

Election Campaign Flawed in Rural Azerbaijan

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Outside Baku, the country is held back by poverty and authoritarian local government officials.

Azerbaijan's regions lag far behind Baku politically as well as economically, but when government minister Farhad Aliev was arrested recently on charges of planning a coup d'état, the aftershocks were felt as far away as Jalilabad, some 160 kilometres southwest of the capital.

According to local observers, local government chief Tale Garashov went around the town ripping down the campaign posters of Alovzat Aliev. The candidate happened to be the brother of the sacked minister, and was standing in the Jalilabad constituency in the parliamentary election taking place today, November 6.

Officials then dismissed the local election commissioner for refusing to expel Alovzat from the race, says Zair Amanov, director of Media and Femida, a non-government organisation or NGO. The commissioner said he had no reason to disqualify Aliev, but his replacement did not have such qualms and struck off the candidate, on the grounds that he had exceeded campaign spending limits.

Amanov says such blatant breaches of the rules are now considered the exception in the capital Baku, but are still commonplace in places like Jalilabad.

"In the regions there is practically no democratic tradition, or independent NGOs," he told IWPR. "Civil society is not developed."

As Azerbaijanis go to the polls to vote in elections for the Milli Mejlis or national assembly, human rights activists say a series of changes to the electoral code, which President Ilham Aliev pledged would ensure free and transparent elections, have been only partially implemented.

Baku and the rest of Azerbaijan are like different worlds. Socially and economically, the capital is the one place which seems to be developing, while the regions are left mired in stagnation.

Half of the country's eight million inhabitants now live in the capital and its environs - where Azerbaijan's oil industry is concentrated - with migrants attracted by the prospects of finding a job and better living conditions.

These differences translate into a disparity in political standards as well.

President Aliev has issued two decrees to regional authorities forbidding them from interfering in the elections. Nevertheless, civil liberty groups say the pressure exerted by local officials on non-government candidates has been considerable.

Ali Abdulayev, an independent candidate in Sheki in northwest Azerbaijan, says his campaign posters have regularly been ripped down.

“Once they cut the lights in a hall where I was meeting with voters,” Abdulayev says. “And in Baltali [a nearby village], the local administration frightened people into not meeting with me.”

In Ganja, in the country’s west, 15 candidates signed a letter to the local administration complaining of pressure from the authorities.

One of the signatories, independent candidate Chingiz Mamedov, says that three days before election day, the authorities prevented him from speaking on local television.

Local officials say that such cases were either accidents or unfortunate coincidences, and that they have not been targeting opposition candidates.

“I personally have not encountered any violations during the campaign,” says Firidun Mamedov, Sheki’s regional governor. “The voters can see for themselves a positive change in these elections – there is a more democratic atmosphere.”

And yet despite the difficulties, voters in the regions seem to hope that these elections will be more free and democratic than before. Most of the voters interviewed by IWPR said that they would be casting a ballot, suggesting a contrast with previous ballots where much of the electorate stayed home.

“The number of people who believe these elections can be conducted democratically has increased, despite pressure from local government and the lack of equal conditions for all candidates,” said Hikmet Hasanzade, who heads the international organisation World Vision’s office in Ganja.

Afrasiya Beilarov, an engineer from Masalli in the far south of the country, says that although wealthy candidates enjoyed the clear advantages of access to cars to travel around the villages and the ability to buy radio and television time, the campaign has been surprisingly open.

“It was very positive that you could hear a lot of criticism of the local administration,” Beilarov said. “I couldn’t have imagined that earlier.”

Some voters would like to believe these elections could be the first chink in the armour of Azerbaijan’s authoritarian state.

“The public harbours a hope, albeit a small one, that this election marks a positive change,” said Hatira Yusubova, a teacher at the Ganja musical college. “However, in seeing local authorities get out the vote for their candidates, this hope is weakening.”

Across Azerbaijan, areas like Masalli are suffering an economic depression that seems inconsistent with the country’s oil wealth.

According to Agadede Agaev, an economic expert in Masalli, unemployment stands at close to 60 per cent in the district. Most Soviet-era factories still stand idle, Agaev says, and less than half of the arable land is currently being farmed.

Agaev believes four out of ten of Masalli district’s population – mostly the young – have left to seek work

elsewhere, either in Baku or Russia.

Zakaria Aliev, a resident of Sheki, says that so far the government's grand plans for job creation have only been half-realised. "New jobs are indeed opening up, but the pay is miserly there and everything seems to be just for show," he said.

In the regions, the loudest complaints are about poor water supplies and lack of electricity.

Najiba Mahmudova, director of the local non-profit organisation Women's World, claims that around 70 per cent of the children in the town of Gokhmug, near Sheki, suffer from intestinal problems because of the poor water supply.

Masalli resident Yashar Fattayev says that in winter, electricity is available only eight hours per day and gas supplies are intermittent, so local people are forced to cut firewood to heat their homes.

"Our schools have not been rebuilt - they're cold and completely unprepared for winter," said Fattayev. "Because of this parents don't send their children to school."

Local officials say that they are doing what they can to deal with complaints. Fikret Jafarov, mayor of Sheki, with a population of 70,000, says that his administration recently provided 60 families with clean water and two refuse trucks to clear debris that had piled up.

Jafarov told IWPR, "We are aware of all of the city's social problems and are working to solve them."

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