

Azerbaijan: A Question of Change

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Political changes are now inevitable – but will they be gradual or turbulent?

For political observers the question is not whether Azerbaijan will undergo a major political realignment in the upcoming years, but what form it will take.

In conversations with IWPR, leading analysts from across the Azerbaijani political spectrum surveyed the fallout of recently-held parliamentary elections and arrived at varying conclusions.

But on one matter all agree: the political changes - that began with the death of the country's long-ruling strongman, Heydar Aliev, and the subsequent ascension of his 43-year-old son Ilham - are irreversible.

"[From the moment of Heydar Aliev's death] the most important process began - the decentralisation of power," said Arif Yunus, an independent analyst with ties to the opposition. "The era of a strong central figure, who controlled everything, has ended."

The central question now is whether these changes will take a relatively smooth "evolutionary" form, or they will lead to instability and possibly violent clashes.

On the surface little seems to have changed. Preliminary results indicate that, as before, the country's Milli Mejlis, or national assembly, will be completely dominated by President Ilham Aliev and his ruling Yeni (New) Azerbaijan party, or YAP.

YAP received 58 seats in the 125-member parliament, while the two main opposition blocs, Azadlig (Liberty) and Yeni Siyaset (New Politics, or YES) managed only eight and two mandates, respectively.

Moreover, analysts believe that the majority of the 42 "independents" with no party affiliation are in fact beholden to the government.

Even if opposition candidates prevail in two scheduled re-runs - to rectify partially what international observers said were widespread and gross voting violations - the new Mejlis will nevertheless be as much of a rubber-stamp body as the previous one, if not more.

But parliament's similar make-up, as well as the typically falsified elections, mask substantive changes taking place deep within Azerbaijan's body politic.

The elections have already led to major changes both within the ruling YAP party and the opposition. Within the Milli Mejlis itself are some 65 new faces, observers say.

These developments within the pro- and anti-government camps, as well as the population itself, will determine the country's political course. The end of Azerbaijan's road could await a "golden future" of

higher living standards and democratic reform, or corruption, instability and possibly revolution.

Observers say that one factor alone will alter the country's political and social landscape - the massive wave of cash which is expected to flow from the country's offshore oil industry.

Already next year, when an 1,800-kilometre pipeline from the Azerbaijani capital Baku to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, comes on stream, revenues to the country's national budget should increase by some 60 per cent, to 3.9 billion US dollars.

In total, over the 20-plus years of the country's main oil development project, three offshore fields operated by the multi-national BP, Azerbaijan should witness revenues of anywhere from 73 billion to 143 billion dollars, depending on the price of oil.

Oil will be the country's curse or its salvation, observers say.

Members of the government's so-called reformist wing like Anar Mamedkhanov, say that oil revenues will allow President Aliev to improve the population's standard of living while at the same time raise its understanding of civil society.

"We have [an independent] press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly - all the basic attributes for democratic development," Mamedkhanov told IWPR. "But we don't know how to use them. What good is a computer if you don't know how to work with it?"

For Mamedkhanov, 35, a thrice-elected member of parliament with no party affiliation - whom President Aliev considers one of his closest friends - the reform process is just beginning. The country's development is "slow but sure," and oil money will allow for an "evolutionary scenario".

Most important, says Mamedkhanov, is the fact that the government has both the funds and the will to change things for the better.

Others however question the government's - and particularly President Aliev's - commitment to reform. The oil windfall, as a result, will have the exact opposite effect, they say.

Hikmet Hajizade, a senior member of the opposition Musavat party and one of opposition's chief ideologues, says that money from the oil industry will allow the government to hold onto power despite growing public dissatisfaction.

"This money covers up all the government's sins and mistakes," said Hajizade. "They are able to pay everyone on the public payroll, the police and so on.

"Shevardnadze didn't have an army. Aliev does - thanks to oil."

Yunus believes that massive oil revenues will exacerbate economic differences, leading to a social explosion.

“A small group will quickly become even richer, and the rest of the population will sink into poverty,” said Yunus. “In the provinces, they are ready to carry out pogroms.

“They hate anyone who has a foreign car, hate the expensive stores, hate the Russian-speaking population. All this shows that there is a great threat of social instability.”

Observers are in agreement that President Aliev wants to restructure the country’s political system, though they differ over what exactly these alterations actually mean.

Mamedkhanov says that the parliamentary elections, which introduced a number of wide-ranging reforms, were a clear indication of President Aliev’s democratic intentions and that the country’s political path will be smooth.

Mamedkhanov says that, although electoral violations took place, these were unimportant when compared to the overall political progress that the contest demonstrated.

“If yesterday I ran 100 metres in one minute and today in 30 seconds, this is obvious progress, even if the world record is nine seconds,” said Mamedkhanov. “You can’t demand that I run it immediately in nine seconds.”

The fault, says Mamedkhanov, is not with the Azerbaijani government in particular, but with the fact that they inherited an unstable political system from the Soviet Union – a problem common among post-Soviet republics.

“[In these elections] we established the outlines [of our new political system], now all we have to do is continue in that direction,” he said. “We have to improve all the time – and not claim that the next elections will be the most democratic ever.”

Others, however, view the structural changes simply as a redistribution of power among the elite, without introducing any true democratic reforms.

Hajizade believes that under the present regime, democratic “evolutionary” change is impossible.

“[The government’s] idea of reform is a reform at the top,” said Hajizade. “They’ll find young, attractive, educated people to replace the fat, uneducated ones who are now in power.”

He doubts that the Aliev regime will ever be prepared actually to introduce democracy and voluntarily give up power to society at large. “It’s hard for me to imagine that [Aliev and his circle] are capable of that,” he said.

“They are afraid that it will turn out this way: first you give up a little power, then a little more, then a little more, and then you have to leave altogether.”

Independent analyst Yunus believes that changes in the country’s political system and ruling party are in fact a battle between political “clans”, fighting over the spoils of government.

The fight broke out after the iron hand of Heydar Aliev was removed, and it spells trouble for the country’s political future, said Yunus.

“There is a pro-Russian group, led by [Customs Minister] Kemaladdin Heydarov and [head of presidential administration] Ramiz Mehtiev, and a pro-western group, which was led by [recently arrested] Economic Development Minister Farhad Aliev,” he asserted.

For democracy to develop stably, however, the country likewise requires a vibrant and responsible opposition, say experts. In this as well, though, their predictions are varied, and in many cases less than optimistic.

The country’s traditional anti-government forces, made up of the Musavat, Popular Front and Azerbaijan Democratic parties, are becoming increasingly marginalised.

According to an opinion poll on the eve of the parliamentary elections, says Hajizade, only 11 per cent of the population considered democratic reforms to be a major issue.

This lack of concern in civil rights is reflected in the number of active opposition members, he added.

“The opposition’s value [in the public’s eyes] keeps falling and falling,” agreed Yunus.

The vacuum left by the opposition’s decline in influence could be filled by any number of groups, ranging from young reformers from within the YAP party, or new anti-government movements – both of which may guarantee the country’s stability in the end.

“What we are seeing is a changing of the guard,” said the pro-government Mamedkhanov. “Those that were with Heydar Aliev – they came, they fought, they grabbed power and they strengthened the country.”

“But now we have a new generation which understands that the situation is entirely different.”

But for others, public discontent could move in more unpredictable, and possibly dangerous, directions. Some analysts warn that radical Islamic forces could be waiting in the wings.

“It is certain that other forces are growing now,” said Yunus.

He points to the fact that thousands of young, educated Azerbaijanis will soon find themselves without work, once construction on the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline ends.

“These people are trying to unite, I know,” said Yunus. “These are capable people, who think not only about their own futures, but the country’s future as well.

“They are like our oil reserve – but this is a very dangerous reserve. One doesn’t know which direction it will flow.”

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