

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 grassroots 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>

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

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.

Baku, the month of January has not been so stormy or full of exciting events. On January 8 the former rector of a private university Elshad Abdullaev distributed new videos which provided evidence of the authorities' participation in serious crimes. On January 12, in the center of Baku, a well-attended protest took place that had been organized by young people with the help of on-line social networks which provoked a strong reaction both in Azerbaijan and abroad. On January 13, there was an incident in the south of the country—the authorities prevented the leader of one of the main opposition parties, Musavat, from entering Lenkoran Raion. On January 17, Rustam Ibragimbekov, a movie director with an international reputation, announced plans to set up a social movement and National Council of opposition forces, declaring that a transfer of power is necessary this year. On January 19, there was a protest in Bine, the largest shopping center in the country. More than 1,000 employees at the center, complaining about high fees and rents, shut traffic on a nearby avenue. The authorities sent in troops, dispersed the protest, and arrested numerous participants. On January 23, a revolt broke out in Ismayilli, the administrative center of one of the raions of Azerbaijan. The action was also suppressed with the use of force. On January 26 young people again used social networks to organize another protest in Baku, supporting the residents of Ismayilli and criticizing the authorities' use of rubber bullets and tear gas against the demonstrators.

This sequence of events led many analysts to speak of an "Azerbaijani Winter" analogous to the Arab Spring.

What Happened in Ismayilli?

Ismayilli is one of the most beautiful raions of Azerbaijan, where 81,000 people live in an area of 2,000 square kilometers. The landscape is mostly mountainous and the population works the land, grows grapes, raises animals while industry consists of several factories, textile mills, and folk art shops.

The region is one of the most politically quiet in the country, both due to its natural environment and the nature of the people who live there. But after what happened on the evening of January 23, even the quiet people of Ismayilli could not remain calm.

According to the General Procurator and Ministry of Internal Affairs, the incident began when Emil Shamseddinov, the administrator of the Hotel Chyrag, crashed into a stop light while driving under the influence of alcohol, after which, together with his passenger Elmeddin Mamedov, he beat a local resident, the taxi driver Ramil Bekirov, and cursed at the people who gathered at the scene of the accident. The enraged people marched to the hotel, set it on fire while also burn-

ing the cars parked in the courtyard, and then tried to burn down the house belonging to the son of the local governor Nizami Alakberov. The police were able to put an end to the chaos, Shamseddinov and Mamedov were detained, and they now face criminal charges.

But why did people try to take revenge for the actions of a hotel administrator on the son of the governor and then proceed to the building where the governor has his office and demand his immediate resignation? The authorities have not answered these questions.

Local residents who participated in the events explain that the cause of the disorder was an incident involving the son of Minister of Labor and Social Protection Fizuli Aleperov, who left the hotel in a Hummer and crashed into a local taxi. The crowd burned down the hotel because it belongs to this minister's son. They then proceeded to the governor's office because Governor Nizami Alakberov is the brother of the minister. The people, as they made clear, are sick of the fact that one family has privatized the raion, and seized its arable land, forests, and pastures.

As many as 4,000 people participated in the demonstrations, which took place 185 kilometers from Baku, according to local journalists. By 3 o'clock in the morning, people went home. However, after 10 the next morning, they again began to gather around the governor's office and demand his resignation. The police tried to disperse the crowds, but people threw stones at them. Then internal troops intervened, firing rubber bullets and tear gas.

The law enforcement agencies eventually restored "order" in the raion center. They drove out the protesters and set up check points. They detained 60 people, filing criminal charges against 8, imposing administrative fines on 38, and issuing warnings to 14.

The Reaction of the Authorities

Certainly, the events in Ismayilli caught the authorities by surprise and they were confused. The president was not in the country at this time and did not change his plans to visit Davos.

Journalists covering the events faced some difficulties. But there were no insurmountable barriers and many transmitted their reports directly from the epicenter of events, literally tracing their development from minute to minute. The new media played a major role in this effort. Additionally, the law enforcement agencies reacted immediately: the Ministry of Internal Affairs press service made an announcement that evening and the local police chief did not "disappear," as happened earlier, but tried to intervene in events, while actively commenting on them.

The country's power agencies know what to do in such situation: they succeeded in sending in the necessary troops and equipment to restore order.

- However, the politicians dropped the ball. They only made comments after the law enforcement agencies had finished their main job of dispersing the protesters. And how they talked! Here are some of the comments recorded in statements and interviews from the heads of the ruling party and top state agencies: The country is rapidly developing, the living standards of the people are improving. What happened in Ismayilli Raion was not a protest, but an “act of hooliganism,” a “domestic conflict,” and a “fist fight among two people with the participation of their relatives.”
- The events in Ismayilli are the result of the anti-state activities of the radical opposition, which is inciting people, summoning them to disobey the authorities, and politicizing incidents from daily life.
- The opposition media is guilty as it distributes biased information, distorting what is actually happening.
- Also guilty are irrational people who have fallen under the influence of the opposition.

The officials also spent considerable time denouncing foreign “third” forces. They did not clarify who they had in mind, but in an interview with ANS, Presidential Administration Department Head Ali Gasanov noted that “The fact that information about the events immediately appeared in the press of several countries leads us to certain thoughts.”

In general, everyone is to blame except the authorities. But the authorities, as statements from the General Procurator and Ministry of Internal Affairs made clear, would decisively intervene against any similar actions.

The Reaction of the Opposition

The opposition, in the face of the Social Chamber, uniting dozens of parties and non-governmental organizations, described these events as popular action against the lawlessness of bureaucrats and oligarchs. They declared the use of force against peaceful members of the population unacceptable, demanded the removal of the troops from the region, and the release of those who had been arrested. It decided “to call on the state agencies to immediately begin negotiations with representatives of the protesting population” and “appealed to ordinary citizens to support the just demands of the residents of Ismayilli.”

Popular Front party leader Ali Kerimli propounded three theses, calling them the Lessons of Ismayilli:

- The authorities should understand that they will not get far operating only on the basis of force and repression and that it is necessary to immediately start reforms.
- We should understand that only a united and organized opposition can direct the people in a period

of social protests and save the country from chaos. As long as we do not transform the protest energy into a country-wide popular movement, it will be consumed in social explosions.

- The people should understand that fighting against the overreaching bureaucrats at the raion level in current conditions is not a route to salvation. Replacing them at the local level will not change anything. It is necessary to fight for a change of the entire regime, and to do that, to participate actively in a country-wide protest movement which will strengthen the opposition.

The Reaction of Population and Society

The events in Ismayilli had a strong impact in society, something that has not happened in a long time. Reporting about the protest actions on the web site of the newspaper Azadlyg attracted more than 220,000 readers over the course of the day, which is a record for Azerbaijan’s on line media.

The people who shared their opinions online in social media or gave interviews to journalists from mainstream and on-line publications, including those who were participants in the events, rarely discussed the incident which led to the disorders. Rather, they spoke more about unemployment, ubiquitous corruption, the tyranny of bureaucrats, and the inability of ordinary people to have a say in the decision-making process. Many focused on the fact that, over the course of the events, none of the authorities wanted to meet with the protesters or listen to them in an attempt to understand their concerns. Only representatives of the law enforcement and military spoke with the people. And when words were not enough, they used force. Young people in the capital appealed to all to join in a demonstration to support the people of Ismayilli.

Leaders of civil society also supported the demands of the protesters. Many non-governmental organization leaders considered the events the result of a systemic crisis in the management of the country: “People are in a hopeless situation, no one pays attention to their votes, they cannot influence who rules at the federal or local levels: all elections are falsified, therefore they cannot achieve justice through legal means.”

Economists, including Chairman of the Center for Economic Initiatives Gubad Ibadoglu, argued that there are serious social reasons for popular discontent. In the Gorno-Shirvan economic zone, which includes Ismayilli and three other raions, average salaries are 40 percent lower than for the country as a whole. Investment in the development of the zone last year was just 1.1 percent of all state investment. The result is that the infrastructure of the raion is not developing. Injustice in the dis-

tribution of incomes, widespread violations of social-economic rights, in particular, the right to private property, the concentration of the region's wealth in the hands of a small group, and growing corruption deepen the amount of social conflict in the raion where poverty and unemployment are the main problems.

The Reaction of Foreign Experts

The events in Ismayilli have been widely discussed by foreign experts, who know the region well and have experience working in Azerbaijan. Caucasus specialist Karl Rader pointed out a change in the tactics of the authorities in contrast with last year's events in Gub: then a large number of protesters were arrested, but the governor who had aroused the anger of the people was replaced. However on January 24, Ali Gasanov, presidential administration department head, said that some people want to use these events to undermine Azerbaijani statehood. He threatened to arrest the guilty, which means prosecuting the demonstrators, but not the bureaucrats. This announcement could indicate a degree of panic at the highest level, where they are seeking a scapegoat. But the fact is, Rader concluded, that arresting famous activists and members of the opposition in the course of demonstrations in Baku is not as dangerous for the authorities as arresting ordinary citizens in outlying areas, where the wrath of people is completely different and could have extremely unpleasant consequences.

According to Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment, the events in Gub and Ismayilli show that the authorities no longer control the provinces of the country as they did in the past. People are seriously unhappy about the corruption and limitless power of the authorities, which led to unrest in both cases. The expert thinks that all the pre-conditions that led to the recent events in the Middle East and Africa exist in Azerbaijan: "But there is something specific in what increases the patience of people in a specific place."

Former U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Kauzlarich (1994–97) claimed that the Gub and Ismayilli events in Azerbaijan remind him of the situation in China. The relatives of bureaucrats mired in corruption fight with all of society. The concentration of great wealth in the hands of a small group is a cause for concern. Thanks to social media, events taking place in a specific area lose their merely local significance and come to the attention of the entire country and the world. Information flows quickly and influences international public opinion: "I do not want to draw a direct parallel with the Arab countries, where revolutions took place, but experience shows that similar events outside the capital can turn into major upheavals."

After January

Near the end of the month, on January 26, a demonstration took place in Baku in support of the residents of Ismayilli. Fountain Square, where the rally was to take place, was surrounded by law enforcement agents from the morning hours. The police dispersed the demonstrators and did not allow them to gather in one spot. About 100 people were arrested, according to the media, and those arrested complained about rough treatment at the hands of the police. After receiving warnings, many left the area. However, four were punished by administrative means and sentenced to 13–15 days in jail. Twenty individuals, including two journalists, were fined from 300 to 2,500 monat (1 monat = approximately 1 euro).

Now there is a tense quiet and there is time to think.

Obviously, a situation slipping out of control as a result of an unplanned automobile accident cannot be described as a protest action organized by "enemies of the state," as the government tries to do. Otherwise, we would have to assume that the Minister of Labor and Social Protection, as well as his closest relatives, are cooperating with the protesters.

It is also clear that the stability, which the authorities consider the main accomplishment of their many years in power, also does not exist. During the last days of the month, state agencies had to deny that Neftchalin, Imishlin, and Zakatal raions were also about to face upheavals.

These events are associated with social-economic and political roots. People are revolting not because they are living poorly, but because they do not have an opportunity to improve their lives, are deprived of their vote, as well as the right to participate in ruling the country, their raion, or even determining their own fate. Then they engage in lynching, burn hotels and cars, as in Ismayilli, or homes, as in Gub, belonging to hated bureaucrats. Of course, these are not democratic means of restoring justice. But this is not their fault. It is the fault of the authorities, who have deprived the people of the right to express their protest through democratic means. When the authorities restrict fundamental rights, such as the freedom of assembly or expression, or do not allow political parties to meet with people in the regions, they should understand what choice they leave to those who are doomed to poverty and a lack of rights.

The stormy events marking the beginning of the year in which presidential elections will take place show how high the temperature of society might go on the eve of major political campaigns. And if events will continue at the pace set in January in the succeeding months, it is not clear if it will be possible to finish the campaign without violence.

We are not simply speaking about revolts and revolutions. Neither the authorities, nor the opposition wants

these; the independent institutions of civil society are particularly opposed to such outcomes. The Forum of the Intelligentsia in Azerbaijan consistently warns participants in the political processes in the country of these dangers.

But will the authorities, relying only on force, hold the situation under control and direct it in the direction they need before the elections? Or will the looming collision in the country and within the ruling elite lead to a lack of coordination, and possibly a split at the highest levels of power? Perhaps, such a scenario serves the secret desires of some groups among the authorities, who support the idea of worsening the situation in the country to force a culmination that would allow them to impose martial law or adopt extraordinary powers making it possible to postpone the elections.

It is interesting to lay out the famous political scientist Zafar Kuliev's answer to these questions which are often posed in the media:

"The January announcements presage a growth in confrontation processes and to a small degree work for a democratic vector in the development of the pre-election environment. They, de facto, demonstrate the beginning of a systemic crisis among the authorities. If the crisis is dragged out for a long time, then the country can expect disturbing developments, fraught with increased repression and a destabilization of the situation.

The authorities are repeating the mistake of corrupt authoritarian regimes who face crisis situations—they are relying only of force and money, trying to crush or buy everyone. Like other similar regimes, the ruling

circles of Azerbaijan are hostages to their own political course, which rejects dialogue and reforms as effective methods of resolving conflicts. Listening to the demands of citizens, or appeals by the opposition or international organizations is perceived by the authorities as a risky display of weakness, which could call into question the stability of the regime. Thus, in the face of growing domestic and foreign pressure, the regime dooms itself to ever more aggressive responses. It would rather collapse than voluntarily give up its position.

The euphoria in some opposition circles that the pace of events set in January will lead to the quick collapse of the authorities and open the road to democratic elections has little basis. Above all the problem is that the events are largely proceeding at their own pace, in a spontaneous manner, and not under the control of the opposition. Social and political organizations are lagging behind events. They are not in the thick of the action, to say nothing of leading or controlling events. In such a spontaneous and revolutionary situation, it would be naïve to assume that these events will create a base for a magic transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

The January dynamic of events seems more aimed toward a revolutionary, rather than an electoral evolution of the situation. In equal measure, the authorities count on a counterrevolutionary, and not an electoral response. The elections remain in the shadow of a deepening crisis and a confrontational split in society. Only time will tell if it is possible to develop the situation in a different direction.

Translated from the Russian by Robert Ortung

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January 2013 in Azerbaijan: The Election Has Begun

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

This article complements the other articles published in this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest by providing details on the main events in January and examining the inner struggle at the highest level of the political elite.

Upheaval

January 2013 has been a month of protests in Azerbaijan. Two major spontaneous protest actions took place: at

the Bina Trade Center and in the city of Ismayilli, proving that groups are ready to come out into the streets. Additionally, another large demonstration took place