

The Opposition's Strategy in Azerbaijan's 2013 Presidential Elections

By Shahin Abbasov, Baku

Abstract

Azerbaijan's opposition, fragmented and weakened by repressions over the course of two decades, managed to unite and participate in the October 9 presidential elections with a broad coalition, which included traditional secular, pro-Western parties, Islamists, some pro-Russian forces, and even former Soviet functionaries. As a result, the opposition backed a single candidate and held relatively large rallies for the first time in many years. However, this unity was not sufficient to win at the ballot box. While the opposition succeeded in mobilizing protest voters, it failed to overcome the general public's strong skepticism in the possibility of political change via elections. Now the major challenge for Azerbaijan's opposition is to maintain its new-found unity until the 2015 parliamentary elections.

Milestone in Opposition Unity

Incumbent President Ilham Aliyev scored a landslide victory on October 9 and was re-elected for his third presidential term with more than 84 percent of the votes. His major rival, the candidate of the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF) opposition bloc, Jamil Hasanli, officially won a bit more than five percent, while none of the eight remaining candidates exceeded three percent. While the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) international observation mission said in its preliminary reports that the elections fell short of meeting democratic standards, were neither free nor fair, and witnessed numerous violations and rigging, hardly anyone doubted Aliyev's victory.

The government, which enjoys huge administrative and financial resources, overwhelmingly dominated during the entire election campaign and provided the incumbent head of state with a comfortable victory thanks to its total control over election commissions at all levels.

The oppositional NCDF, which lacked serious financial resources, suffered from repressions (several activists were arrested and intimidated during the campaign) and did not have access to television and radio broadcasts, nevertheless conducted a relatively bold campaign for its candidate, holding three rallies in Baku and making trips to several regions. However, it fell short of what was needed for victory.

For the first time in almost two decades, Azerbaijan's major opposition parties and groups united and established the National Council of Democratic Forces election bloc in early June 2013. The engine behind this process was the well-known Azerbaijani Oscar-winning screenwriter Rustam Ibrahimbekov, who began criticizing the Ilham Aliyev government about three years ago and has faced strong government pressure ever since.

He proposed the idea of the National Council as a broad coalition of opposition forces and was elected

its chairman and single candidate for the presidential elections in July. The 125-member NCDF includes the leaders of the two major secular pro-Western parties, the Popular Front Party (PFPA) and Musavat, the Ibrahimbekov-led Forum of Intellectuals, the Liberal party, the "EL" movement which includes former high-ranking functionaries, activists of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, several well-known representatives of civil society, and some small opposition parties.

The failure to unite due to the personal ambitions of party leaders had often provoked criticism from the media and local analysts in the past. It also led to widespread apathy among grass-root level activists and functionaries. Therefore, the creation of the NCDF was considered by many as an important milestone and inspired protest voters.

However, Rustam Ibrahimbekov failed to secure registration as a candidate. The Central Elections Commission rejected his application because of his dual citizenship (along with his Azerbaijani citizenship, the screenwriter also had a Russian passport and Azerbaijan's legislation bans people with dual citizenship from running for office). In July–August, Ibrahimbekov unsuccessfully tried to revoke his Russian citizenship until it became clear that he would not be allowed to participate in the elections.

Thus, the opposition faced the dilemma of how to proceed with its campaign. There was no unity inside the National Council concerning a strategy after Ibrahimbekov was barred from running. Some insisted on having a back-up candidate, others believed that a boycott would be the best way, while a third fraction said that several candidates, including Musavat party leader Isa Gambar, Popular Front Party chairman Ali Kerimli and others should run separately.

Ultimately, the NCDF agreed on running another united candidate only in late August. By that time, the opposition had already wasted a considerable amount of time that could have been devoted to organizing a

decent campaign and had lost momentum—enthusiasm among grass-root opposition activists, which was strong in the early summer after the creation of the National Council, had declined.

On August 23, the NCDF decided to nominate Jamil Hasanli, 61, as the replacement for Ibrahimbekov in the presidential elections. Ibrahimbekov himself supported the decision.

Hasanli is a former deputy chairman of the Popular Front Party and advisor to former president Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993). He served as an independent (no party-alignment) Member of Parliament for two terms in 2000–2010 and is a well-regarded professor of history and author of several books concerning the foreign policy of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918–1920 and the history of the Cold War.

The choice of Hasanli could be considered another milestone in the history of Azerbaijan's opposition. For the first time in its history, a wide spectrum of opposition forces united behind a well-known representative of the scientific elite, rather than a party leader or functionary. Hasanli is not associated with any political party or group and has a clean reputation, which complicated the work of the government's political spin-doctors who organized a negative PR campaign against him.

During the campaign, Hasanli won popularity, especially among protesting youth groups, and now, in the post-election period, will likely remain on Azerbaijan's political scene as a reputable and respected leader who could preserve opposition unity in the future.

Predetermined Result Dominated the Campaign

From the very beginning of the campaign, no serious political analyst in Azerbaijan doubted that the results had been predetermined—incumbent Ilham Aliyev was the obvious frontrunner and his landslide victory was expected.

During the entire three-week campaign period, there was little campaign activity, either in the country's capital Baku or in the provinces. There were few campaign posters on the streets. A handful of faded informational posters from the Central Election Commission (CEC) calling on citizens to vote and explaining voters' rights were poorly designed and easily overlooked among the sea of large commercial advertising billboards.

Television stations did not show much interest in the elections either. Surprisingly, no single private TV or radio channel in Azerbaijan applied to the CEC for a license for paid election advertising, election talk shows or debates. Such "voluntarily" abstinence among broadcasters who might have secured commercial gains indicates the total dependence of TV stations on the Pres-

idential Administration and that the government was not interested in an active and competitive campaign.

Propaganda appeared only on Public Television (İctimai TV, ITV) which is legally obliged to provide free air time to candidates. Each candidate received 18 minutes total free broadcast time in several debates on ITV.

Overall, according to Anar Mammadli, the head of Election Monitoring and Teaching Democracy Center (EMTDC), a Baku-based election watchdog, there was no "election atmosphere" anywhere in the country. "The campaign took place in a very calm atmosphere and was almost invisible for the general public," Mammadli said. According to him, it was not possible to hold free and fair elections while "political freedoms, the right to assembly and freedom of speech were seriously restricted."

One of the campaign's main features was the passive behavior of President Aliyev. He did not hold a single campaign rally, make any trips to the regions and never participated in televised debates, to which he delegated ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party leaders. Unlike the 2003 elections when Aliyev promised 600,000 new jobs, doubling the GDP and many other future accomplishments, this time the President did not make a single campaign promise for the next five years. His campaign slogan was "Davam" (Continue) and mainly described the economic successes of his ten-year presidency. He also signed a series of executive orders increasing salaries for almost all government employees, including teachers, doctors, soldiers, law-enforcement officials, pensioners and others.

Hasanli, in contrast, conducted a relatively bold campaign, taking into account the NCDF's lack of resources, and targeted Aliyev personally in his criticism. During his speeches on televised debates, campaign rallies and meetings with people in the regions, Hasanli focused on the issues of endemic corruption in Azerbaijan and the country's poor democracy and human rights record.

"People in this country have to pay bribes from the day they are born until their death and Ilham Aliyev is personally at the top of this corrupted pyramid. Aliyev is ruling the country like his personal business empire," Hasanli, whose campaign slogan was "Basdi" (Enough), said during his campaign appearances. He presented public documents about the enormous capital flow out of the country by members of the Aliyev family and other high-ranking officials as well as information concerning a number of companies and accounts registered by the ruling family in various offshore zones.

Among Hasanli's promises was a "golden amnesty," i.e. the unconditional release of all political prisoners; measures to protect property rights and to guarantee the independence of the courts and the promotion of

freedom of religion, including permission for observant Muslim women to wear hijab where desired.

He has made a few populist-sounding pitches, too: state subsidies for the agriculture sector and government payback of small-scale personal loans; cutting utility prices in half and a two to threefold increase in pensions and the salaries of teachers and doctors. He also promised to remove all restrictions imposed by country's migration legislation for Georgian citizens of Azerbaijani heritage.

Despite a lack of time and resources, Hasanli and the NCDF conducted an active campaign with trips to six regions and three campaign rallies in Baku. This strategy of talking about the country's most important problems and not being afraid to target the president personally increased Hasanli's popularity and mobilized some protest voters and youth.

However, the shortage of time and resources, as well as the general apathy of the population, which does not believe in the possibility of political change via elections due to the traditionally wide-spread election rigging in the past, took its toll. Hasanli's meetings and rallies were not massive, with maximum participation of about 7,000 people. Several incidents with obstacles created by the police and provocateurs trying to spoil the rallies took place during Hasanli's trips to the regions.

Opposition activists and journalists also came in for a disproportionate share of police attention, as well, ranging from the arrests and beatings of National Council activists to charges of alleged drug trafficking for one opposition journalist, Parviz Hashimli.

Ten activists from the pro-opposition NIDA youth movement faced charges of allegedly preparing a coup and making Molotov cocktails. The intended presidential candidate Ilgar Mammadov, leader of the Republican Alternative (REAL) movement, remains in prison on charges of having allegedly incited popular unrest earlier this year and was not registered as a candidate.

Another presidential candidate, who conducted a relatively active campaign, was a Member of Parliament from the opposition Umid (Hope) party, Iqbal Aghazadeh. He was cautious in criticizing the government and never singled out President Aliyev personally, but held several rallies and offered as many as eight differ-

ent programs targeting various social groups of the population—youth, teachers, pensioners, the unemployed among others. His campaign slogan was "Change your life." He came in third after Hasanli, but with just 2.4 percent of the vote.

The remaining seven candidates—non-partisan Member of Parliament Zahid Oruj; the United Azerbaijan Popular Front Party's Gudrat Hasanguliyev; the National Revival Movement Party's Faraj Guliyev; Social-Democrat Party leader Araz Alizade, and Modern Musavat Party chief Khafiz Hajiyev—either praised the government and attacked Hasanli and the National Council or were passive—the Justice Party's Ilyas Ismayilov, Democrat Party chairperson Sardar Mammadov.

New Challenges for the Opposition

The opposition lost this election, which according to the OSCE/ODIHR international observation mission, was undermined by limitations on the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association and fell short of meeting democratic standards.

Opposition candidate Jamil Hasanli demanded canceling the election results due to "their total falsification." "In fact, yesterday, Ilham Aliyev usurped power," Hasanli said at a press conference on October 10. His campaign appealed to the court to overturn the results.

However, it is clear that the opposition will not be able to organize strong resistance and protests and that the situation in the country will become quiet again soon.

The real challenge for the opposition now is to maintain unity and gradually increase its popularity among the population to ensure active participation and more votes in the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for November 2015. There is a good basis for optimism—the wide coalition of political forces in the NCDF and a respected leader in Jamil Hasanli. However, the question of whether the opposition will withstand the ongoing government repressions and will be able to stay united despite numerous internal controversies and divisions, remains open.

"This election is not the end of our fight," Hasanli said but emphasized that the opposition will use only peaceful protests to advance its cause.

About the Author

Shahin Abbasov is an independent Azerbaijani journalist and analyst. From 2004, he has been a freelance correspondent of the Internet publication Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org) in Azerbaijan. He worked for 14 years in the print media, including working as a deputy editor-in-chief of *Zerkalo* and *Echo* newspapers in Baku.