

Azerbaijan Opposition in Crisis

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Government gloats as election controversy threatens to tear apart the opposition.

Azerbaijan's opposition alliance is on the verge of break-up amidst divisions over whether its members should work in the new parliament and take part in repeat elections.

Results of last November's ballot were declared void in a number of electoral districts after evidence of serious irregularities emerged. Reruns expected in four months' time.

The opposition is in crisis just as it received a boost from the Council of Europe last week, which warned that the mandate of the Azerbaijani delegation to the parliamentary assembly might be revoked if the repeat polls were not democratic.

Three of the four main opposition parties that fought the election - the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan and the Liberal Party - announced last week their decision to boycott the reruns in 11 districts.

They also said they would not put their representatives on the new electoral commissions, unless they are formed on an equitable basis as required by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. Liberal Party leader Lala Shovket Hajieva has already officially refused to take up her seat in parliament.

However, the fourth main opposition party Musavat is yet to take a stance on the contentious issue. Party members are debating the issue and their final decision, which has been put off twice already, is now expected on February 5.

The majority of Musavat leaders want it to work both in parliament and take part in the new elections, but a minority led by deputy chairmen Sulhaddin Aqper and Ibrahim Ibrahimli and others, are opposed.

Musavat's leader, Isa Gambar, who was speaker of parliament under the post-communist administration of President Abulfaz Elchibey, says that the presence or absence of opposition in the parliament is an important, but not critical issue.

"There is something to say for both boycotting the parliament and being there," said Gambar. "We'll weigh all the pros and cons and make a decision. Some of our voters may disapprove, but politics is not all about making popular decisions. Unpopular decisions may have to be made in the interests of democracy."

Musavat was one of three members of a coalition named Azadlyq (Freedom) that has now all but collapsed. "The Azadlyq member parties ran together, and it's important that they agree on all election related matters," Popular Front deputy chairman Hasan Kerimli told IWPR. "If Musavat disagrees, we will no longer be able to stay in the same alliance with them."

The acting chairman of the Liberal Party Avaz Temirhan was even more categorical. "After the elections, all Musavat seems to care about is getting more parliamentary seats, not fighting for the cancellation of the

election results,” he said. “Their prolonged debates over the issue are a sure sign that they are making a deal with the authorities.”

Musavat deputy leader Arif Hajily dismissed these charges. “They are simply trying to pressure Musavat into making a decision that’s suitable for them, but we won’t be pressured,” he said. “It seems to me that our fellow Azadlyg members should be more cautious in what they say.”

Other opposition figures are following the Musavat line. One deputy elected on a New Politics ticket, Ali Masimov, a former prime minister under Elchibey in 1992-3, said there was no way he would give up his parliamentary seat. “The parliament is the arena where we fight for democracy,” he said. “What’s the point of not using it?”

Azerbaijan held its parliamentary elections on November 6 last year under an intense international spotlight. Observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who noted numerous violations during the ballot, concluded that the polls fell short of international standards.

Azadlyg won only four seats out of 125, with another two going to the New Politics bloc which pitches itself as “moderate opposition”. One seat was secured by Liberal Party leader Lala Shovket Hajieva, who is close to Azadlyg but not formally a member. In ten districts, the constitutional court cancelled election results on account of massive violations. After Hajieva gave up her seat, the number of districts scheduled for an election rerun on May 13, rose to 11.

At last week’s winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Andreas Gross, who headed the team of monitors observing the Azerbaijani ballot, proposed a motion that the mandate of the Azerbaijani parliamentary delegation should be revoked because of the polls. After some debate, the assembly decided to recognise the mandate on three conditions: the elections must be rerun in a fully democratic manner; electoral commissions should be formed on an equitable basis; and the right of assembly must be guaranteed.

The assembly also advised the newly elected parliamentary deputies from the opposition to take part in both parliamentary work and the election reruns. The US Ambassador in Baku Reno Harnish recently met with Azadlyg leaders to make the same recommendation.

The failure of the opposition to take a united stand is evidently pleasing the government. Ali Hasanov, who heads the public policy office in the presidential administration, said, “If the radical opposition chooses not to get involved in parliamentary work, this will signify the end of their political career in Azerbaijan.”

Deputy speaker of parliament Bakhar Muradova held out the possibility that the line-up of the Central Electoral Commission might be revised to include Azadlyg deputies if

“they show up in the parliament and take part in the election rerun”.

At least one opposition group, the National Independence Party, has already split in two in a dispute about whether to recognise the election results. Its former chairman Etibar Mamedov and breakaway leader Ali Aliev have held separate conventions and parted ways.

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