

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 possibility 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

in Baku on January 12, to protest against non-combat soldier deaths (accidents, suicides, diseases, army hazing etc.). This cause united people from different age groups and social backgrounds, activists as well as the typically passive. Moreover, on January 26, two days after the civil unrest in Ismayilli, young people staged a protest in Baku demanding an end to the alleged ill-treatment and persecution of those who participated in the earlier riots.

All the organized and unorganized protest actions in January demonstrated one new tendency: the citizens' tolerance of business-as-usual practices is nearing its limits. People no longer want to tolerate the things they tolerated in the past.

January 12—The Death of Jeyhun Qubadov

Certainly, many soldiers have died in suspicious circumstances in Azerbaijan in the past, but this time the reaction was completely different from previous ones. So what caused thousands of people to take to the central square of Baku after years of silence? It is difficult to identify a single cause, but to start with, this time the evidence of abuse on the body of the soldier Jeyhun Qubadov was clearly visible and suggested what had happened to him in an effective manner. There were clear marks of ill-treatment on the dead soldier's face and pictures of his body circulated in the country's social media networks. Defense Ministry officials said he slipped and had injured himself falling down a hill. Their story was not convincing, to say the least. Also, this death provided a specific, concrete case and it helped to unite and mobilize the people.

Some observers say that January 12 was such a successful event in part because the number of social media (Facebook and Twitter) users in Azerbaijan has reached 1 million persons, which is a two-fold increase from 2011. Now it is not only young people who join Facebook and socialize but also middle-age and older people who come to social media to discuss problems and engage in politics. In that respect social media has become an indispensable tool for people in a country where the traditional media is controlled by the authorities, public assembly is banned, and voluntary associations face huge administrative obstacles.

Another important question is why authorities allowed the January 12 protest to happen. January 12 was an unusual event because, starting from late 2005, protesters were never really permitted to occupy Fountain Square in the heart of the city. It appears that this time the authorities realized that they had a problem. Political parties did not organize the protest, which is probably one reason why the government was more tolerant towards the demonstrators, as they did not per-

ceive the protest to be "political." The protesters did not call for the resignation of the government in general but targeted the Ministry of Defense.

The Bina Trade Center

The protest in the Bina Trade Center was sparked by the increase in fees for shop-keepers. Later the protest turned into violent clashes between shop-keepers and riot police. The event was unique because of who was protesting—traders, who spend most of their time running their business rather than engaging with political and civil society. Although the authorities were tolerant towards the January 12 protesters, their response to the situation in Bina and Ismayilli was different. Several demonstrators faced criminal prosecution on both occasions.

Ismayilli

A car accident and the subsequent beating of a local taxi driver allegedly by the relative of the governor resulted in violent civil unrest in the city of Ismayilli. People burned down one hotel and another house that belonged to the governor. The residents of Ismayilli announced through these actions that they were fed up with the local governor's illegal behavior and demanded the governor's replacement.

This event was particularly important because the protesters did not seek to change the system, but the person. They never asked, for instance, to have governors elected by people and not appointed by the president. Some protesters were also chanting that the government in Azerbaijan must change.

The government sent internal troops and special forces to Ismayilli to restore order. Police used tear gas against the protesters, then arrested and beat them.

The potential sources of popular discontent in Ismayilli were social and economic more than anything else. Ismayilli is one of the least economically developed regions of Azerbaijan, the unemployment rate is high, and capital investment is low. By contrast, the neighboring Gabala is advancing rapidly as a tourist center with recently built five-star hotels and an airport.

The political problem is that governors in Azerbaijan are appointed by the president and not elected by popular vote. In a country where tribalism remains strong, locals typically dislike outsiders coming to rule them from other places. This tendency is less prevalent than in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it is a sensitive issue when governors do not represent the local people. Another political problem is that, in fact, the country is being administered according to a system in which a region (or group of regions) are attached to a particular minister (or another influential bureaucrat). According to this informal division, Ismayilli, for instance, is under

the management of the Minister of Social Welfare Fizuli Alekperov. Hence his brother Nizami Alekperov is the governor. This division has created differences between regions in terms of socio-economic development, as some ministers they “take a good care” of their regions, and others do not.

However, perhaps the most surprising development was the arrest of two prominent opposition politicians in connection with the Ismayilli events. Tofiq Yagublu, Deputy Chairman of Musavat Party and Ilgar Mammadov, Chairman of REAL Movement, were charged with inciting public disorder in Ismayilli, where they went the next day after the unrest started. Although people expected that the president would punish the authorities in Ismayilli for their lawless behavior, in fact the government decided to hold the opposition accountable for reasons that remain unclear.

Domestic Politics in the Run-up to the Elections

The election season is already well under way. The prosecutor has launched a criminal probe into corruption charges at the Azerbaijani Cinema Union, which is led by the prominent Oscar-winning Azerbaijani movie director Rustam Ibrahimbeyov. Ibrahimbeyov, who is becoming a well-respected leader of the civil opposition, has been critical of the government and he is the main founder of the Intellectual Forum, which seeks

to achieve major political changes in Azerbaijan. Ibrahimbeyov is also a member of the Union of Azerbaijani Organizations in Russia, also known as the “Billionaires Union.” This organization brings together the most powerful Russian oligarchs of Azerbaijani origin. It is possible that the Union might also nominate someone or support an existing candidate in Azerbaijan’s presidential elections in October.

The Musavat Party and REAL Citizens Movement have already nominated their candidates. This is part of the overt struggle for power; at the same time, there is another layer of the power struggle, which is not very visible and public knowledge of the proceeding are largely based on rumors. This is the internal struggle of various power groups within the regime. The tension mainly centers around the battle between the Pashayevs (the family of Mehriban Aliyeva, the first lady) versus Ramiz Mehdiyev, a powerful eminence grise of the late president Heydar Aliyev. There is a political crisis inside the regime since Ilham Aliyev (even if the amended constitution removed term limits) legally is not permitted to run for a third term, as the law does not have retrospective effect. Therefore, the regime might need to produce a new candidate and this is quite a challenge.

Overall, 2013 promises to be an exciting year, many in Azerbaijan already look forward to the end of year and the major question is: “Will the regime finally change this year?”

About the Author

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INTERNATIONAL PRESS REVIEW

Media Reports on the Protest Actions in Azerbaijan

Dozens arrested after Azerbaijan protests

Aljazeera (Qatar) 26 January 2013

Police have arrested about 40 activists demonstrating in Azerbaijan’s capital Baku against President Ilham Aliyev’s government, and in support of residents of a northern town where protests were crushed earlier this week. [...]

Unrest [there] reflected frustration at what some Azeris see as an overbearing government, corruption and a large divide between rich and poor in the mostly Muslim Caspian Sea nation of nine million where many lack jobs, money and prospects. [...] “Our patience came to an end. People are very unhappy with this regime. We demand a change of power in our country,” demonstrator Malakhat Nasibova said at the protest in Baku.

Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/201312623135907244.html>