

Azerbaijan: Elite Feud Intensifies

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President Aliev is failing to control a battle between two groups in his administration.

A long-running feud between two powerful groups in the Azerbaijani political elite has intensified in recent weeks, to the point where Ilham Aliev, the country's young new president has condemned it in public.

The two groups, which have their origins in the exclave of Nakhichevan and Armenia, the Nakhichevanis and the Yeraz as they are known, fought for influence during the presidency of Heidar Aliev. But their rivalry has reached a new level now that his son is president with both camps using the media to try to blacken their opponents.

The new president took the unusual step of commenting on the battle in public, saying that "I take decisions on my own. Newspaper articles and especially politically motivated articles cannot influence my opinion".

"I think this is very primitive," Aliev went on. "People with self respect shouldn't behave like that. If someone thinks he can use an article to change my view he is mistaken. Very serious reasons are needed to take decisions."

The younger Aliev did not mention any particular publication or any official by name. But you only need open a newspaper in Baku at the moment to read detailed corruption allegations about leading government figures.

Amongst the newspapers receiving and printing the allegations is the title *Azadlyq*, which has close ties to the opposition. "They get in touch with me directly," *Azadlyq*'s editor-in-chief Ganimat Zakhidov told IWPR. "Our sources who are high state officials need guarantees that their names will not be revealed."

Even after the articles are published, Zakhidov said, "Top officials call, to supply us with additional compromising material and facts."

In the last month, *Azadlyq* has published a lot of damaging reports about transport minister Zia Mamedov. "Thirty to forty per cent of this information comes from the investigations of our own journalists," said Zakhidov. "All the rest comes from sources in the government.

"We've just been given information about Ali Nagiev, the labour and social welfare minister and we are checking it out."

Many analysts predicted that after Ilham Aliev was elected last October a power struggle would develop between the "old guard" of officials who had served his father and the "young reformers" around the son. However, this has not happened: the younger Aliev has made very few new appointments – one exception is the naming of a new foreign minister Eldar Mamedyarov – and has left most of the old team unchanged.

Instead, the struggle inside the governing team has grown fiercer. Many see this as the result of a situation in which Heidar Aliev, who dominated the country for so long, left a political vacuum, which has not yet been filled by his far less experienced son.

“It’s dangerous when a head of state is not in a position to stop feuding in his team and they begin to prevent him from running the country,” Eldar Namazov, who was chief aide to Heidar Aliev from 1993 to 1999, told IWPR. “Today in Azerbaijan it is doubly dangerous, as our groups are based on regional and corrupt interests.”

Formerly there was a little-disguised power struggle between Nakhichevani labour minister Ali Nagiev and Yeraz health minister Ali Insanov. “However Heidar Aliev tightly controlled the situation and acted as arbiter, so the fight stayed within certain limits. The system the former president built was based on his charisma and toughness. But the system is failing under a new person,” said Namazov.

The two groups found common cause in the election of Ilham Aliev last October, after his father fell seriously ill. But soon afterwards a sustained campaign of vilification both on television and in the newspapers began against the mayor of Baku Hajibala Abutalibov (a Nakhichevani) and education minister Missir Mardanov (a Yeraz). Each was accused of corruption, of having failed to carry out the orders of Heidar Aliev, sabotaging the work of his son Ilham.

Both men angrily defended themselves and counter-attacked against their accusers. Answering the charge that bribes were being given to arrange the hiring of secondary school headmasters, Mardanov told ANS television, “I don’t hire school headmasters. They are hired by the executive heads of regions. I won’t name names but everyone knows very well who controls the executive in the regions.”

This was a broad hint at Ramiz Mekhtiev, the head of the presidential administration and a prominent Nakhichevani.

Recently other figures have been drawn into the fray, including customs chief Kamaledin Heidarov, transport minister Zia Mamedov and head of the bonds committee Heidar Babayev.

The feuding is causing trouble for Ilham Aliev as he tries to establish himself as president both at home and abroad.

A report published on May 13 by the International Crisis Group said Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliev faced “stark choices” and a test of leadership.

“President Aliev is in an awkward situation,” Nicholas Whyte of the ICG said after the publication of the report. “He has to justify the expectations of the West about reforms and the democratisation of the country and at the same time to satisfy the interests of the ruling elite. Plus he needs to demonstrate that it is he and not his father’s advisers who are controlling the government.”

This does not seem to be happening at the moment. Eldar Namazov said of Ilham Aliev that “at the moment you can feel a certain lack of confidence in him”. And he commented that “recently close relatives of top officials are being appointed as executive heads of regions and deputy ministers”.

To assert more control Aliev may be planning a programme of government reform. Sources in government say there are plans to unify some state institutions and abolish some ministers and state committees.

The same sources are predicting that some of the ministers facing the axe may be appointed ambassadors. Recently the Azerbaijani parliament voted to create eight new Azerbaijani embassies in Canada, Hungary, Greece, Latvia, India, Belarus, Bulgaria and Indonesia.

“Ilham Aliev is in a difficult position,” said Namazov. “It’s similar to the one in which Mikhail Gorbachev was at the end of the 1980s. It’s already impossible not to reform the old system – pressure from the public and the international community is too strong. And it’s dangerous to start reforms as the old guard still retains a lot of influence.”

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