

Azerbaijan: Aliev's Democratic Intentions on Trial

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The November 6 election was seen as a litmus test of the president's will to reform his country, but for now the jury is still out.

Ever since Ilham Aliev succeeded his father Heydar in 2003, long-time observers of Azerbaijan have wrestled with one central question: is the 43-year-old president a western-style reformer, or an authoritarian leader in the mould of his father?

Up until now, the record has been mixed. The younger Aliev has introduced some partial changes, such as police reforms, to Azerbaijan's Soviet-style order, but has stopped short of wide-ranging overhauls that might threaten the system itself.

Many experts hoped the parliamentary election on November 6 would bring them closer to a conclusive answer. Either the vote would be relatively free and fair, they reasoned, thus proving Aliev's democratic credentials, or else it would be rigged - demonstrating once and for all that he has no intention of introducing western reforms.

Azerbaijan's future political direction - and by extension, western governments' policy toward this oil-rich Caspian state - hung in the balance, they said.

Four days after Azerbaijanis went to the polls to elect a new Milli Mejlis or national assembly, the picture is no clearer, however. If anything, it is even more confused.

The vote, as it turned out, was riddled with violations. International observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe said that much of the ballot counting they observed was "bad or very bad".

But other experts and western diplomats point to President Aliev's decision to introduce fundamental reforms to the electoral system, such as exit polling, marking fingers with indelible ink to prevent multiple voting, and allowing a record number of candidates to run.

This, they say, along with explicit instructions to local officials not to interfere in the process, indicated his good intentions. The blame should therefore lie not with Aliev, but rather with local authorities and perhaps some senior top officials in his government, who undermined the process either through habit or by design.

In this post-election environment, a second question supplements the first. In addition to asking whether the president is a democrat or dictator, many now wonder whether he is actually in full control of the country.

The contradiction contained in these two questions, however, is that Aliev is a democrat only if he is not in control.

This argument has some appeal to Aliev's supporters, who insist that he is a different kind of politician who is fighting against the political system his father created.

But other observers say a weak president would not bode well for Azerbaijan.

“There is the theory of the ‘Good Tsar’ – that none of this would be happening if only the president knew about it,” said one western analyst who wished to remain anonymous. “If this is actually true, however, this is a possibly frightening prospect.”

In addition to the risk that a weak leader will find it hard to push through reforms, there is also a danger that the divisions that emerged within the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party during the election campaign could grow worse and destabilise the country.

On the other hand, if Aliev is in fact master of the political scene, then he is a Machiavellian operator equal to his father, able to emasculate the country’s opposition and simultaneously hoodwink western governments into believing his democratic rhetoric.

There is a third argument, according to which the truth lies somewhere in between. Aliev, say those who hold this view, is not completely in control, but at the same time he is a long way from being so feeble as to threaten Azerbaijan’s future.

He is a reformer - but only to the point where democracy and the free market do not threaten his power. Most of all, these analysts say, he wants to be taken seriously on the international stage as a western-style leader, not as the authoritarian ruler of a tiny, corrupt ex-Soviet state.

“Ilham, more than anything, wants to be viewed as a legitimate head of a serious country by the West,” said one western observer.

As a result, Azerbaijan-watchers will be closely following developments in this post-election period.

If Aliev acts decisively to rectify election violations and punish officials responsible for the abuses, then perhaps he may prove more than a democrat than his detractors say - and also more in control than many believe.

So far, he has sacked two district-level local government chiefs for failing to heed his instructions not to interfere in the ballot. The election commission had earlier annulled the results in both the constituencies involved. Recounts were ordered in at least two more constituencies, and as a result of one of them Ali Kerimli, leader of the opposition Popular Front, looked likely to win the seat.

This is a good start, western diplomats say, but it remains to be seen how far the corrections will go.

Dismissals and recounts may be just a sop to the West, or else a tactic for negotiating with the opposition Azadlig and Yeni Siyaset blocs, which managed to secure just a handful of seats in the new parliament.

Western governments have criticised the election results, but have stopped short of threatening any action.

The United States State Department, following the OSCE’s lead, issued a statement in which it said the

elections “did not meet a number of international standards”, and noted President Aliev’s “stated intent to take corrective action”.

US officials, who have made democracy-building in the Caucasus a central policy objective, say that at this point they will not make any “specific linkages” between the election and Washington’s policy.

Possible responses could include censure by the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly in January next year, or a snub by US president George Bush to Aliev, who is said to be angling for an invitation to the White House.

Either action would sting the image-conscious Aliev, but some experts wonder how much impact any punitive measures would have.

Azerbaijan finds itself in a position of strength, where the US and Europe need the Caspian state more than it needs them. The country is expecting massive profits from its offshore oil industry starting next year, and the military alliance between Baku and Washington grows with each year.

According to one European diplomat, the mood in western embassies is now “wait and see”.

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