

E-Democracy in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The article examines the state of e-democracy in Azerbaijan, namely, the conditions for adult citizens to participate in the decision-making process by means of information and communication technologies.

Difficult Conditions

According to recent OSCE reports, about 80 percent of the population in Azerbaijan receives its information from TV channels, which, critical observers point out, mainly carry propaganda for the current government instead of providing citizens with quality information.

Furthermore, almost half of the population lacks access to regular, high-quality internet, which prevents them from receiving information from alternative sources, including social media. This problem becomes more obvious during the elections, when the citizens lack opportunities to obtain free and impartial information.

Finally, citizens who dare to criticize government decisions in social media face prosecution and may even end up in prison.

As a result of this situation, this article argues that despite the opportunities for civic participation created by online media, there is still a long way to go until e-democracy develops in Azerbaijan.

The State of Democracy in Azerbaijan

As an oil-rich country, Azerbaijan is described in international reports as a place where human rights and freedoms are repressed.

According to the World Report 2014 issued by Human Rights Watch, the Azerbaijani government's records on freedom of expression, assembly, and association deteriorated during 2013: "The authorities arrested dozens of political activists on bogus charges, imprisoned critical journalists, broke up several peaceful public demonstrations, and adopted legislation that further restricted fundamental freedom" (Watch Human Rights, 2014).

Another human rights organization, Freedom House, considers Azerbaijan as a "not free country," in contrast to "free" and "partly free countries" (Freedom House, Map of Freedom, 2014).

However, in a recent speech, President Ilham Aliyev dismissed the critique regarding democracy issues in Azerbaijan, emphasizing the existence of free internet in the country (APA, 2013). Yet, according to the critics, although the internet platform is free and no restrictions are imposed on accessing websites, the deficiency of democracy in the country naturally affects the devel-

opment of e-democracy as well. The same human rights abuses in real life are abused in virtual life as well, illustrated by the so called "Facebook prisoners," as well as by the violation of the "virtual rights of assembly" and "virtual freedom of expression."

What Is E-Democracy?

There is no single definition of e-democracy. It can be generally described as the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes (E-Democracy, 2009).

On March 23–24, 2010, the European governments met in Lisbon to announce the European Union strategy for the next 10 years. One of the key elements of this strategy was to avoid the digital divide by ensuring that no citizen is left behind in using web-based technologies for decision-making and administrative purposes (Meier, 2012).

What is the distinction between e-democracy and e-government? Norris argues that while developing the ICT infrastructure for e-government, the aim of the authorities is not to provide a platform for e-democracy, but rather to maintain the tools for delivering governmental messages faster and for making administrative processes more effective, while activists and civil society leaders use this infrastructure for empowering civic activism and participation (Norris, 2010).

E-Democracy in Azerbaijan: Access to Online Media

Usually democracy studies are organized around the following themes: freedom and equality, human rights, collective decision making, legitimacy, and justice (Frank Cunningham, 2005).

Article 1.1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan reads: "The sole source of state power in the Republic of Azerbaijan is the people of Azerbaijan." However, the citizens of Azerbaijan are not provided with sufficient opportunities to employ this Constitutional right. The ruling family controls almost all the TV channels (Kazimova, 2011), whereas 80 percent of the population receive information from television. Hence their access is mainly limited to information that is pro-ruling party, consequently, they lack the political

awareness to make informed decisions in elections. The opposition candidates find themselves in unfavorable conditions as the restrictive media environment mars the election campaigns (OSCE, 2013).

However, for the last five years, since the internet and social media have been on the rise, there also has been an increase in civil participation too. For a certain part of the population, social media, especially Facebook (up to 700,000 Azerbaijanis are registered on Facebook), which enjoys more freedom than the traditional media, has become an alternative source of information and even a platform for civic activities (Freedom House, 2014).

Despite these changes, however, they can hardly be generalized to the national level. Although the government announced 2013 as an ICT year, there are only 500 villages out of 4,000 in Azerbaijan with access to broadband internet. As 53 percent of the population is rural, almost half of them have limited access to the internet (Mammadli, 2014), hence to the alternative information spread via the social media.

Some may argue that the rural population can go online using mobile internet platforms. However, the infrastructure for the mobile internet is not well developed yet: Even 3G is not available for all the mobile internet providers throughout the country, to say nothing about 4G.

In addition, the internet is quite expensive in Azerbaijan. By comparison, 1 mb costs 7.5 USD in Azerbaijan, while it costs 1 USD in Turkey and 0.15 cent in Lithuania. Furthermore, accessing internet devices, such as computers, is also problematic as there is only one computer-producing company in the country, while entrepreneurs who import computers have to pay 36 percent taxes, including VAT and customer taxes.

Considering the reasons listed above, it can be inferred that the poor infrastructure provided by the government prevents half of the population from accessing alternative information and participating in collective decision making.

Finally, although the Azerbaijani Law on Access to Information lists 34 types of information that must be publicized online, according to the report issued by the Media Rights Institute (MRI), government organizations treat up to 60 percent of their information as confidential. MRI monitored the websites of 67 governmental organizations and found out that they publicize only 30–40 percent of the information they are required to share by the law. These organizations expose only 18 percent of the information related to tenders, while only 4 percent of the state budget information can be found online (Freedom of Access to Information in Azerbaijan Report, 2014).

Freedom of E-Expression

Freedom House describes the traditional media in Azerbaijan as not free, while the internet as partly free. Indeed, the internet has created an opportunity to escape the direct censorship imposed on the traditional media and is mostly free from systematic blocking of websites; yet, the online activists are increasingly exposed to detention and intimidation. Moreover, the Criminal Code was amended on June 4, 2013, to explicitly extend the application of defamation provisions to internet content. Finally, the recent amendments to the legal framework unduly restrict the constitutional guarantees on access to information (OSCE, 2013).

A few examples from a large body of evidence illustrate the problems. Jabbar Savalan, a 23-year-old student and a member of the opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) in Azerbaijan, was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on May 4, 2011 on drug charges. International Human Rights organizations, including Amnesty International, recognized his arrest as fabricated, relating it to his post on Facebook a day before, in which he called for anti-government protests in Baku (Amnesty International, 2011).

Additionally, MRI declared that the detention of social network activist Abdul Abilov on drug possession charges was politically motivated, as Abilov is an administrator of the Facebook page “Let’s say stop to flatterers” (<<https://www.facebook.com/YaltaqlaraDurDeyk?fref=ts>>, offline as of 16 April 2014).

According to the local NGO Legal Protection and Awareness Society, there are four “Facebook prisoners” in the country: “All four are officially convicted on drug charges but we know that they are imprisoned for creating Facebook pages, which are critical to the government” (Jafarov, 2014).

Such arrests and intimidations lead to self-censorship by the new media users in Azerbaijan as they feel that their online activities are monitored by the authorities.

Freedom of E-Assembly

The social media platforms have provided a new opportunity for those who have encountered obstacles in meeting face-to-face to discuss public issues.

One of the examples is the fact that Facebook was the main platform for the Azerbaijani Front Party members to “come together” and have discussions in 2006–2013 after being forcefully evicted from their building in the city center of Baku.

In addition, social media has become central to organizing protests in Azerbaijan. Since early 2013, a number of protest actions have been organized primarily via Facebook without any support from the traditional opposition parties. Instead, the individuals spread

information throughout their personal social networks (Pearce, 2014).

There have also been some cases when the discussions held in the social media influenced government decisions. For instance, Safar Abiyev, the former Minister of Defense, who held this position for 18 years, was fired after a soldier's death led to a wave of protest that had been inspired by a heated discussion on Facebook (Pearce, 2014).

Conclusion

Azerbaijani citizens have gained an enhanced opportunity to employ their democratic rights on virtual platforms as social media, especially Facebook, enjoys more freedom than the traditional media, which is extensively controlled by the government.

Yet, there are two main reasons that prevent Azerbaijani citizens from being actively involved in e-participation: First, about 50 percent of the population does not have access to high quality internet, which prevents them from participating in online civic activities. Second, citizens who are critical about government decisions face prosecution, a situation that provokes extensive self-censorship in social media.

The Azerbaijani government should meet its legal obligations by making information sources accessible to its citizens and should guarantee the population's constitutional rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, including via the online platform.

About the Author

Ulviyya Asadzade is a journalist in Baku.

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