

Ilham Aliev's Uncertain Rise

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Azerbaijan's presidential heir has a massively well-funded campaign, but still lacks confidence.

Ilham Aliev, favourite to be elected president of Azerbaijan on October 15, was given just 12 days to look presidential enough to step into his father's shoes.

On October 2, Heidar Aliev, president of Azerbaijan since 1993 and Communist Party leader since 1969, announced he was stepping down. Aliev senior, who is still in a clinic in Cleveland, Ohio said that health problems prevented him from standing for re-election.

He asked Azerbaijanis to support his son Ilham - recently appointed prime minister - whom he described as a man of "high intellect, pragmatic thinking and a fine understanding of contemporary world politics and economics".

This has been an unusual election campaign, with both father and son registered as candidates. Before October 2 the younger Aliev had campaigned more for his father than on his own behalf, saying he was preparing to stand aside when his father returned from the United States. When Aliev senior pulled out, Ilham's campaign moved up a gear and he began campaigning in earnest.

"We have spent a lot of money on this electoral campaign," campaign organiser Bakhar Muradova told IWPR. "Two months is a good length of time to prepare. As Azerbaijan is a ruling party we have more opportunities than the others do. The opposition candidates have not been ready for a political fight."

A series of campaign rallies have doubled up as free concerts, with well-known singers and performers performing after the candidate's speech. Many of those attending have been government employees and several people confessed that they had come to hear the singers rather than Aliev.

Aliev's standard speech touches on two main themes, developing the economy - he promises to create 600,000 jobs in the next five years - and resolving the Nagorny Karabakh dispute, either through peace or war.

"Our army is capable of coping with any problem it is set," he told a crowd in Sumgait. "Alongside the economic development of Azerbaijan, we are strengthening our armed forces. However we want a peaceful resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict."

October 7 was the busiest day yet in the campaign. Ilham Aliev visited six towns in western Azerbaijan and attracted large crowds. After the rally, several people managed to get close enough to the candidate to pass on complaints and requests. One grey-haired old woman who tried to reach Ilham was pushed away by his bodyguards, but he spotted her, embraced her and promised to investigate her complaint.

That evening, at a wedding between two Karabakh refugees in the town of Barda, Ilham Aliev gave the happy couple a car and some household equipment as a present.

"Of course his electoral resources are unlimited, and not comparable with the financial means available to the opposition," commented liberal political commentator Zardusht Alizade. "Under the constitution of

Azerbaijan the whole family of the president is supported by the state. The current regime believes that this includes making Ilham Aliev president of Azerbaijan."

Aliev junior's advantage is that, at 41, he offers a fresh start for Azerbaijan, while still promising continuity. "I don't want any big changes. A lot of major events are linked to the name of Heidar Aliev, such as oil contracts," said history teacher Samira Kerimova. "His son will continue his work. If the opposition comes to power, it will destroy what we have today."

For much of the campaign the candidate has looked uncomfortable. His performance has become more assured with time but he still looks unhappy with the situation, and voters have noticed that he rarely smiles.

"I think this campaign has been very poorly organised," said political scientist Rasim Musabekov. "Basically he is performing without having a political identity of his own. Apart from the argument that he is continuing the 'sacred work' of his father, he has not promised the public anything attractive in this campaign.

"And I don't think that this campaign, with its mass deployment of singers and performers while the father is sick elsewhere, is making a positive impression on the traditionally conservative mentality of the Azerbaijani people."

Alizade agreed, "Although he is a big strong man Ilham does not make a strong impression," he said. "He has nothing to boast about either as an orator or in terms of political talents. Ilham Aliev has achieved very little in life, and so he relies on the successes of his father and promises to continue his policies."

On his campaign tour, Ilham is constantly surrounded by his father's closest advisers, including presidential chief of staff Ramiz Mekhtiev and deputy prime minister Artur Rasizade. During his speeches they listen closely to the candidate and nod in approval.

In a less public setting, however, the balance of power looks rather different. On October 8, Ilham Aliev was awarded a medal in honour of the 300th anniversary of St Petersburg at a ceremony at the Russian Embassy. Not a single top official apart from Mekhtiev stayed in the room to listen to his speech of thanks. It would have been unthinkable for them to display such a free-and-easy attitude towards Heidar Aliev - and this suggests that for the time being, the younger Aliev is less powerful than his entourage.

Eight candidates are now left on the ballot for October 15. All the opinion polls suggest that Ilham is in a head-to-head fight with opposition leader and former speaker of parliament Isa Gambar. There is no unanimity on who is leading. One poll by the FAR Centre, a Baku analytical organisation close to the opposition, gave Gambar 36 per cent and Ilham Aliev 27 per cent of the vote. A poll by another organisation, Sel, gives Ilham 65.9 per cent support.

Rasim Musabekov said he believed the ruling regime was using its high-profile campaign as "camouflage for rigging the vote." When accused of fixing the result, the authorities will say that they won the hearts and minds of voters, he argued.

The real test for Ilham Aliev may come only after election day, however, when the chances are he will be declared president.

"The father has done everything over the past five years to hand on the state to this son," Musabekov said. "But sometimes parental fondness clouds a sober view of reality. I am afraid that's what happened with

Heidar Aliev. If some hidden potential is not revealed in Ilham Aliev, then the father has not done his son a favour by pushing him down this dangerous political path."

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Location: Karabakh
Azerbaijan

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/ilham-alievs-uncertain-rise>