can be destructive, as the events in Kyrgyzstan have shown; the United States's initial

euphoria has evidently dwindled to sober realisation. Consequently, Washington has no wish to see fresh chaos erupt in Azerbaijan, for that could cause serious problems with respect to the aforementioned oil pipeline and make already high oil prices even higher. What complicates the situation further is the fact that since Azerbaijan boasts extensive oil deposits, many observers view the United States's reluctance to tackle problematic events there as a political concession to oil interests.

Outlook for the Future

It looks as though Azerbaijan is in for a turbulent end to the year. If the opposition opts to set out on the political path taken by the leaders of the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, for example, the situation will escalate in early 2006. President Aliyev faces two basic alternatives: either he can allow re-elections to be held in some constituencies—which could result in the leaders of the opposition landing in parliament after all—or he can make no concessions and run the risk of provoking a fresh wave of confrontation and possible mass protests.

However, one thing is quite clear: Today's Azerbaijan needs a new strategic vision, aimed at bringing about drastic political change, extensive freedoms, and a radical reform of the government in the post-election period. President Aliyev will manage to stay in power if he can persuade strategic investors that nobody else can guarantee stability and initiate democratic reforms in Azerbaijan. At the same time, the opposition also has a chance of coming to power if its leaders can credibly convince the United States and other Western democracies that they have the broad support of the population and are therefore in a position to guarantee stability in the country.

The most likely scenario at present is as follows: The political situation will develop under the control of the current ruling regime. If an internal battle is waged to

redistribute power and property, with the corresponding political and economic consequences, both Washington and Moscow will actively intervene to end it and both will work together to shore up and consolidate Azerbaijan's stability.

So far, in spite of growing European interest in Caspian energy sources and pipeline projects, the European Union has not yet played any particularly prominent role in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the European community needs to become more consistent in its deployment of political tools and be more connected to the activities of the EU member states there. If it managed to seize the full range of political opportunities open to it—ranging from diplomatic efforts to regional programmes like TRASECA (Transportation Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia) and TACIS, and the provision of active support in resolving conflicts—such actions would go a long way towards fostering stability and encouraging development in Azerbaijan and throughout the region. In the context of its neighbourhood policy, the European Union should make various efforts to ensure long-term stability, for example: by implementing transnational economic projects, actively supporting far-reaching reforms designed to promote the rule of law, combating corruption and organised crime, and developing the market economy in Azerbaijan. To this end, it needs to back constructive forces, both within the opposition and in the government, mainly counting on people who are prepared to cooperate to reform the country and ensure its integration into the European community in the long run.

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