

Stepping into the Unlimited Phase: Ilham Aliyev's Third Term

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Abstract

Azerbaijan's sixth presidential election since independence, held on 9 October 2013, was again neither free nor fair. It granted President Ilham Aliyev his third term after term limits had been eliminated by a referendum in 2009. However, the election itself passed essentially unnoticed because the media completely ignored the opposition and the incumbent refused to campaign. This situation left the citizenry uninformed about political developments in the country and particularly about the activities of the opposition. In addition, the permanent repression and violation of human rights has created a climate in which the citizenry is not (and has no willingness to be) involved in politics. The status quo is here to stay.

Background

On October 9, 2013 Azerbaijan conducted its sixth presidential elections since gaining independence. The elections have been heavily criticized by domestic and international observers as having failed to meet international standards and the Azerbaijani government's commitments and obligations to international institutions. The preliminary statement of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), which observed the entire electoral process including campaigning, legal framework, work of the election administration, and the media, concluded that the voting and counting processes were flawed by substantive irregularities, such as ballot stuffing and 'carousel' voting (individuals casting multiple ballots). OSCE/ODIHR also concluded that in 58% of the observed polling stations, the vote counting process was 'bad or very bad'. Nevertheless, ruling party members and the Central Election Commission dismissed this statement, saying that it 'showed disrespect for the will of the Azerbaijani people' and is 'based on false information provided by the opposition'.

Now if we turn back and examine the picture from at least 2003, some things will become clearer. The year of 2003 became a landmark in Azerbaijan's new history, as it was the point when the 'son replaced the father': the deteriorating health of the former Soviet official and KGB general Heydar Aliyev (or even his alleged death in July 2003) pushed the ruling elite to agree on his son Ilham as the united candidate of the ruling party. Ilham Aliyev's accession to power in 2003 was surrounded by extensive violations of the electoral law and suppression of fundamental freedoms. Hundreds of opposition activists attempted to protest against the falsification of the elections on October 16, 2003, and the government responded with a massive crackdown: arrests, torture, and intimidation were widespread. OSCE/ODIHR reported that 600 persons were arrested throughout the country. Moreover, many election officials who represented opposition parties were intimidated to sign fraudulent final protocols of the vote

count. OSCE/ODIHR also concluded that 'overall, the presidential election was a missed opportunity for a credible democratic process. Progress toward democratic elections in Azerbaijan will now depend first and foremost on the political will of the authorities'.

Ilham Aliyev quickly consolidated his rule after 2003. However, it would be a mistake to attribute this to his personal capacity and skills. Two things are important to bear in mind in order to understand why Ilham Aliyev's rule has lasted so long. Firstly, it is about oil. The major oil contracts and investments were agreed before 2003, but the real oil money, in fact, started to inundate the country after 2005. This is the year when Azerbaijan's biggest oil project, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, started to rake in revenues. So, although Ilham Aliyev did not have the skills of a politician or of a statesman as his father did, his rule enjoyed a constant stream of oil money, which made it easier to buy supporters and suppress opponents.

The second important feature of the Ilham Aliyev period is the transformation of the political, economic and administrative structure from simply authoritarian to oligarchic and authoritarian. Under Ilham Aliyev, the government gradually turned into a 'union of oligarchs'. Indeed, ministers of the post-2003 government (and certainly, most of them retained their posts as Ilham Aliyev stated he would continue the 'political course of Heydar Aliyev') have become much more influential than before. Ilham Aliyev has to some extent decentralized the grip on the political regime and become something resembling a 'first among equals'. He has become a mediator and a 'consensus point,' around which all those who intend to perpetuate the system agree. Those inside the regime who disagreed with this arrangement and Ilham Aliyev's role soon faced punishment (e.g., imprisonment for embezzlement).

Referendum 2009

The next presidential elections in 2008 were calm and uncontested because the opposition boycotted them.

But soon after President Aliyev won re-election, a new political crisis emerged. Mehriban Aliyeva, the first lady who also represents the increasingly powerful Pashayev family, started to be seen as a replacement for Ilham Aliyev after his final second term as a president. Her media coverage increased, although the propaganda of her becoming the next president was not forthright. It was more inferred than explicit. However, the prospects of her becoming president cautioned the biggest and most powerful clan of Nakhchivanis (originating from the enclave of Nakhchivan), the group that has the most extensive representation inside the Azerbaijani ruling elite. Thus, the referendum that would eliminate term limits for the presidency was seen as an exit from the impasse that emerged between various factions inside the elite. In January 2009, an amendment to the constitution was adopted through a referendum allowing the incumbent president to run for an unlimited number of times. This change was criticized by the Venice Commission (the Council of Europe's advisory body on legislation) which warned that the changes 'may prove a serious setback on Azerbaijan's road to consolidated democracy'.

Pre-Electoral Situation 2013

Several traits marked the pre-electoral situation in Azerbaijan before the October vote in 2013. First of all, from the very beginning the entire pre-electoral debate was focused around the issue of the 'third term'. There was an impression among the politically active parts of the society that 'Ilham Aliyev did not win the approval' of the bigger hegemonic states in the region (mostly Russia, the US, Europe). Rumors were floating around that Ilham Aliyev was trying to secure the support of the great powers, but it was not easy. There was a sense that the big powers would not close their eyes on such a blatant 'usurpation' of power by Aliyev. These reports were widespread in oppositional media outlets throughout 2012–2013.

On June 12, 2013 the foreign policy advisor to the president, Novruz Mammadov, made a statement in which he said that, Ilham Aliyev's presidency had been 'approved by the big states'. He also added that those countries, which want to use the 'third term' issue against Azerbaijan, would fail.

The second important development was that on June 7 major opposition forces and civil society groups came together to establish the National Council of Democratic Forces—an unprecedented coalition of political party members, intellectuals, and youth and NGO activists. Although stronger unions of opposition blocs existed before the elections in the past, the power of the National Council lay in the fact that in such a non-

permissive environment it had attracted a broad range of forces and individuals to unite against the regime. Another unprecedented development in Azerbaijani politics was that major political parties had agreed to support a candidate without political party affiliation. A united candidate of the opposition was a response to a long standing expectation of political and civil society that all the forces inside the country who disagree with Aliyev's regime should speak with one voice. Rustam Ibrahimbeyov, a renowned script-writer and movie director, founded the National Council and was the united candidate of the opposition. On June 7, Ibrahimbeyov was elected chairman of National Council and on July 2 he became its consensus candidate for the upcoming presidential elections. However, as Ibrahimbeyov had dual citizenship (Azerbaijani/Russian), the Central Election Commission did not register his candidacy. Thus, Jamil Hasanli, another intellectual-historian and former MP replaced Ibrahimbeyov as presidential candidate of the National Council.

It is important to emphasize that the entire pre-electoral phase in Azerbaijan was marked with arrests, intimidation and harassments against Aliyev's political opponents. Among those arrested on fake charges were seven members of the NIDA Youth Movement, a group that has criticized the Aliyev government and staged protest actions.

Russian Involvement

An important part of the pre-election period was the involvement of Russia. It was perhaps for the first time in 20 years after independence that news started to emerge about Russia's probable involvement in a regime change in Azerbaijan. The Union of Azerbaijani Organizations in Russia, known as the 'Billionaires Union' (since several Russian billionaires of Azerbaijani origin joined it), was established in Russia and seemed to have an interest in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs. Rustam Ibrahimbeyov and former Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Abbas Abbasov were among the most vocal members of the Union. Although the Union did not directly criticize the ruling regime in Azerbaijan, it was largely seen by Azerbaijani ruling politicians as a Russia-backed project.

However, the expectations of a regime change supported by Russia vanished when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Baku on August 13. The visit was seen by many as a sign of direct support for Aliyev's third term.

Immediately before the Elections: Campaigning

Generally, the campaigning environment in Azerbaijan can be described as extremely restricted. Usually, there is a considerable amount of fear among citizens. More-

over, the authorities have significantly reduced the legal pre-election campaigning period from 60 to 23 days. The extremely unfavourable situation for the opposition circumscribed the possibilities for campaigning. The authorities again used the usual tactics of putting forward 'fake candidates', people whose role was only to create a façade of competition and attack the united opposition's candidate during the one-hour debates on public TV. These so-called debates (which were actually a roundtable with 6 minutes of air time allocated to each of the 10 candidates) became the only opportunity for the National Council's candidate to campaign on TV. Although opposition candidates were able to hold rallies in designated places, they often encountered obstacles.

The ruling party officials made it clear at the beginning of the campaigning that Ilham Aliyev did not need advertising, because 'he is well known for the good work he has done'. However, Aliyev paid visits to the regions of Azerbaijan and opened facilities, which should be in fact be considered campaigning.

Conclusion

The re-election of Ilham Aliyev in a highly dubious environment of electoral fraud and human rights violations was probably the second important turn in his career

after he came to power in 2003. Although the experience of 2003 was quite shocking for the population of Azerbaijan, the 2013 elections passed by peacefully.

The October 2013 election has made it obvious that continuous electoral manipulations have largely undermined citizens' confidence in any election. On the other hand, the regime's extensive control of media, permanent informal ban on freedom of assembly, and continued harassment, intimidation and arrest of dissidents has left the citizenry uninformed about political developments in the country and particularly about the activities of the opposition. Both issues have paved the way to the formation of a citizenry, which is not (and has no willingness to be) involved in politics. Although the National Council focused on shaking the status quo, it could gain little leverage against the powerful regime.

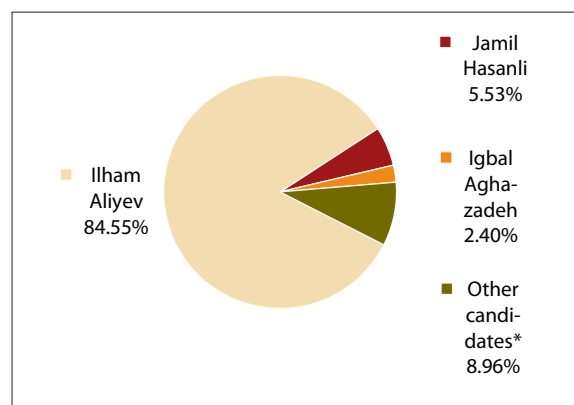
Ilham Aliyev seems to have won a green light for the further consolidation of his rule in Azerbaijan and the status quo appears likely to continue as long as he satisfies the security and energy interests of the major global powers. Perhaps more importantly, the status quo promises to last as long as oil resources are sufficient to keep the active part of population content. What happens after oil production decreases remains a huge question mark.

About the Author

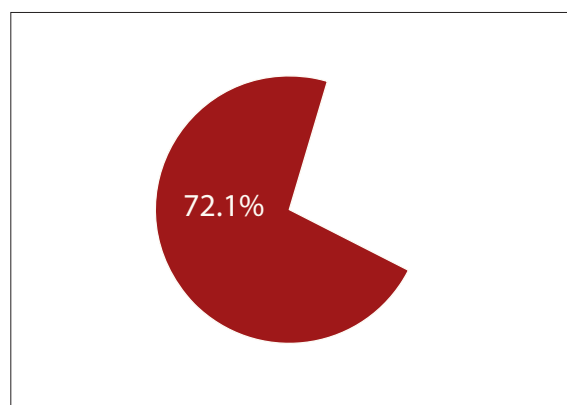
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Information of the Central Election Commission on Preliminary Results of the Presidential Elections Conducted on October 9, 2013 (12.45 p.m., October 10, 2013)

Election Results



Voter Turnout



* Gudrat Hasanguliyev: 1.99%, Zahid Oruj: 1.45%, Ilyas Ismayilov: 1.07%, Araz Alizadeh: 0.87%, Faraj Guliyev: 0.86%, Hafiz Hajiyev: 0.66%, Sardar Mammadov: 0.61%.

Source: <http://www.msk.gov.az/en/newsmsk/661/>