

## **Aliev Collapse Shakes Azerbaijan**

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Dramatic proof of president's shaky health raises doubts as to whether he can really seek a third term in office this autumn.

For years the state of health of President Heidar Aliev has been a persistent topic of discussion in Azerbaijan, as the country speculates how long he will continue as leader.

The subject hit home to hundreds of thousands of television viewers in the most dramatic way possible on April 21, when Aliev fainted twice in public during a live transmission from Baku's Republic Palace. Both times state television pulled the broadcast off the air.

Hundreds of worried residents of nearby homes gathered around the building in central Baku after seeing the incidents on television to find out what had happened.

Aliev, who will turn 80 on May 10, had come to the palace to make a speech marking the 30th anniversary festivities of the Nakhichevan military academy. Midway through his address, he was seen to clutch at his heart and leave the podium, supported by his aides.

The president then returned to the stage 15 minutes later and told the audience that "someone must have put the evil eye on me". He continued his speech, but collapsed again shortly afterwards, striking his head against the podium. Aliev then found the strength to wind up his address and left the hall.

The whole country is now digesting the implications of the presidential collapse. Aliev has said that he intends to run for a third five-year term as president in elections expected to be held this October. But according to political scientist Rasim Musabekov, "Everyone clearly understands that, however good the president looks, his resources are not unlimited."

The presidential administration said that Aliev's attack of ill health was not serious and due to a rapid fall in blood pressure. A few hours later, they issued a statement saying "the president now feels fully well again".

However, many officials both at home and abroad took the episode very seriously. On the same evening, military and police vehicles appeared on Baku's Freedom Square, a favourite venue for demonstrations. And Turan news agency reported that the country's security forces had been put on a high state of alert for the night of April 21-22.

It was later reported that Aliev received phone calls from the presidents of Iran and Turkey Mohammad Khatami and Necdet Sezer. The Turkish newspaper Zaman reported that Ertan Demirtas, head of the cardiology department at the Gulhane Military Medical Academy, had flown to Baku.

The next morning, top Aliev aide Ali Hasanov announced that the president had come to work as normal and dismissed opposition claims that he was not fit to carry on as leader of Azerbaijan. Aliev met first with his interior ministry and national security chief and then received US ambassador Ross Wilson.

"I am alive and well and at work," Aliev told journalists attending his meeting with Wilson.

The incident has raised doubts over Aliev's ability to contest presidential elections this autumn and whether Azerbaijan is facing a period of political turmoil.

Aliev has long suffered from health problems. He suffered a heart attack in 1987, the year he retired from the Soviet politburo and had heart surgery in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1999. Earlier this year, he had a hernia operation in the same hospital.

"Anything can happen and it could all be catastrophic," commented Musabekov. "What if this happens again during a presidential campaign? The elections have been fixed and it is illegal to cancel them."

The opposition is in a state of heightened expectation. Nureddin Mamedov, a senior official in the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, said that he had talked to party leader Rasul Guliev and received the order to be "on alert" and ready for any eventuality. Guliev is a former speaker of parliament, who quarrelled with Aliev and is now in exile in New York.

Another likely presidential candidate, head of the Musavat party, Isa Gambar, who was also parliamentary speaker in the early Nineties, said that doctors should determine the president's state of health and Aliev himself should decide whether he was fit to run in October.

If the head of state decides to pull out of the presidential race, his most likely replacement will be his 41-year-old son Ilham, who is a parliamentary deputy, vice-president of the state oil company SOCAR and head of the country's Olympic Committee.

Yet many doubt that the son is capable of following his father's lead - or even wishes to.

"Does he want it?" asked Musabekov. "And then we must take into account what kind of support he will get from the electorate."

"Besides it's clear that if Ilham is the candidate, the levels of vote-rigging may be enormous and the whole story could end very badly. There are other possible options, but I don't want to speculate. Everything depends on finding a person whom the ruling clan can trust."

An early sign of who the presidential heir is will come when and if a new prime minister is appointed. Last August, new constitutional amendments were adopted which would make the premier acting head of state if the president steps down.

The current occupant of the post, Artur Rasizade, is a figure with a low public profile and no political ambitions. Ironically, he too is having health problems and left for the US for medical treatment the day after Aliev collapsed.

Observers will now be watching closely how well Aliev keeps up with his presidential engagements. He already failed to attend an exhibition organised by the Russian embassy in Baku to mark the 300th anniversary of the founding of the city of St Petersburg.

The administration insists that there are no plans to change the president's main schedule and he still intends to attend the anniversary celebrations in St Petersburg on May 29.

But his entourage has not yet confirmed whether Aliev will go to Barda and Nakhichevan regions next month to open Olympic sports complexes there, as planned earlier.

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**Location:** Turkey  
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**Focus:** Caucasus

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