

Aliev Illness Galvanises Opposition

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As President Heidar Aliev looks set to mark his 80th birthday in a Turkish hospital, the Azerbaijani opposition is weighing its options.

With spring in the air, the president hospitalised and elections due within six months, Azerbaijan's opposition knows it is entering a critical period, which could see it come to power, suffer a severe crackdown - or simply remain on the sidelines.

So far two parties, Musavat and the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, have begun their public campaign to taken advantage of the governing regime's worries, while the others are hanging back and adopting a more cautious line.

The Azerbaijan crisis deepened on May 3, when President Heidar Aliev secretly flew to Turkey. The next morning, Turkish broadcaster STV reported that Aliev had checked into the Gulhane hospital, but gave no information about his condition.

Three days later, presidential chief of staff Ramiz Mekhtiev told the press that Aliev's official 80th birthday celebrations - scheduled for May 10 - would have to be postponed. The presidents of Russia, Georgia and Ukraine were all expected to attend the weekend event.

Aliev took a turn for the worse on April 21, when he passed out twice while making a speech televised live on Azerbaijani television. (See CRS No. 176). Despite upbeat statements by presidential aides, all details of the president's health are kept secret. As a result, all sorts of rumours are now circulating.

The president's problems have galvanised the opposition, with both anti-Aliev politicians and media calling for his resignation on health grounds.

On May 2, Yeni Musavat, the organ of Azerbaijan's largest political party and the best-selling newspaper in the country, wrote that Aliev was no longer able to perform his duties. Hurriyet, which supports the Democratic Party, went further - citing an "informed source" to allege that the president was in a coma.

The next day, the Azerbaijani prosecutor general's office warned Yeni Musavat, Hurriyet and two other opposition newspapers Azadlyg and Milliet, to desist from "unethical and libellous publications on the president's health" and threatened them with criminal charges.

On May 4, events took a more disturbing turn. At around 9.30 in the evening, a group of athletic looking young men burst into the editorial offices of Yeni Musavat, and wrecked them.

According to Gabil Abbasoglu, the paper's deputy editor-in-chief, there were approximately 30 assailants, several of whom were obviously drunk. At first, they requested a meeting with the paper's management, but when Abbasoglu tried to talk to them, they beat him up, then piled into the front office and started destroying the furniture.

For about 25 minutes, the attackers kept wrecking the paper's property and equipment, kicking and insulting the journalists and telling them to stop writing about the president's health.

One of the journalists managed to call the police, who quickly arrived on the scene and arrested six of the attackers. However, they were soon released. "None of those who took part in that incident are currently at the Sabail police station. I know this for a fact," Major Mukhtarov, the officer on duty at the station, told IWPR.

Rauf Arifoglu, editor-in-chief of Yeni Musavat, declared that the attack was a politically motivated act designed to intimidate opposition journalists, while Musavat party leader Isa Gambar denounced it as an attempt to provoke a violent response from the opposition.

Top presidential aide Ali Hasanov conceded only that "problems do exist between the public and some media".

Yeni Musavat subsequently received visits from a string of diplomatic visitors, including the Council of Europe's Azerbaijan rapporteur Georges Clerfayt.

Meanwhile, the traditionally fractious Azerbaijani opposition has not patched up its differences in the face of the crisis.

On Sunday, May 4, the two most outspoken opposition groups - Musavat and the Democratic Party - held a rally demanding Aliev's resignation and free democratic elections. They did so even though the opposition umbrella group, the Opposition Coordinating Centre, OCC, had ruled against the demonstration the night before.

Other parties did not take part in the rally and only around 12,000 demonstrators turned up - around half of the usual attendance for these events.

Democratic Party leader Rasul Guliev, the former speaker of parliament who is now in exile, is one of those who has decided to step up his activities.

Guliev used to be a close member of Aliev's inner circle before leaving the country in 1996 and, as a native of Nakhichevan, homeland of most of the governing elite, he probably keeps in contact with some members of the ruling regime.

The Azerbaijani authorities want to extradite him on charges of embezzling government property, but he dismisses these charges as "politically motivated".

On April 26, Nureddin Mamedli, one of the leaders of the Democratic Party, said the European Court of Human Rights was considering whether Guliev would be allowed to return freely to Azerbaijan, so he can take part in the presidential elections scheduled for this October. Mamedli said Guliev would return to Baku at the beginning of August irrespective of the European Court's decision.

However, Guliev was detained by the police in Amsterdam airport on an Interpol warrant on May 2 - the day after Azerbaijani interior minister Ramil Usubov had received Ronald Nobel, secretary general of Interpol, in Baku.

The incident backfired on the Azerbaijani authorities. "I was detained by Interpol," Guliev told journalists.

"We talked for an hour, and then they apologised and let me go."

Guliev said that the Dutch authorities had confirmed he was free to enter Holland at any time without restrictions and added, "Aliev's regime had about one hour's worth of international influence and evidence against me." He has since moved to London, where he feels "more comfortable".

The situation in Azerbaijan remains tense but is stable, as all sides wait for more detailed information about the health of the president. While the opposition media continues to lobby for early elections, pro-government newspapers are printing letters from "the public", castigating the opposition.

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