

Azerbaijan: Opening Shots in Election Battle

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Sharp exchanges over election commission and threats of a “velvet revolution” in run-up to parliamentary ballot.

Although not scheduled to take place until some time in November, Azerbaijan’s parliamentary elections are already shaping up to be a hard-fought battle.

Arguments so far have focused on the composition of the country’s Central Election Commission, CEC, which administers the ballot, with analysts saying it is weighted in the government’s favour.

And there have even been warnings in the opposition camp that any attempt by the government to manipulate the vote could bring about a popular revolution.

At present, the CEC consists of 18 individuals – six government, six opposition and six so-called “neutral” members, who are nevertheless named by the government-dominated legislature, the Milli Mejlis.

Opposition members, backed-up by recommendations from the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, have demanded that the body’s membership be split evenly between government and opposition figures.

The Venice Commission submitted a wide range of recommendations to the Azerbaijani government in 2004 to assure a democratic vote in November. And Azerbaijani officials and commission members met in Strasbourg at the end of May to discuss the ideas.

But, while the Milli Mejlis is yet to give its final word, so far only lesser changes have been accepted and the composition of the CEC has remained untouched.

Andreas Herkel, co-rapporteur for Azerbaijan for the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly, PACE, said in an interview published in the Russian-language Ekho newspaper, "In principle, democratic elections can be held also under present electoral legislation. But under circumstances existing presently in Azerbaijan this looks doubtful because political forces do not trust each other.

"Therefore it would be better if election commissions would be more balanced between political forces of country. The absence of such changes increases the possibility that coming elections will not be fair and honest."

Since Heydar Aliiev, Azerbaijan’s deceased former leader, took power in 1993, the country has held numerous parliamentary and presidential elections. All have come under heavy criticism from western election monitors, with the conduct of the CEC being a particular target.

Some took a more positive view of the negotiations. Sergey Kuznetsov, chairman of the Venice Commission’s department for elections and referendums, said, "The main thing for us is what happens in practice. The Azerbaijani government promised to organise fair and transparent elections. Let us see how they will implement their promise in practice."

Mats Lindberg, the Council of Europe general secretary’s special representative in Azerbaijan, likewise said that the fact that Azerbaijan accepted some recommendations by the Venice Commission was a step forwards.

Meanwhile, at a joint session last weekend, members of the Venice Commission and representatives of the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR, adopted a resolution in which they noted that the Azerbaijani authorities have only agreed to technical amendments to the electoral code. As a result, they said, it does not meet international standards.

In the statement, ODIHR and the Venice Commission said they "regretted" that the Azerbaijani authorities did not take into account numerous recommendations that have been put forward for amending the law.

These recommendations included changing the composition of the CEC and reforming registration procedures, election monitoring – including restrictions imposed on non-governmental organisations monitoring the vote – and laws requiring candidates to pay a large deposit in order to qualify.

The statement also said that the electoral code in its current form was complex and contained numerous repetitions, creating problems with registering candidates and financing their election campaigns.

The amendments proposed by the Azerbaijani government "will not promote public trust and the development of electoral legislation in Azerbaijan", ODIHR and the Venice Commission concluded.

Meanwhile, members of Azadlyg, or Freedom, a bloc which unites the country's three largest opposition parties – Musavat, the Popular Front party and the Democratic Party – repeated threats at a June 4 rally that they would stage a “velvet revolution” if the vote is rigged.

The rally – the first officially sanctioned opposition gathering since the 2003 presidential elections – took place at a cinema on the outskirts of the capital. Unofficial figures placed the number of participants at 5,000 and there were pitched battles between police and anti-government demonstrators.

Opposition members at the event even chose a symbol for a future revolution – an orange carnation.

Eldar Namazov, former head of the presidential secretariat and currently one of the leaders of the Yeni Siyaset, or New Politics, opposition bloc, told IWPR that he does not believe fair elections are possible with the CEC's current make-up.

"The ruling party has monopolised these commissions and the results of previous elections are proof of this," he said, adding that he is certain that the government's rejection of the Venice Commission's recommendations stemmed from a desire to pack the parliament at any cost.

But he warned that the government's tactics may backfire, "The Azerbaijani authorities are playing a very dangerous game. They are acting on an 'all or nothing' basis. However, one often loses everything in cases like this."

Popular Front chairman Ali Kerimli told IWPR that he believed it was still possible to hold the government accountable for the election's outcome. "Even if parliament approves the electoral commission's composition in this form, it will be difficult to conceal the real results of the elections," he said.

"There is no doubt that the Azerbaijani public and the international community will not turn a blind eye to the falsification that is being prepared."

Government representatives that IWPR spoke to rejected such criticism out of hand.

Parliamentarian Mubariz Gurbanli, of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan, or New Azerbaijani, party, said, "Local and international observers will monitor the elections. The fuss that the opposition is making about the electoral commission's make-up is aimed at insuring themselves in case they lose."

Azerbaijan's parliament had planned to consider the Venice Commission recommendations, and to introduce amendments to the election code, on June 14. But deputies subsequently postponed the debate until June 17.

The most significant changes that are expected will be to reduce the time taken to announce preliminary election results from five days to two, to allow the electoral register to be available on the Internet and to issue voters' identity cards.

Analysts say there is little likelihood that the composition of the CEC composition will feature in the debate.

There is now little time remaining to alter the election code. According to Azerbaijani law, President Ilham Aliiev should announce the date of the elections 120 days before the vote is set to take place – that is, sometime in early July.

So far, however, the general public has paid little attention to the furious battles taking place among the country's politicians.

Whether Azerbaijanis become energised by the electoral race, and whether the opposition can drum up support for its campaign to depose the government, remains to be seen.

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Location: Azerbaijan

Focus: Caucasus

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