

DEMOCRATIZATION FALTERS IN AZERBAIJAN

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On 5 November 2000, Azerbaijan conducted the second parliamentary elections in its brief yet eventful history as an independent state. Before the elections, international pressure had brought about significant improvements to electoral legislation and had helped reverse decisions banning significant opposition parties from participating in the vote. These developments seemed to confirm the relative openness of Azerbaijan's political system to criticism and recommendations from the West. Yet serious irregularities in both the conduct of the elections and the subsequent counting of the votes have obliterated this progress and have cast serious doubt not only on Azerbaijan's development in the direction of a more pluralistic society but also on its political stability.

Azerbaijan gained its independence upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Like its neighbors in the South Caucasus—Armenia and Georgia—Azerbaijan became independent under less than ideal and orderly conditions. Azerbaijan was entangled in a debilitating war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian-populated enclave on Azerbaijan's territory, while Georgia experienced conflicts with its South Ossetian and Abkhazian minorities. All these disputes have remained unresolved despite the respective cease-fires in 1992–94, and they have severely affected the region's political and economic development. The influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees and infrastructural damage caused by the wars have had a harsh impact on the local economies, not to mention on local society. The region's chronic instability has discouraged foreign investors from doing business there

and has made the task of building pipelines to carry Caspian Sea oil and gas to markets much more difficult. The nationalist upsurge accompanying the conflicts has prevented the development of an ideologically defined political spectrum. The conflicts themselves have further complicated the democratization process and the building of civil society and have served as excuses for authoritarian rule.

Unlike Armenia and Georgia, where popular fronts opposed to Soviet rule had come to power through elections in 1990, Azerbaijan gained its independence under the sway of a pro-Moscow communist leadership that remained in power until it was forcibly unseated in the spring of 1992. The demise of communist rule brought the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) to power. In one of the freest elections in the post-Soviet sphere, the Front's leader, historian Abulfaz Elçibey, was elected president on 7 June 1992.¹

Despite the war, Azerbaijan under the Popular Front developed in a clearly democratic direction. Elçibey's government is widely credited with having laid the basis for democracy in the country. Yet due to the disastrous development of the war with Armenia and the ineptitude of the Popular Front government, this democratic process came to an abrupt halt in June 1993 when a rebellious army commander, Colonel Surat Huseinov, unseated the government in a bloodless coup, with clear evidence of Russian backing. Elçibey fled Baku, effectively surrendering his position to Heydar Aliiev, Azerbaijan's communist party chief in the 1970s, who proclaimed himself president on 18 June 1993 and subsequently named Huseinov as prime minister.² Aliiev, who had been one of the most influential figures in the entire Soviet Union during the early 1980s (a full Politburo member and a first deputy chairman of the entire Soviet Communist party, a position unprecedented for a native of a Muslim republic), gradually consolidated his rule. In balloting on 3 October 1993, he was confirmed as president, officially winning with a Soviet-style 98.8 percent of the vote. In March 1994, he concluded a cease-fire with Armenia, providing order and stability to the country. This stability, however, came at the cost of halting the ambitious process of democratization initiated in 1992. Much as in Georgia and Tajikistan, rapid political liberalization in Azerbaijan, coupled with conflict and unrest, ended up bringing back authoritarianism.

Today, Azerbaijan is neither a democracy nor a clearcut authoritarian state of the sort found in the Central Asian republics, with which Azerbaijan shares cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities. An active and diverse opposition, a relatively free press, and a vibrant political life exist in Azerbaijan. Opposition leaders (and the press) criticize the regime openly and harshly; they even organize demonstrations and rallies, something that would be unthinkable in Central Asia. Of course, the Azerbaijani political scene is not free from serious problems. Opposition figures are sued for libel, a private television channel was

suddenly closed, and none of the country's elections has come anywhere close to international standards. In sum, Azerbaijan is torn between powerful tendencies toward both democratization and authoritarianism.

Stumbling Toward Stability

Given his Soviet past, most regional and international observers assumed that Aliev would be Moscow's man. Subsequent evidence has shown, however, that Aliev's main support has come from the same quarter that had supported Elçibey—Turkey. In fact, the Turkish Foreign Ministry had always suspected Elçibey of being too inexperienced and erratic to lead Azerbaijan in such a complicated internal and regional context, and it saw Aliev, with his vast political experience at the highest level, as the one man who could manage the task. By early 1993, the situation in Azerbaijan had gotten so bad that Turkey had “started looking out for alternative horses to back.”³ Aliev, then head of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhjivan on the Turkish and Iranian border, was the obvious choice.

The period from 1993 to 1996 can roughly be termed Azerbaijan's hard road to stability. After the Azerbaijani armed forces, in total disarray following Huseinov's June coup in Baku, suffered severe military setbacks in the fall of 1993, victorious Armenian forces occupied the whole area between Karabakh and the Iranian border, thereby creating an easily defensible *cordon sanitaire* around the rebellious region. In May 1994, as a military stalemate developed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a cease-fire was signed under Russian auspices that still remains in force. No political settlement has been found, despite recent progress in the negotiations. To mollify the Russians, Azerbaijan agreed to join the Commonwealth of Independent States; unlike Georgia, however, it managed to prevent the stationing of Russian troops on its territory. Yet stability remained elusive, as Huseinov attempted another coup in October 1994. (Interestingly, this occurred immediately after the signing of a \$7 billion oil deal between Azerbaijan and foreign, mainly Western, oil companies to develop three Azerbaijani offshore oilfields in the Caspian Sea, a deal that Moscow emphatically opposed.) Huseinov's second coup failed, as people took to the streets, massing by the thousands in front of the presidential office. In 1995, another coup attempt, this time organized by a leader of the interior ministry forces, was averted; only since 1996 has Aliev had firm control over the country.

While Aliev's advent to power has brought stability to Azerbaijan, it also put an end to the country's first democratic experiment. Indeed, the wave of democratic enthusiasm that had swept through the republic in 1991–92 had cooled significantly as early as 1993. Political instability and the economic hardship caused by the war, the dismantling of the Soviet command economy, and mismanagement under the APF

government had led to a powerful wave of nostalgia for the Brezhnev era. And those “good old years” were associated with one man: Heydar Aliiev. Aliiev was the only person whom both Azerbaijanis on the street and foreign observers saw as capable of bringing Azerbaijan back on track. For an overwhelming majority of the population, stability was a more urgent concern than the abstract concept of democracy, which was generally seen as having brought nothing but disorder and poverty. It is reasonably certain that Aliiev would have won the 1993 presidential election overwhelmingly even if it had been held under proper democratic conditions. By 1997, Aliiev was credited, both domestically and internationally, with having restored order in Azerbaijan; with having succeeded in attracting numerous foreign oil companies to the country; with having improved Azerbaijan’s standing in world affairs; and (with Turkey’s help) with having created the foundation of a modern army.

All this, however, came at the cost of political liberties and democracy. The 1995 parliamentary elections were characterized by observers as a farce, with Aliiev’s supporters winning over 90 percent of the vote. After the elections, however, the opposition was gradually given greater representation in parliament, eventually coming to control more than a quarter of the seats.

Given that Azerbaijan has a presidential system, the 1998 presidential election naturally became the main focus of attention. At first, the regime issued an electoral law that was rejected by both the OSCE and the opposition, which decided to boycott the elections. In response to the OSCE’s criticism and after a dialogue with the opposition, the Aliiev regime reformed the electoral law and abolished press censorship. These changes, despite the problems that remained, won the OSCE’s approval, and several opposition parties, including the large National Independence Party (ANIP) led by Etibar Memedov, decided to participate. The other major opposition parties regarded the reforms as insufficient and boycotted the election.

Memedov’s participation, however, wrecked the opposition boycott and gave the elections legitimacy, both at home and abroad, although international observers reported major irregularities both in the election process (such as ballot-stuffing) and in the counting of the votes.⁴ Official results gave Aliiev 76 percent of the vote, far ahead of Memedov’s 11 percent, thus avoiding the runoff required by the constitution if the leading candidate wins less than two-thirds of the vote. Independent assessments on election day, however, showed Aliiev receiving only between 50 and 65 percent of the vote, with Memedov exceeding 25 percent. Although it is reasonably clear that Aliiev would have won a runoff, he seems to have desired a first-round victory to protect his image as a national savior. In retrospect, however, this electoral manipulation had the opposite effect, substantially weakening Aliiev’s popularity and boosting the divided opposition, especially ANIP, whose decision to

participate in the election gave it an opportunity to present its program to the people. The opposition parties that had boycotted the election, including the Popular Front and Musavat, grudgingly came to realize that their boycott, which had been interpreted by large parts of the population as a sign of weakness, had been a mistake.

The Political Players

The players on the Azerbaijani political scene can be divided into two main groups: the government bloc and the opposition parties. The government bloc consists of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) and a collection of minor political formations tied to the regime. A significant number of NAP cadres are well-entrenched and experienced functionaries who had served under Aliev during his tenure as communist party chief in the 1970s. In addition to this “old guard,” the NAP also has a “young” wing of reformers, often foreign-trained, who have associated themselves with the ruling circles. These two groups have widely divergent political and economic beliefs. Indeed, they seem to be engaged in a power struggle within the regime, which is likely to intensify once Aliev leaves office. Currently, the power struggle seems to be developing in the reformists’ favor. The presence of Aliev’s son Ilham in their camp, together with increasingly harsh criticism of the regime’s inefficiency by the media and the opposition, probably has also had an impact in pushing the president in their direction. At the NAP’s December 1999 congress, the modernist wing captured three of five deputy chairmanships. Significantly, these now include Ilham Aliev, who officially became his father’s deputy. Recently, Ramiz Mekhtiyev, the increasingly powerful head of the presidential office, has come under criticism within the party. Reformist forces fear that Mekhtiyev, part of the “old guard,” will try to position himself as a successor to the president.

The Azerbaijani opposition displays tendencies toward both fragmentation and cooperation. Most of the major opposition parties have their roots in the Popular Front; the differences among them center more on personalities than on political ideology. Despite being fragmented into several dozen parties, only half a dozen of which can be considered major, the opposition is capable of working together, whether it comes to organizing demonstrations or coordinating a response to government policies or actions. Although the opposition includes leftist forces, represented mainly by the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, center-right and nationalist parties predominate. The opposition parties with the largest degree of popular support are Musavat, ANIP, the Democratic Party, and the Popular Front.

Musavat takes its name from Azerbaijan’s first political party, founded in 1911, which ruled the first Azerbaijani republic between 1918 and 1920. The party benefits from a relatively strong nucleus of activists

and has placed itself in increasingly radical opposition to the regime. Gambar also gained some support by denouncing the domination of political life by natives of Nakhchivan—most of the country's leaders, both in government and opposition, spring from this enclave on the Iranian border. Musavat produces the country's most popular political newspaper, *Yeni Musavat*, and claims to be the largest opposition party.

The Popular Front party itself is even more tainted by this experience; moreover, it has been plagued by internal tensions. Since Elçibey's return from internal exile in 1998, the party has been divided between two factions led by equally charismatic figures: the "classics," led by Elçibey himself, and the "reformers," led by the party's 37-year-old deputy chairman Ali Kerimov. After Elçibey's death in August 2000, the rift widened, and shortly before the election the party split into two seemingly irreconcilable wings, both claiming to be the party's legitimate ruling bodies. The reformers clearly have a larger following among the party's rank and file. This wing defines itself as "centrist," dissociates itself from neoliberal economic ideas, and promotes a role (albeit a limited one) for the state in the economy. As Kerimov has acknowledged, the party has suffered greatly from not having dealt with its past mistakes.⁵ Its prospects of becoming a major party depend on its coming to terms with the 1992–93 debacle.

ANIP, which rivals Musavat as the largest opposition party, is led by Etibar Memedov. It is decidedly liberal in the economic sphere, advocates a minimal economic role for the state, and has stayed in "loyal opposition" to both the APF government and the Aliev regime.⁶ Unlike Musavat, both ANIP and the APF have shown a willingness to engage in dialogue with the government.

Finally, the Democratic Party is led by Rasul Guliev, a former speaker of parliament under Aliev, who is currently in exile in the United States after having been indicted for corruption. The party is run by his loyal deputy, Sardar Jelaloglu, and its future depends upon Guliev's return.⁷ The Democratic Party is a splinter group, not of the Popular Front, but of the Aliev government.

These four main opposition parties broadly share the Aliyev regime's foreign policy. Their main differences with the regime relate to the country's internal political and economic situation. While Musavat and ANIP seem to be the two strongest opposition parties today, Azerbaijani politics remains characterized less by parties than by personalities. Since Azerbaijan is a presidential republic, the decisive factor will ultimately be who wins the country's next presidential elections in 2003. Analysts regard Gambar and Memedov as the strongest candidates, but Kerimov's star is on the rise, despite his party's rather weak base and recent indications that he may be colluding with the government. Guliev, however, is tainted by the popular perception of his direct involvement in corruption, and his prolonged absence from the country further inhibits

his chances of becoming a serious contender. A main dividing line within the opposition is between “irreconcilable” parties like Musavat and the Democratic Party and parties more willing to deal with the government.

Political maneuvering within both the government and opposition blocs is centered on one issue—the succession to Heydar Aliev. The succession problem is a major threat to the stability of all the personalized, authoritarian regimes of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and nowhere is the problem more acute at present than in Azerbaijan. The 1998 presidential campaign was hard on the 76-year-old Aliev, who underwent heart surgery in early 1999. Given his age and declining health, it is not believed that he will run again in 2003. Instead, his main concern seems to be to pave the way for his son Ilham to succeed him, something that has been discussed for several years. This will be a difficult task, however. Azerbaijan is not Syria or North Korea, and to expect the people to accept Ilham simply because he is Aliev’s son would be a mistake. His alleged past as a gambler and the fact that he has so far shown more interest in business than politics—he is currently vice chairman of the state oil company—are significant liabilities. Yet a significant number of people in Azerbaijan depend on patronage from the Aliev regime for their privileged position and have a vested interest in keeping that regime in power. That is the main reason for Ilham’s strong support within the state structures.

The opposition vehemently attacks any plans to create a “dynastic state” and smears Ilham, often unfairly, in every possible way. In the opposition’s view, Aliev’s retirement will open the way for a true democratic transition. For this to happen, the present regime structures must be dismantled, the existing networks of patronage and corruption destroyed, and truly free and fair elections held.

Geopolitical factors are also likely to affect the succession. Azerbaijan’s strategic location, its oil resources, and its role in the geopolitical realignment underway in Eurasia mean that overt or covert involvement by a number of different powers cannot be ruled out. The most blatant involvement will likely come from Russia and Iran, which both support rather shady contenders for the presidency (former Communist party leader Ayaz Mutalibov and former head of the interior troops Mahir Javadov, respectively) and may try to promote them during the transition period. In addition, the role played by Turkey is likely to be significant, although different forces in Turkey may support different Azerbaijani factions. Moreover, the United States may also play a role.

Under these conditions, the succession to Aliev may not be a smooth one. A worst-case (but unlikely) scenario would be large-scale unrest bordering on civil war. Thus the need for preventive measures in order to ensure an orderly succession is pressing.

In this context, Azerbaijan is in desperate need of strong institutions with popular legitimacy that can keep order during the inevitable

transition period ahead. In consolidated political systems, parliaments fulfill this function, but the manner in which Azerbaijan's 1995 parliament was elected left it unsuited to this task. With most of its members selected rather than elected, the Milli Mejlis enjoyed little confidence among the people, and none whatsoever among the opposition.

The 2000 Elections

The 2000 elections presented a crucial opportunity to change this state of affairs. If they produced another rubber-stamp parliament, through a combination of electoral fraud and opposition boycott, it would be ill-equipped to handle the succession successfully. The ensuing power vacuum would put Azerbaijan once again in danger of falling into a downward spiral of instability, with substantial risk of a direct and possibly violent confrontation between entrenched state structures and the opposition. On the other hand, a parliament elected by relatively acceptable standards, with the major opposition parties represented at a level roughly commensurate with their actual public support, would significantly increase the chances of an orderly succession. Debate would be likely to take place in the parliament, not in the streets; foreign powers would be less likely to interfere. Thus the November 2000 parliamentary elections were bound to be a watershed in Azerbaijan's political development.

During Azerbaijan's brief electoral history, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and its counterparts at the district and precinct level have been a major focus of controversy. The opposition boycott of the 1998 elections was prompted by concerns regarding the CEC's composition and functions, and this was a major issue again in 2000. In May, Mazahir Panahov, the chairman of the physics department of Baku State University, was appointed as the CEC's new chairman. Panahov was not associated with the Soviet-era *nomenklatura*, and his appointment was interpreted as a positive development. In June, after heavy international pressure, the parliament reformed the electoral law and adopted a new law on the CEC giving the opposition the ability to block a quorum in the central, district, and precinct electoral commissions. After the opposition boycotted the CEC's first three meetings, incapacitating the body, the parliament revised the law in July to remove the opposition's de facto veto power. Moreover, the ruling party was enabled to appoint commission chairmen at all levels. Despite these setbacks, the OSCE and other international organizations concluded that the law provided "a comprehensive legislative framework for the conduct of elections" and represented a significant improvement over the previous law.⁸

A major problem arose regarding the registration of candidates. Of

the 125 seats in parliament, 25 are elected by nationwide proportional representation among party lists, and the remaining 100 from single-member constituencies. A total of 13 parties presented the 50,000 signatures necessary for registration in the party-list election, but the CEC rejected the applications of eight of these (including Musavat and ANIP) on dubious grounds, claiming that signatures were forged without presenting conclusive evidence or allowing the parties to address these charges. The situation was similar in the single-member constituencies, where more than half of the candidates were refused registration. This led to suspicion that the regime was attempting to rig the election by keeping its most dangerous rivals off the ballot, thus relieving itself of the need to alter the results on election day.⁹

International criticism against the regime mounted, but it focused on the ban on parties in the comparatively less important party-list election, virtually ignoring the single-member constituencies that were to elect 80 percent of the parliament. As a result of this pressure, President Aliev asked the CEC to reverse its earlier ban, although the constitutional basis for his doing so was questionable at best. Yet while all 13 parties that had applied to participate in the proportional vote were allowed to do so following an October 11 CEC decision, only a small number of the rejected candidates seeking to run in single-member constituencies had their cases reviewed. Moreover, as the election approached, ominous signs appeared of undue government interference in the process, including an unmistakable bias toward the ruling party on state television (the only mass medium available in many rural areas).

Azerbaijan achieved important progress in democratization in the late 1990s. Significant legislative reform prepared the ground for elections, press censorship was abolished, and opposition media functioned, albeit with difficulty. Azerbaijan developed an increasingly pluralistic political environment, and it is no exaggeration to argue that, of the three Caucasian states, Azerbaijan had gone furthest toward developing a multiparty system with relatively stable political parties. These positive developments, together with the regime's responsiveness to international criticism and advice, generated hope for improvement in the conduct of elections as well.

Unfortunately, these hopes were dashed on election day. In the week preceding the elections, a number of additional precincts were created on military bases and in prisons throughout the country, and foreign and domestic observers were typically denied access to these polling stations. In addition, an audit of voter registration lists showed a margin of error of 30 percent, with people not living at their stated address as well as deceased or nonexistent persons on the lists.¹⁰ Numerous abuses were noted on election day, including various forms of ballot-stuffing, the falsification of results protocols, and the intimidation of voters and opposition members of precinct electoral commissions. Official voter-

turnout figures (reported hourly by precincts) were artificially altered. Observers noted numerous instances where official figures were double or triple the actual turnout observed on location. (The final official figures showed a turnout of 68 percent, whereas observers reported an actual turnout of approximately one-third of the electorate.) Observers were denied access to the computers used to tabulate precinct results at the district level and send them electronically to the CEC. This illustrates the risks that accompany the use of modern computer technology for elections. In numerous countries, such apparent improvements may facilitate fraud in the form of what might be termed electronic ballot-stuffing.

On the night of November 5, the ruling party claimed victory with more than 70 percent of the vote. Initially, one opposition party, the Popular Front, was acknowledged to have surpassed the 6 percent threshold for gaining party-list seats. Musavat, ANIP, and the Communist and Democratic parties all were said to have failed to meet this standard, capturing between 1.5 and 5 percent of the vote. These official figures were in stark contrast to practically all of the independent exit polls and to the counting witnessed by most international observers. According to these unofficial but diverse sources, the NAP received less than a majority of the votes. In some, but by no means all, precincts, the ruling party won a plurality; in other areas, individual opposition parties outpolled the NAP. Musavat, in particular, seemed to do well. Although not coming close to the 50 percent of the vote claimed by party officials, Musavat was reported to have led in many areas. ANIP also showed strength, but the Popular Front, no doubt due to its internal rifts, drew fewer voters. The NAP fared better in the single-member constituencies, although independent polls still significantly differed from official results. Aided by the overwhelming support for NAP candidates from precincts located in prisons and military bases (where turnout was said to be close to 100 percent), NAP candidates prevailed in all but a few of the single-member constituencies.

Although Musavat, ANIP, and the Democratic party were able to secure a few victories in single-member constituencies, they all were denied representation in the party-list elections, in which their leaders had run. As a result, the leaders of the main opposition parties were left out of the new parliament. This situation quickly led to a unanimous opposition boycott of the parliament, somewhat reluctantly joined by the Popular Front (which supposedly had passed the 6 percent threshold).

A Setback for Democracy

The international reaction came quickly. On November 6, the OSCE and the Council of Europe issued a brief joint report that gave roughly equal importance to the progress made in the past five years and to the

significant shortcomings of the election and counting process, including “serious deficiencies in regard to implementation of the election legislation.”¹¹ This two-page report was instrumental in securing the admission of both Azerbaijan and Armenia into the Council of Europe on November 9 (the two countries’ membership had been linked due to their conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh). In fact, the joint OSCE and Council of Europe observation missions were reluctant to disrupt Azerbaijan’s integration into European institutions. The Council vote on membership had been postponed until after the elections, in the hope that this would exert additional pressure on the Azerbaijani government to conduct the elections in a free and fair manner. By doing so, however, the Council put itself in an untenable position. Its decision to link Azerbaijan’s and Armenia’s membership was fundamentally correct: Given that Armenia occupies over 15 percent of Azerbaijan’s territory as a result of military conquest in apparent violation of the Helsinki Final Act, accepting Armenia into the organization without accepting Azerbaijan would have been a major mistake. Yet refusing to grant membership to Armenia because of a fraudulent election in another country would also have been indefensible. The Council noted that Azerbaijan was “willing to comply with Council of Europe standards,” but it also “asked the Government of Azerbaijan to submit, within a month, a report responding to the criticisms voiced by the international observer mission after the parliamentary elections on 5 November 2000, and to rectify the instances of reported frauds.”¹²

On November 7, the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), which also fielded an observer mission, issued a report expressing more unambiguous disappointment with the conduct of the vote. NDI stated that the elections represented “a continuation of a pattern of seriously flawed elections in Azerbaijan that fail to meet even minimum international standards.”¹³

The degree of electoral fraud, in fact, surprised some of the regime’s own representatives. Within several days, the regime reacted by publishing the final official election results, which reduced the ruling party’s official figure to 62 percent of the vote and unexpectedly showed that the Communist Party and the Citizen’s Solidarity party, as well as the Popular Front, had passed the 6 percent threshold. Given these parties’ relative lack of public support, it is fairly apparent that this move was adopted for external consumption. As a result, Azerbaijan now had three nominal opposition parties in the parliament.

While this at first sight seemed to indicate a move toward political pluralism, in fact the main opposition figures were still kept out of the legislature, thereby increasing the likelihood of their resorting to street politics; moreover, it deepened the fractures within the opposition. Small parties with relatively low public support were faced with the choice of either joining the opposition boycott (where they would play a minor

role) or participating in the legislature on the government's terms, thereby increasing their public exposure and perhaps boosting their fortunes.

The main opposition parties responded by holding relatively peaceful rallies demanding the invalidation of the election. Although they succeeded in drawing substantial crowds to their rallies all over the country, it soon became clear that Azerbaijan was not ripe for political revolution. The low voter turnout was a sign of political apathy among a substantial part of the population, who expected that the elections would be rigged and that voting would not change anything. They had no confidence that the fragmented opposition parties could run the country better than the present regime or that they would be any less prone to corruption.¹⁴ Indeed, some ordinary Azerbaijanis decided to vote for the ruling party precisely because they had been in power for seven years and presumably had filled their pockets already. This attitude is probably unfair to the opposition—indeed, both the ruling party and the opposition contain many dedicated and honest politicians at all levels—but it shows the utter repugnance that many Azerbaijanis feel toward politics and politicians.

A Missed Opportunity

The 2000 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were a missed opportunity not only for democratic development but for the further stabilization of the country and the entire South Caucasus. In 1995, and perhaps even in 1998, the Aliev regime was rightly associated with political and economic stability, which was Azerbaijan's clear priority at the time. Moreover, while Aliev has maintained a relatively conciliatory position toward Armenia, repeatedly and vehemently ruling out the use of force, a number of opposition figures have been less pacific in their approach.

In the late 1990s, Azerbaijan enjoyed remarkable political and economic stability compared to its neighbors. Georgia has been plagued by small-scale rebellions and kidnappings in its western regions, a threatening refugee crisis on its border with Chechnya, repeated attempts to assassinate or overthrow its president, and a severe economic crisis, including the devaluation of its currency. Armenia has experienced economic stagnation and debilitating emigration; in 1999, its hitherto treasured political stability was shattered by the murder of its prime minister and the speaker of its parliament. By contrast, Azerbaijan has seen the consolidation of its oil and gas industry and sustained Western investment in spite of the 1998 plunge in oil prices; apart from the area occupied by Armenia, its government has relatively firm control over its territory. It has also experienced the growth of an increasingly assertive political opposition. In the face of a looming succession crisis, however, Azerbaijan's stability can no longer be based upon one man,

or for that matter, one party. The requisite stability can be achieved only by the strengthening of legitimate institutions, a task that, for obvious reasons, will be gradual and prolonged and that presupposes the inclusion of all major political forces.

While the 2000 parliamentary elections were an indisputable setback, democratic development in Azerbaijan is not a lost cause. Compared to many of the Central Asian republics, which are moving toward greater authoritarianism, Azerbaijan remains relatively open and responsive to international criticism and pressure. Azerbaijan's foreign policy is decidedly pro-Western; integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is a goal shared by both the regime and the overwhelming majority of the opposition. This gives the West a rare degree of influence over Azerbaijan's political development.

Moreover, the opposition, with few exceptions, is dedicated to achieving power by democratic means and is capable of exerting significant pressure on the government. Although many observers took it for granted that Ilham Aliyev would be chosen speaker of the new parliament (and thereby next in line for the presidency), the incumbent speaker Murtuz Aleskerov was reelected to this post. Perhaps the government realizes that the present parliament lacks legitimacy and that making Ilham speaker would therefore not have strengthened his position in the long run. In any case, the government certainly took notice of the opposition's ability to mobilize substantial numbers of people, and may have wanted to refrain from further angering the public by a move that would have been widely interpreted as a step toward dynastic rule.

Nevertheless, the damage inflicted on the body politic by the recent elections remains significant. The people's remaining confidence in the regime was further damaged, and the polarization between the government and the opposition has increased to a point where efforts to set up a dialogue, which succeeded in 1998 and in 2000, seem largely futile at present. The prospects of a peaceful and orderly transition have worsened, and the risks that the succession to Aliyev will be accompanied by unrest, whether internally or externally induced, have increased.

Most alarming of all is the widespread apathy and general aversion to politics in Azerbaijani society. In 1992, masses of people gathered on the streets of Baku to support the Popular Front's bid for power; in 1993, popular indifference toward the fate of the Popular Front government accelerated its demise. Again, in October 1994, it was the masses, not the security services, that took to the streets to save Aliyev from being unseated by Huseinov's coup attempt. With the people's trust in their leaders steadily decreasing, however, it is unlikely that Aliyev—or anyone else for that matter—will again be able to draw the people into the streets in defense of their country's political future.

NOTES

1. The fairness of the election, however, was partially compromised by the passage of a law preventing persons over the age of 65 from running for president. There is little doubt that this law was passed solely to prevent Heydar Aliev from running.

2. For an account of the Karabakh war and its effect on Azerbaijan, see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Power: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), ch. 4. See also Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn Post-Soviet Republic* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

3. Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 367.

4. See for example, *Statement of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) International Election Observer Delegation to Azerbaijan's October 11, 1998, Presidential Election*, 13 October 1998, available at www.ndi.org/ndi/worldwide/eurasia/azerbaijan/oct1998/azer_obsv_10111998.htm.

5. Author interviews with Ali Kerimov, Baku, October 1999, 8 November 2000.

6. Author interviews with Etibar Memedov, Baku, October 1999; with Ilgar Memedov, deputy chairman, November 2000.

7. As Jelaloghlu himself acknowledged in December 2000, when accounting for the party's failure to emerge as the major opposition party. See "Musavat Bashka Partiyalardan Chox Ses Toplayib" (Musavat got more votes than any other party), *525ci Gazet* (Baku), 7 December 2000.

8. OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Azerbaijan: Review of the Law on Parliamentary Elections*, Warsaw, 22 August 2000. See www.osce.org/odihr/election/azer00-1-review.htm.

9. Svante E. Cornell, "Azerbaijani Leadership Struggles to Reconcile Opposition with Political Succession," *Eurasia Insight*, 11 October 2000, available at www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/leav101100.shtml.

10. National Democratic Institute, *Statement of the National Democratic Institute International Observer Delegation to Azerbaijan's November 5, 2000 Parliamentary Elections*, Baku, 7 November 2000 (available at www.ndi.org/ndi/worldwide/eurasia/azerbaijan/nov2000/azerbstmt_112000.htm) citing an audit made by the Azerbaijani NGO "For the Sake of Civil Society."

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13. *Ibid.*, 1.

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