

Azerbaijan: Aliev Rival Fights to be Heard

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Isa Gambar, the main opposition challenger in Azerbaijan's presidential election, takes to the road to counter a dirty tricks campaign against him.

When Isa Gambar, Azerbaijan's leading opposition candidate, came to the town of Beilagan last week, he saw walls adorned with dozens of posters of President Heidar Aliev and his son Ilham. There were only three Gambar posters to be seen, all of them torn.

Gambar faces up an uphill struggle to defeat the official candidate in the October 15 presidential election. Gambar faces up an uphill struggle to defeat the official candidate in the October 15 presidential election. As IWPR went to press on October 2, 2003, Aliev senior, who is in poor health, withdrew from the race, as expected in favour of Ilham, leaving his son as the favourite in the race to be the next leader of Azerbaijan.

Gambar knows that, despite a concerted campaign against him, this year is the opposition's best chance in a decade to galvanise voters disappointed by the Aliev regime.

Beilagan, a poor town, just 16 km from the ceasefire line with the Armenian forces near Nagorny Karabakh, would seem to be ideal territory for Gambar. Around half of the population of 90,000 are impoverished refugees from the Karabakh war and Gambar himself comes from the nearby region of Fizuli.

The residents of the town were talking animatedly on the streets waiting for Gambar to arrive, when a group of foreign cars drove through. The police saluted, unaware that they actually contained members of the opposition. When Gambar arrived at the stadium, a crowd of one thousand people was waiting for him.

Those attending the rally said there would have been more people but the local authorities had tried to stop them coming. The low turnout, however, was also a sign of how many ordinary people are fed up with politics and most rallies attract only hard-core party supporters.

Those who did turn out were pleased with what they heard. As Gambar promised the refugees he would ensure their return to the occupied territories and that the Armenian aggressors would be punished, a smartly-dressed sixty-year-old man could not hold back the tears. A group of women in long dresses cheered and Khatira Isayeva, a pensioner, said she was supporting Gambar because he promised to raise her pension threefold.

Around fifteen policemen watched everything from the sidelines. They were easily outnumbered by Gambar's bodyguards - around 40 of whom, wearing brown jackets and earphones, ringed the crowd to try and ward off any trouble.

The main opposition candidates in the presidential race, Gambar and Etibar Mamedov, have, just like the eight other candidates, five hours of guaranteed access to television airtime and they are able to screen election adverts.

But, shut out from state television news coverage, the opposition is relying heavily on public meetings. Gambar, a professorial man, now aged 46, is not an inspiring orator. His strength lies in his intelligence and experience dating back to the early Nineties when he was the founder of Azerbaijan's Popular Front. He was then speaker of parliament under the short-lived nationalist government of 1992-3 and briefly

acting head of state.

An opinion poll published in Echo newspaper on October 2 gave Ilham Aliev 58 per cent support in the elections and Gambar 22 per cent. But polls in Azerbaijan are unreliable and the government certainly seems to believe Gambar is a threat.

Both he and the other opposition leader Etibar Mamedov are the targets of an intense dirty tricks campaign. For example, several insignificant pro-government politicians have been registered as candidates and use their airtime to blacken the names of their rivals.

One of them, Hafiz Hajiev, for example, leader of the puppet party Contemporary Musavat, has accused Gambar on television of being an Armenian, a husband who sponges off his wife (who earns more than him) and a former KGB collaborator.

The Beilagan rally went so smoothly that Gambar's electoral staff became worried, not sure of what was going on.

On the way to the next town of Barda, however, politics got back to normal. Gambar's cavalcade was forced to turn round because the main highway had been dug up. They spent three hours looking for an alternative route, while the organisers began to think of cancelling his scheduled rally.

No one in Barda took responsibility for the delay. But in Baku, Bakhar Muradova, a supporter of the pro-government New Azerbaijan party, told IWPR, "As far as I know a part of the road was closed in Barda because of repair work being carried out there, however there were other roads and it did not stop Isa Gambar holding his rally.

"Isa Gambar tries to make himself a hero. We understood that he needs provocations so he can complain to international organizations and so we don't pay any attention to him. For some reason we don't get complaints from other opposition candidates like Sabir Rustamkhanli and Lala Shovket."

Eventually, Gambar did make it to the rally in Barda. "These provocations by the authorities don't work because people still support my candidacy in the elections," he told IWPR. "We have been to a lot of big towns in Azerbaijan and we've felt the support of the people. People are tired of the current regime, the country needs to change and only we can do that."

Up to two thousand people came to the Barda rally - not that you would have known this if you had read the next day's edition of Yeni Musavat newspaper, which put the number at 20,000.

Gambar told the crowd he would create jobs, restore lost savings, raise salaries and pensions, release political prisoners and return Nagorny Karabakh by peaceful means. This was met with approval. "We don't want war, we want to return to our homes and live in peace," said one refugee.

Not everyone was impressed though. Fifty-two-year-old Hasan Mamedov said he would not vote for Gambar. "Why?" he asked. "Now I have a small shop, which turns in a small profit. We all remember the period of chaos in the country when Musavat was in charge. I don't want to risk my property so I will vote for Ilham Aliev. After all he is the son of the president and he will continue what's been started."

Gambar's biggest test comes not during the campaign but on election night when many observers expect

the authorities will try to rig the poll in favour of Ilham Aliev.

“If there is obvious rigging of the vote the people will have to decide their own fate,” warned Arif Hajili, head of Gambar’s election campaign. “The future of the people should not depend on people who have falsified all elections dating back to 1993.”

Hajili said that if they were cheated of a fair result, Gambar’s supporters would protest the verdict “on streets and squares”. “If they fix the results of the voting we will call on the people to do that,” he said.

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