

Protests in Azerbaijan: Hot Months Expected Ahead of the Presidential Election

By Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Warsaw

Abstract

Azerbaijan has seen a series of protests since the beginning of the year. Various social groups have been involved in them: young people, merchants, and residents of the town of Ismayilli. These outbursts have been grassroots protests, independent of each other as the individual groups of protesters were not mutually coordinating their actions. What these protests had in common was their resistance to the government's abuse of power and corruption. The protests reveal the continuing existence of a socio-economic crisis and intensify the political dispute between the general public and the ruling class. They could also potentially reveal a conflict inside the political elite. The protests are likely to re-emerge in the coming months, given the fact that presidential elections are scheduled for autumn.

Characteristics of the Protests

The first protest took place on January 12 at Fountain Square in the centre of Baku. It was organized via social media (mainly Facebook) by young activists and targeted violence in the military. The demonstration was attended by several hundred people; under the slogan of "Stop death in the army," they called for increased accountability for military authorities and the resignation of the long-time defence minister, Safar Abiyev. The initial spark for the demonstration was the death of an 18-year-old soldier who, according to the official version, died of a heart attack; but the photos of the body released by the family provide evidence that he was beaten and suggest fatal levels of abuse. The case has disturbed the public in Azerbaijan, the more so as the government's reaction was limited to demoting several officers connected to the case.

Then, on January 19, merchants from Bine trading centre blocked the Baku-Astara highway in a protest against an increase in their rental payments. The growth in fees was, according to some reports, connected with the merchants' participation in the action ("5 qepik") of gathering coins to pay the fines assessed against some of the participants attending the protest a week earlier.

But the most surprising and violent riots took place in Ismayilli on January 23–24, a provincial town with approximately 30,000 residents, located around 200 km north-west of the capital, Baku. The protest was inflamed by a minor car collision in which Emil Sham-saddinov, the manager of a local hotel—Chirag, was involved. An evening disturbance between the driver and the local community in which he insulted the locals eventually resulted in several cars being burned and in the torching of the hotel allegedly owned by Vugar Alakbarov, a nephew of the local governor Nizami Alakberov and the son of Minister of Labour and Social Protection Fizuli Alakberov. The next day, demonstrations calling for the governor's resignation were continued. Finally,

the police cracked down on the demonstrations, arrested dozens of people and locked down the town effectively. The events were followed by a protest in Baku, held as a sign of solidarity with the residents of Ismayilli on January 26. The hundreds of young protesters were effectively prevented by the police from gathering on Fountain Square and thus dispersed across the city centre. A few days later, there were reports of demonstrations in Zaqatala and Imishli (towns with approximately 30,000 residents) in which public service workers demanded the payment of overdue wages. The authorities in the towns opened a dialogue with the demonstrators.

It is worth noting that not one of the protests was purely political in character. The protesters did not demand that President Ilham Aliyev step down, but they called for the dismissal of lower-ranking government officials and wanted solutions to their every-day problems (wage payments, corruption). At the same time, the protests were organised or inflamed from the bottom up and protesters basically demonstrated their anger towards those in power. This proves that there is the potential for dissatisfaction in the Azerbaijan public, which is not, and may not be, channelled by the existing discredited political opposition parties (Musavat and the Popular Front).

Response of the Government

On a tactical level, the government applied different measures with regard to each of the protesting groups. Rather robust methods were used against the merchants and the residents of Ismayilli (rubber bullets and water cannons). In Baku, however, due to the presence of numerous journalists and diplomats and the fact that protesters had access to social networking media, they were treated relatively mildly, almost entirely without the use of coercive measures. Hundreds of people were detained, dozens were fined and administrative detention was applied to more than ten people. The difference

in the measures applied indicates that the government is keen to avoid harsh criticism from the West ahead of the upcoming presidential election.

Only days after the last protest emerged, several new steps were taken aimed at turning public attention away from the recent protests and the social problems they revealed. On January 31, a campaign against author Ekrem Eylislini began when members of the pro-governmental Azerbaijan Internally Displaced Persons/Refugee Youth Organisation and a group of students held a protest in front of his home denouncing his novel *Stone Dreams*, which was published several weeks ago in the Russian magazine *Druzhiba Narodov* (Friendship of Nations). The novel casts a positive light on Azerbaijan's traditional rival, Armenia, and avoids presenting Azerbaijanis as the victims and Armenians as the aggressors. The issue of the Khojaly massacre, in which hundreds of Azerbaijani people were murdered, and which the Azerbaijani government wants to be recognised as genocide, does not appear in the novel. The message of the novel contradicts official state rhetoric and drew harsh criticism from officials. Following the publication of the controversial novel, a February 7 presidential decree deprived Eylislini, a former lawmaker and staunch critic of the ruling regime, of the title of 'People's Writer,' which he had earned in 1998. The whole case dominated the media and led to the opposition offering cautious support to the writer, a move that will not win them popularity in a country which is fighting Armenians over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Then, on February 4, at least four people were arrested, including Ilgar Mammadov, a political analyst and chair of the opposition group REAL, Tofiq Yagublu, a journalist who is deputy chair of the opposition political party Musavat, and two residents of Ismayilli. The first two travelled to Ismayilli the day after the riots started. They are accused of instigating riots in Ismayilli and were remanded by the court to a two month pre-trial detention.

These steps indicate that the government eventually decided to put strong pressure on opposition groups ahead of the election by imprisoning the most active members. The government is also tightening control over society and on the activities of non-governmental organisations and religious groups. This is clear from the statement of the Prosecutor General who instructed the relevant agencies to maintain socio-political stability, and also from recent legislative changes, which allow the Central Bank to monitor the finances of the above-mentioned organisations. On the other hand, the government took some ad hoc moves to ease the social tensions in the country by providing additional funds to the regions—an example is a presidential decree allocating

5 million euros from the Reserve Fund for the acceleration of the socio-economic development of Quba region.

The Political Context

The protests coincide with the barely concealed tension inside the ruling elite, proof of which include the president's attempts to marginalise representatives of the old part of the elite (who have been in power since the presidency of Heydar Aliyev) by making preparatory moves aimed at removing its key representative, the head of the presidential administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev. He featured as the central figure in a bribery scandal in Azerbaijan in autumn last year. Subsequently, in December, President Ilham Aliyev nominated four deputies to help run the presidential administration. The move strongly eroded Mehdiyev's position and seemed to indicate that he might lose his position during or after the presidential election. Mehdiyev is seen as a guarantor of the old elite's presence in the inner circle of power, thus his possible departure would likely lead to more extensive changes within the ruling elite. However, the recent protests and social tensions may complicate this scenario as dismissal of any prominent officials would be regarded as a sign of weakness by society and could thus encourage further protests. It is worth noting that in March 2012, protests in Quba took place which resulted in the president dismissing the local governor. This action might be seen as a precedent and an incentive for the recent events in Ismayilli.

The protests are taking place in an election year, where peace and public support is necessary for the incumbent president to prove his public mandate and maintain the image of an efficient partner who does not create problems for the West. Thus, on the one hand, the looming election and the need to avoid criticism will encourage the government to avoid using robust methods against protesters—as was seen in case of the demonstrations held in Baku. On the other hand, the government will increase its control over society in different ways, including arresting coordinators with organisational skills and employing stronger measures to infiltrate opposition activity on the Internet.

Prospects

The measures taken so far by the government are unlikely to solve the problems enshrined in the system, in which the ministers are oligarchs and their relatives or close allies are appointed to posts in the regional administrations. In such a system, the economy is monopolised by various groups and corruption is widespread. At the same time, despite a general improvement in the economic situation of the country driven by revenues from oil exports, the gap between the rich and the poor is wid-

ening as well as that between Baku and under-invested regions. This causes resentment in society and it is likely to surface again as was seen in Quba or Ismayilli. What is more, the looming presidential election, the growing social tensions and the conflict within the ruling elite make any reforms even more difficult.

Despite this, it still seems unlikely at present that the protests will turn into mass political demonstrations aimed against the system, and even less so that the ruling class will be removed from power. However, the grass-roots nature of the protests and the universality of the issues the protesters are raising will be encouraging to the rest of society as the date of the election draws near. The lack of a united and coordinated opposition (there are instead a variety of angry social groups comprised of people from different parts of society and dispersed across the country) or a political figure who could pose a challenge to the incumbent president is at the same time both a weakness and a strength of the opposition. Although, the opposition groups cannot present a viable political alternative to the ruling elite, similarly they cannot be dismantled easily by the government.

About the Author

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Further reading:

- <http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-azerbaijan-stone-dreams-akram-aylisli/24890815.html>
- <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/06/azerbaijan-government-detains-outspoken-critics>
- <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66485>
- <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sex-video-used-to-blackmail-azerbaijani-journalist-7575834.html>

Another important issue is what strategy Muslim circles, which are quite strong in Azerbaijan, will choose. These circles have proven their ability to mobilise the public several times over the past few months, and have protested, for example, against the ban on wearing the hijab. They have so far supported the young activists during a scandal over sex videos used to blackmail Azerbaijani journalist Khadija Ismayilova. Some women wearing the hijab were seen during the recent protest in Baku (January 26) but still the question of a possible joining of forces remains open.

The situation in Azerbaijan will also become more strained due to the example from neighbouring Georgia, where President Mikheil Saakashvili's camp was defeated in democratic elections last October and where a presidential election is also scheduled for autumn this year. This means that in the coming months the government in Baku may increasingly frequently encounter forms of public protests which were typical during the initial phase of the Arab Spring.

Ismayilli: The Winter of Our Alarm

By Arif Aliev, Baku

Abstract

This article analyses the events taking place in January in Azerbaijan and their implications for the presidential elections later this year. The spontaneous violence in Ismayilli shows deep discontent with the regime. The lack of peaceful methods for the population to protest, combined with the regime's reliance on force, suggests that there will be more confrontation in the near future.

Introduction

January 2013 was a month for popular protests in Azerbaijan. The largest of these took place in Ismayilli Raion. The government described the behavior of local residents as an act of hooliganism, growing, thanks to the incite-

ment of "enemies of the state," into disorder. The opposition and many independent experts saw it as the possible beginning of major changes. What, in fact, is going on?

Since 1990, when Moscow sent in its imperial troops in order to prevent the fall of the Soviet authorities in