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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

Special Editor: Farid Guliyev

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The 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: The Neglected Category of Independents

By Farid Guliyev, Baku

Abstract

About 35 percent of Azerbaijan's parliament members are independents and an even larger number of independents routinely run for parliament. Who are those independents and should we take them seriously? In this article, I show that independents are not a uniform group, and there are three main subtypes: public figure independents, "fake" independents, and independents vying for public visibility. I briefly provide examples for each subtype and argue that with the downfall of traditional opposition parties over the past 10 years and the disturbing irrelevance of political parties in general, non-fake independent candidates have taken up, within the prescribed limits, the job of airing popular grievances. Election cycles allow independents to take a more proactive stance and run grassroots and social media campaigns. Future research should not disregard independents as mere pro-regime puppets if they want to get a fuller understanding of the political dynamics within the electoral authoritarian regimes.

"Unremarkable" Election?

On November 1, 2015 Azerbaijan held its fifth round of parliamentary elections for the 125-seat unicameral legislature Milli Məclis. The Azerbaijani parliament has been traditionally dominated by an alliance of the president's "party of power" and pro-government loyalists. Parliament has held only a marginal position vis-à-vis the omnipotent chief executive. All Azerbaijani policymaking is concentrated in the presidential apparatus, and there are no other veto players within or outside the executive branch that have the capacity to block a piece of legislation or an important policy decision. To use Tsebelis' classification, Azerbaijan is a single-veto player system. Moreover, following the constitutional amendments in 2002, Azerbaijan switched from a mixed majority-proportional electoral system, in which 100 seats were elected in single-member constituencies and 25 seats were allocated to deputies elected through the party lists, to a pure majoritarian electoral system. The majoritarian electoral design tends to favor candidates from large parties and non-partisan candidates and disadvantage smaller parties. In the specific Azerbaijani context, the elimination of proportional representation discourages the development of political parties as an important channel of interest aggregation in an already poorly-institutionalized political environment. Individuals and their (often shadowy) networks of friends and connections, instead of political parties and platforms, take the center stage in Azerbaijan's Machiavellian politics.

Even more than in previous elections, the outcome of this race was a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, this election cycle had the following four peculiar features. First, it was the first time that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) canceled its

monitoring mission, citing the lack of an enabling environment for effective election observation, though the Council of Europe sent its observers. Second, it was the first time most traditional opposition parties boycotted the legislative vote (previous boycotts were used only in presidential contests like the one in 2008). Third, never before there has been so little public interest in the elections, and it was the first time no public debates were held on television as the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of Azerbaijan refused candidates the right to free air time on the public TV channel. Fourth, it was the first time the parliamentary elections were not followed by any opposition protests to dispute the election outcome, as was the case in 2005 and more modestly in 2010.

The ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) continues to maintain the majority of seats (57 percent of all seats) with a handful of YAP candidates re-elected for the fifth time while the rest of the seats went to independents loyal to the government and to a pocket of smaller pro-government party representatives. In 2010, the traditional opposition parties ran, but received no seats. This year, most of them decided to abstain from running candidates. About 75 to 80 percent of all outgoing deputies were re-elected and several experts were able to predict the results with more than 90 percent precision even before the elections took place.

Race Without Competition

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the elections in Azerbaijan have transformed from the semi-competitive contests that they were in the 1990s and early 2000s to a non-competitive arena that forbids multi-party pluralism and genuine contestation. Elections now serve merely as a mechanism for the incum-

bent establishment to place its loyal candidates in the parliament to make sure the executive can pass its bills without any criticism or deliberation. This year's elections fixed the role of elections as merely a democratic ritual without democratic substance. More important, this perception of elections as "not changing anything" has come to be "normalized" or "taken for granted" among the populace. No one, not even the established opposition parties, however marginalized they have become, had the willingness or the stamina to dispute the fairness of the vote. The electoral process as a genuine contest for power has become so irrelevant that most voters did not follow the pre-electoral candidate campaigning and according to official figures, only about half of the voters, 55.7 percent (a suspiciously exaggerated turnout figure) went to the polling stations on election day. Dubbed an "imitation" of elections, the November poll was a ritual to demonstrate the government's *pro forma* adherence to democracy.

Why Run in a Non-Competitive Election?

There is some evidence that elections in nondemocratic systems are typically aimed at claiming democratic legitimacy, signaling incumbency strength, making policy concessions to powerful groups or distributing patronage. They are anything but genuine contests over which candidate will represent this or that constituency.

Officially, about 767 candidates ran for parliament. Having estimated their chances, opposition parties realized the futility of running: the opposition Musavat party first nominated, but later withdrew its 24 registered candidates citing the reason that "for the first time the authorities provided no free air time for campaigning before the elections". Some independents also calculated the chances. For example, the outspoken lawyer Aslan Ismayilov who was registered as an independent dropped out of race 10 days before the election also in connection with the authorities' refusal to allocate free air time on public TV. A plausible reason for this decision, however, seems to be that the candidates who are not backed up by the ruling elites, use the elections for purposes other than getting a seat. Some of them use the election as an opportunity to push for the solution of issues related to bureaucratic neglect and lawlessness (*"bespredel"*) or to increase their public visibility.

There are many reasons why individuals might want to run in elections they have no chances of winning. A pessimist conspiracy theory has it that some or even a majority of independents are "fake" in the sense that, by having unofficially accepted financial assistance from the authorities, they participate to make the elections look competitive. A softer version of the conspiracy theory argues that these candidates are funded through

government friendly businesses. There is no way we can verify these claims.

Independents

One of the interesting features of the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan is the large number of nominally independent or non-partisan (in Azeri: "bitərəf") contestants among registered candidates, most of whom, when elected, turn out to be pro-government deputies. Independents got 46 (of 125) seats both in 2005 and 2010 and 42 seats in the newly elected parliament, representing respectively 36.8 percent of seats in 2005 and 2010 and 33.6 percent in 2015, a substantial proportion of deputies (see Table 1 on p. 5).

I argue here that while elections in Azerbaijan are clientelistic contests—in which a parliamentary seat and its material and nonmaterial affordances, to borrow Katy Pearce's term, is a reward one gets from the chief executive for his or her political loyalty—they also allow within certain permitted limits expression of public concerns. Because traditional opposition parties are often ostracized for being "radical", "predatory" and "unpatriotic", this puts them to the sidelines of the electoral play and opens the space for a large group of non-affiliated and self-nominated candidates who do not question the legitimacy of the ruling regime to fill in the vacuum. While most independents serve to demonstrate the democratic trappings of the regime, some of them, irrespective of whether being elected or not, do use the electoral cycle to voice community-level concerns, to deliberate on pressing issues and even advocate policy solutions.

Within this large and varied group of independents, three sub-categories can be identified: "public figure" independents, "fake" independents, and independents seeking public visibility. The borders between these categories are not necessarily clear-cut, but rather drawn for analytical purposes. Some independents are public figures. An example is lawyer Aslan Ismayilov who certainly is aiming at a more independent stance, from both the ruling party and opposition groups. On his Facebook page (<<https://www.facebook.com/Aslan.Z.Ismayilov>>), which has more than 131,000 followers, he was seeking popular support for a social media campaign advocating free public access to the seaside coast of the Absheron Peninsula. The beach was removed from free public access after the installation of restaurants, paid beaches and villas of the rich. Aslanov's video campaign against the "fencing of the Caspian sea coast" ("Xəzər sahillərinin hasarlanması") went viral and got more than 15,000 likes on Facebook and was shared by 21,600 users (Video available on Youtube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e54AezWISZ8>>).

Other independents are loyalists of the authorities supported by the establishment and slated to win. In fact, these are disguised YAP supporters. For example, deputies Elkhan Suleymanov (elected in 2010, re-elected in 2015, both times as an independent) and Zeynab Khanlarova, a popular Soviet-era singer who was previously nominated by YAP, but re-elected in 2015 as independent, both are ardent government supporters.

Finally, a third, and possibly larger, group is more ambiguous, having no realistic chances to win a seat, such independents vie for political visibility and career advancement. They publicize their profile to get noticed for potential gains in the future. For instance, political expert and now politician Rasim Musabekov, who first ran unsuccessfully as part of the opposition bloc in 2005, was elected in 2010 and re-elected this year as an independent.

Other examples of public visibility seeking independents from the 2015 campaign include Ilhamiyya Rza, Ahmet Shahidov and Eyvaz Gojayev who ran, unsuccessfully, with promises of personally fixing household and community-level problems, without offering any coherent policy alternatives. This group's campaign posters included slogans: "For a new start", "Trust in youth means confidence in the future", "For a more beautiful Qakh!", "I am your voice" (campaign posters are available here: <<https://twitter.com/AzStudies/status/658000394577125376>> and here <<https://twitter.com/AzStudies/status/658000817262346240>>). Shahidov, 33, head of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Human Rights Institute ran an active campaign both at the grassroots in his home Qakh district and online (his Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/shahidovcom>> has more than 107,000 likes) meeting with locals to discuss their social problems.

These "public visibility" candidates, while not questioning the government's overall performance, do express certain popular grievances. These candidates seem to run in the hope of gaining the attention of the

authorities who might even help them land a public sector job. This in a way plays a role of upward mobility in a system with restricted political recruitment and where loyalty trumps competence. As election contestants who can be easily identified by face from their campaign posters, they at least get the chance, however small, to win a public job or launch a political career.

Conclusion

While elections in this kind of restricted political environment are anything but contests for seats, they still give a certain opportunity for some candidates to gain political capital or to build a political career. As the nature of the regime limits political opportunities during normal times, election cycles turn out to be the only time when politically ambitious individuals can legitimately campaign, distribute their posters and run Facebook campaigns to get noticed. When political recruitment is so restricted, for some people this is the only opportunity to land a government job or possibly build the career of a politician.

A broader implication of this analysis is that while the literature on electoral authoritarianism has emphasized the battle between incumbent autocrats and pro-democratic oppositions, it has largely neglected a sizeable category of independents who can play different, but not negligible, roles in this kind of political regime. It is, by no means, a homogenous group. Some independents are pro-government figures in disguise who, by acting as independents, help the regime maintain the veneer of democratic legitimacy. Other independents are public advocates who voice public grievances without necessarily aiming to reap public office benefits. Finally, the third type of independents are those who invest their resources and energies to raise their public profile and get noticed by the authorities. Closer attention to this varied group of political actors can help improve our understanding of the internal dynamics and possible vulnerabilities of electoral authoritarian regimes.

About the Author

Farid Guliyev, PhD, is an independent researcher and policy expert whose interests include the comparative study of political regimes and political elites, and the management of natural resources.

Table 1: Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Election Results: Number of Seats by Affiliation*

	2005	2010	2015
Ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP)	61	69	71
Nominally independents	46	46	42
Other pro-government parties	11	10	12
Traditional opposition	6	0	0
Total	124**	125	125

Sources: Calculated from the following sources: OSCE Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, 7 November 2010: Final Report, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/75073>>; Afgan Mukhtarli, "Predictable win for ruling party in Azerbaijan, IWPR, November 7, 2015, <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/predictable-win-ruling-party-azerbaijan>>; Azerbaijan, Parliamentary Elections, 6 November 2005: Final Report, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/17946>>; Azerbaijan, Repeat Parliamentary Elections, 13 May 2006: Annex to the Final Report on the 6 November 2005 Parliamentary Elections, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/19596>>

Notes:

* Notation: "Other pro-government" stands for representatives of smaller puppet parties aligned with the ruling party in terms of both ideology and policy. This includes such parties as the Motherland Party, Civic Solidarity Party and other satellite parties. For example, MP Zahid Oruj, known for his indisputably pro-government position on all matters, was elected to parliament from the Motherland Party (2000, 2005, 2010), but was expelled from the party in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2013 for nominating himself as a presidential candidate in violation of the party's decision to support the incumbent president. In 2015, he was reelected to parliament as an independent.

"Traditional opposition" refers to the established opposition parties, chiefly the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) whose platforms are openly critical of the incumbent authorities.

"Independents" are non-partisan, non-affiliated candidates.

** Numbers do not round up to 125 for 2005 as one seat held by an opposition candidate was later annulled by the CEC; also note that the opposition Popular Front Party (APFP) refused to take up their seats in parliament after the 2005 elections, and that there is some confusion as to how many independent candidates were elected in 2005 as, in the words of the OSCE observation mission, although more than half of all candidates declared themselves "independent" "a large number of self-nominated candidates were in fact affiliated with a political party".

A Useless Campaign?

The Example of a Non-Partisan Candidate in Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Elections

By Adeline Braux, Baku

Abstract

This article analyzes the way a non-partisan (in Azerbaijani: "bitərəf") female candidate who is not related to the dominant party ran her campaign for the Azerbaijani parliament in a largely uncompetitive election process. After briefly discussing the main obstacles experienced by non-partisan candidates during the campaign, I will describe the strategies she used to carry out an alternative campaign in a centrally located constituency in the capital city Baku. In so doing, I will show that if such a campaign might seem alternative in its form according to the local context and promising due to the candidate's social capital, its background remains fairly classical in terms of the approach adopted and the issues raised, while the outcome turns out disappointing.

Background

Unlike the electoral campaign of 2010, which began several months ahead of the election day, the parliamentary election campaign in 2015 lasted only three weeks. One could say that it does not make any difference in a country where the election results are predictable ahead of the election day, but still it meant that opposition and genuinely independent candidates had even less time to run for a seat or at least to struggle for visibility in a political landscape monopolized by candidates who are members of, or loyal to, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). Incidentally, some opposition formations (Müsavat party, NIDA youth group) announced that they were withdrawing from the election process. Therefore, there were ultimately fewer real independent candidates (meaning not loyal to the majority party) than expected. In the end, out of 125 elected MPs, there were 71 who were affiliated to the ruling party, and 42 nominally independent candidates who can in fact be considered loyal to the authorities. In this context, the simple fact that some genuinely independent candidates decided to carry out a campaign is in itself an intriguing fact. In Azerbaijan few candidates, especially among those affiliated with the ruling YAP, actually campaign; typically, the most that they do is scatter some posters through the constituency in which they compete. Campaigning on regular TV broadcasting is virtually impossible due to the huge financial resources which are necessary: for these elections, one second on TV cost 50 manats (approx. 45 euros).

I chose to focus on a particular constituency, namely the Yasamal 17th constituency (Yasamal 17 üçüncü sayılı seçki məntəqəsi), and more specifically on the case of Mrs. İlhamiyyə Rza, a non-partisan candidate backed by the quasi-independent Ümid Party (Ümid Partiyası, "Party of Hope"). Rza was not officially affiliated to this party, but benefited from some logistical help,

such as the printing of flyers or posters. Yasamal is mostly located in the central district of Baku, but is fairly large and has a population of 250,000 inhabitants. It is made of four electoral constituencies (12, 15, 16, 17), among which one is shared with two other districts, Qaradagh and Binəgedi. The 17th constituency has 33 polling stations and 32,259 voters, but actually neither the candidate's campaign team nor the candidate herself were aware of the exact limits of the electoral constituency. What draws our attention is the fact that this area is home to the old "Sovetski" district, an impoverished neighborhood in central Baku that makes up a considerable part of this constituency. Sovetski is expected to be entirely demolished in the coming years; the process has already started but was delayed for financial reasons. This is not the only area affected by such projects in Baku, but two elements are worth noticing: firstly, a complete demolition is planned; secondly, the inhabitants find themselves in limbo since the work has been postponed for years. As we shall see, this issue featured frequently in Rza's campaign.

According to the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan, voter turnout in this constituency was less than 33 percent during the last parliamentary elections in 2010. In that cycle, the athlete Ulvi Guliyev had been elected under the banner of the ruling YAP party. Sovetski's inhabitants [to whom I spoke] vowed particular discontent with their former MP, who, they claimed, "never turned up in the neighborhood after being elected". This time, he was trying his chances in a different constituency. For this election, the context in the 17th constituency was more complex than in most constituencies. Indeed, the YAP candidate had to withdraw her candidacy because running was not compatible with her executive branch duties in a district of Baku. Some media also pointed to her alleged family links with Eldar Mahmudov, the former minister of

national security who was fired just days before the election. As a result, a lawyer at one of the largest accounting and consulting companies of the country, who officially campaigned as an independent candidate without any backing, emerged as the favourite, although it is difficult to know to what extent he was close to or independent of the authorities. According to the final results, this lawyer was ultimately elected. Why, then, focus on one of the “losers”? Because amidst the peculiarities of the given constituency and the overall context of elections in Azerbaijan, the candidate we followed seemed to be among the few who carried out what appears to be a conventional campaign according to international standards. In other words, she pursued a range of strategies to convince the voters to cast their ballots for her: she prepared herself well ahead the election day (e.g. she left her former position to focus on her future candidacy), she set up a real campaign team, and organized the promotion of the ideas and policies she supported through various means (door-to-door campaigning, meetings, promotion on social media, etc).

Social Capital

Ilhamiyya Rza, in contrast to most other non-partisan candidates, is endowed with real social capital that may be—and has been—used for an election campaign. In this context, social capital is understood as the whole range of resources, including media knowledge, communication capacities, and a social network. She was

Campaign Poster of Independent Candidate Ilhamiyya Rza, 2015



Source: Candidate's Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/ilhamiyya.rza>>

able to gather the social capital over the course of her professional career.

She was born in Qazakh, in the west of Azerbaijan, in 1967 but has always lived in Baku. After graduating from the faculty of philology even before the collapse of the USSR, she started a career as a journalist on private TV channels and also collaborated with a wide range of Azerbaijani newspapers (opposition outlets: *Azadlıq*, *Bizim Yol*, *Yeni Müsavat*; independent: *Zerkalo*), both in Russian and Azerbaijani languages. At the same time, she has been engaged in social activities, namely for the defence of children's rights. In February 2014, with some other would-be candidates, she created the so-called “Political Club of the 125” (*125-lər Siyasi Klubu*). In their founding declaration, they expressed worries about the general situation in the country and the problems (the occupied territories, corruption, human rights) that have not been solved so far for “different reasons”. The connections between the members of this club can be seen on social media since the candidates running for office expressed support for their comrades. Therefore, Rza is a person who may be regarded as public, in the same way as her husband, Hamid Herişçi, a well-known journalist and publicist who anchored some popular television programs with historical content. During door-to-door campaign, Herişçi was sometimes recognized and would use his fame as a campaign argument, as we witnessed on a couple of occasions. In this campaign, he argued, his wife's team had real know-how in terms of ability to communicate directly with people. Therefore, they tried to get a return-on-equity from their TV activities that might have admittedly given them an edge compared to other independent candidates.

Thanks to this social capital and to her personal networks, Rza was able to set up a devoted campaign team made up of volunteers from different backgrounds: some were friends or relatives who took some days off, others were students who were following her on Facebook where she was one of the most active candidates. She managed her account herself and, according to her husband, Rza was, generally speaking, even carrying out an “interactive campaign”. She had 10 legal representatives. Her headquarters had been, she explained, rented for the duration of the campaign and was shared with a friend while her car had been lent to her by another friend who also paid the driver's salary. From a logistical point of view, she benefited from the support of the *Ümid* Party, whose values she declared to share. That said, the party's logo did not appear anywhere on her campaign materials.

The study of her campaign material is informative. In her official poster she appears smiling, which is actually fairly uncommon on election posters in Azerbaijan,

dressed in a lively colour, sporting “non hair-dressed” hair (as she told me). In the background, one can see a playground for children, again an innovative initiative. Her campaign’s slogan was “Sizinləyəm” (I am with you), which she also widely used on her Facebook page. The leaflets which were distributed by her campaign team contained several pictures of the candidate in different situations: during a TV program; on the ground “embedded” in the campaign, talking to some inhabitants; and with her family.

And, last but not least, her professional activities helped her build a network in the local media. She published a few articles in the opposition newspaper *Yeni Müsavat*. But since 80 percent of Azerbaijanis don’t read newspapers, much less opposition newspapers, the impact of such a publication could be only extremely limited.

An Alternative Approach, The Usual Background

The candidate used her social and personal capital during her campaign. She also engaged in conventional campaigning methods, like going door-to-door. Unlike candidates who do not campaign at all, those who carry out an “interactive campaign” directly encounter alienated voters because they are the only ones who come and see them. One might argue that in any campaign unsatisfied voters are the most likely to vow discontent. But in the Azerbaijani context, this may in turn appear still more unfair to these non-partisan candidates since, being the “eternal losers”, they have virtually no chance to share power and responsibilities anytime soon. During a door-to-door campaign swing in Sovetski, a lot of people expressed their despair and exasperation about the limbo they face. Due to the specific situation they were experiencing, Sovetski’s inhabitants were a particular target of Rza’s campaign. In addition to that, people in the region live in small houses in open courtyards and are therefore much more easily accessible than people living in the brand new buildings equipped with secure entry systems. The emphasis on this precise district may also been interpreted as part of the candidate’s emphasis on “care” since her circle stressed on several occasions the fact that she is a woman. As her husband, who is also one of her legal representatives, put it: “Voters are fed up with men, they want to see women being in charge.” The aim of my fieldwork was not to question this assertion, but it may certainly be put it into a local context. Indeed, Azerbaijani citizens have largely clientelistic-particularistic expectations and an instrumental view of politics. At the same time, Azerbaijani society is characterized by low trust (30 percent) toward people who are not members of one’s family. Consequently,

political discourses (when they do exist) tend to take on paternalistic or even populist tones. A “good” politician is one who cares about the voters as a father (or, in our case, a mother), would care about his children, taking entire responsibility for their fate and trying to solve their individual problems.

When looking into the details of the booklets that were distributed during the campaign by Rza and her team, one can find questions such as: “Are your salary and study grant needs met? Can your children and your parents find a hospital room? Do young people receive a good education; do they find a job and then create a family? [...] These are some of the issues I will raise in Parliament. And you are also interested in having an answer to these questions, I am WITH YOU! [...] This is not only a promise, this is a guarantee”. At the same time, at her campaign headquarters, the candidate proposed legal consultations to voters, among whom inhabitants of Sovetski were well-represented. At the end of these consultations, people would receive a flyer with information about the candidate’s next meeting.

Among the techniques usually favoured by candidates in elections where local embeddedness is important is segmentation, that is the definition of groups among voters who are targeted according to some specifics. The 17th constituency includes at least four mosques (a substantial number for Baku). During a meeting with her volunteers, before they went distributing some tracts, the candidate asked them to pay special attention to religious voters “who are numerous in our constituency”. In the same way Rza gave two interviews to the website “Deyerler” which is administered by Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the well-known leader of Baku’s Djuma [Cüme] mosque’s community (situated in the Old City, not in this constituency). In one of these interviews (before election day), Rza insisted on the necessity of integrating the more religious milieus into Azerbaijani society. She also touched upon some issues, like the impossibility of wearing a veil in an official picture and, without taking a clear stand on the issue for practical matters, vowed to respect women’s religious beliefs. Besides, during the Ashura, an important day for Shia Muslims, she organised an *ehsan* (traditional dinner) for believers.

Finally, the Internet has also been a crucial means of campaigning for Rza. It enabled her to recruit some volunteers: indeed, some of the young people we talked to at her headquarters told us they had decided to engage after following Rza on Facebook. Actually the young electorate is not the only target: with 17 percent of people having a Facebook page in Azerbaijan, it seems wise to carry out a real campaign on social media. For sure, non-partisan candidates in Azerbaijan are not the only ones who make wide use of the Internet, but owing to

the political situation in the country, it certainly offers them a crucial tribune for expression. They are also much more active on social media than the candidates of the ruling party.

Conclusion

On November 1, 2015, Rza's main opponent was elected with 82 percent (11,281 votes) with a voting turnout of roughly 50 percent, according to the CEC report¹. The second place candidate received 943 votes and Rza won 825 votes, indeed a fairly disappointing result. Amidst the usual irregularities that plague every election in Azerbaijan, she also had to deal with the arrest of one

of her legal representatives for a few hours. In fact, what seemed worth studying in this campaign were the campaigning methods used by a non-partisan candidate who is not from the traditional opposition and whose profile stands in sharp contrast with that of most other independent candidates. In this regard, the approach I described may be considered alternative according to the local context, but a more thorough scrutiny of the situation shows that the methods at stakes remain fairly common according to international standards. Yet, vote gathering methods may well appear useless in the face of unfair competition before the elections, and widespread manipulations during the vote.

About the Author

Adeline Braux holds a PhD in political science (Sciences Po Paris, 2011). She has been in charge of the Caucasus branch of the Institut français d'études anatoliennes (IFEA-Istanbul) in Baku since January 2014.

Further Reading

"Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan", special issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest No. 55, 24 October 2013.

1 <<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/millimeclis2015.aspx?i=1>>, page consulted November 24, 2015. Voter turnout was 44,2% at 7pm: <<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/millimeclis2015.aspx>>.

To Participate or Not To Participate—That is the Question.

Electoral Strategies of the Azerbaijani Opposition

By Sofie Bedford, Uppsala

Abstract

Elections pose a dilemma for the democratic opposition in electoral authoritarian states. On the one hand, the election campaign is often their only opportunity to get sanctioned access to the public, on the other, through their participation in an election where the outcome is known beforehand they appear to support a democratic charade. This article focuses on the ways in which oppositional actors in Azerbaijan choose to tackle this predicament in relation to the recent parliamentary elections. The analysis and comparison of respective electoral strategies (boycott, campaigning, statements and monitoring) tell us about the roles elections, despite their predictable outcome, play in this type of context. Even though no one in the opposition is 'in it to win it' the Republican Alternative (REAL) movement stands out. Fully aware of their marginalization in society, as representatives of an extremely unpopular 'opposition', their electoral work focused on selling themselves to the public as 'something new,' which is, of course, easier said than done. Nevertheless, their approach and campaign could be interpreted as an attempt to actually convert this into practice.

Background: Opposition—the Perpetual Underdogs

In Azerbaijan, 'opposition' has come to serve as a rather vaguely defined collective label for proponents of dem-

ocratic reforms. Previously such 'genuine' opposition (which differs from what is commonly referred to as pocket opposition, i.e. supporters of the ruling elite that are 'opposition' on paper only) could get sporadic repre-

sentation in the parliament, but since the 2010 parliamentary election, this is no longer the case. The authorities, failing to see the need for political pluralism, are sending the message that opposition is fruitless, pointless and unnecessary. This message applies in particular to the two so-called 'traditional' opposition parties—Popular Front Party and Musavat—which have turned into perpetual underdogs. The population in general, as observers of the opposition's gradual decline, is understandably disappointed with the lack of visible outcomes of 'oppositional' activity. As a result these actors, whether they are political parties, youth groups, human rights activists, other movements or organizations that question the political status quo, are often perceived negatively, as is the concept 'opposition' itself.

The authorities are increasingly undermining the opposition's position by monopolizing informational and economic resources and imposing restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and organization, making it literally impossible for the opposition to reach out to and interact with potential supporters. The exception is the 22-day electoral campaign that, for obvious reasons, becomes an important tool for all oppositional actors. Even though to a certain extent their efforts are coordinated and overlapping, they do not all use this tool in the same way. Below we will take a look at various electoral strategies pursued by the 'opposition' and the reasoning behind them.

Boycott

Boycott is one of the opposition's most well-known tools of protest against un-free elections. The National Council for Democratic Forces (NCDF), an alliance of civil society organizations and opposition parties created to facilitate the promotion of a united oppositional candidate in the 2013 Presidential Elections, decided early in the process to boycott the elections. The general explanation was the lack of competition, open public debate and genuine campaign opportunities, but according to Ali Kerimli, chairman of the Popular Front Party (currently the backbone of NCDF), the fact that the OSCE chose not to send election monitors was a decisive factor. One reason for participating in fraudulent elections, he said, is "to show the world the situation in the country. To achieve this goal, the presence of the OSCE's observers is important."

The voice of the traditional opposition parties is almost completely absent in mainstream media, which are all government controlled. Most likely there is a 'blacklist' of people news outlets at the request of the government are not supposed to interview or even mention. Instead, so called 'constructive' opposition party leaders, MPs, 'experts' and others discuss these

parties and their leaders exclusively in terms of their shortcomings and negative character. Usually the election campaign provides a small, but real, opportunity for the opposition to temporarily overcome this information blockade through the five minutes of TV time allocated to each candidate. "It is not a lot of time, but it gives meaning to the elections that we can at least say what we think," explains the President of NCDF, Jamil Hasanli (Presidential Candidate in the 2013 election). In this election however, according to Azerbaijan's Election Code, only a party with more than 60 candidates was allowed free airtime. In practice this meant the only party entitled was the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party. Opposition parties and groups were forced to pay commercial rates for their TV time, which made this outreach unaffordable, hence unavailable, to them. Both Ali Kerimli and the chairman of the Musavat party, Arif Hajili, describe this lost airtime as an indicator demonstrating that this election was even less free than previous ones. "This time there was not even an illusion of elections," explained Hajili. "Elections are now a formality only." "If we cannot even disturb the elections", said Kerimli "then we do not want to participate. There is simply no meaning—since we do not actually hope to win. We want to win, of course, but we are not hoping for it".

Musavat initially participated in the election campaign, but managed to get only 24 of 73 nominated candidates registered. Just four days before the vote they withdrew even these citing a repressive environment as the main reason. This move appears to have backfired, however. The Central Election Commission informed them that withdrawal was not allowed, and as a result the names of many Musavat members remained on the ballots for Election Day, even though they were no longer candidates. "It would have been easier for us to boycott from the beginning," comments Hajili, "but now we could at least report about the abuse against those who collected signatures for our candidates". Musavat appears to have been the opposition group that suffered the most harassment during their signature collection effort.

The civic group NIDA, which managed to register two of its eight nominated candidates, announced its withdrawal at the same time. As explained by Turgut Gambar, member of the board, the group's initial participation was merely symbolic to "maintain the spirit of protest." Having no illusion of winning, they perceived the campaign as a "process to get to the people" something openly stated in their distributed material as well.

Another noticeable category of actors that chose to boycott—or at least stated non-participation—comprised representatives of the influential (Shi'ite) Mus-

lim communities. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of the Center for the Protection of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM) and Imam of the 'Juma' mosque community, proclaimed that his community would neither support any candidate nor participate in the election. Haji Tale Bagirov, head of the Muslim Union Movement and additionally a member of NCDF supported the boycott, as did other religious leaders. The fact that the position of religious leader in relation to the elections was noticed and acknowledged is interesting in itself, as it indicates that religious activism is increasingly seen as something 'oppositional.' I will however save that discussion for another time.

Campaigning

All oppositional actors see the election period as a small window of opportunity. Kerimli vividly described it as "the repression going on holiday [*kanikuli represiyi*]." "We can go to the regions to agitate (which we can otherwise not do). We can tell people there is an alternative," he said, in May 2015. Nevertheless his party decided not to register any candidates. Even though they later withdrew, both Musavat and NIDA took advantage of the increased possibilities for outreach, first by collecting signatures to nominate candidates, later through the distribution of materials (brochures, leaflets), accompanied by continuous use of the Internet to spread information. As far as short-term gains, NIDA saw an increased interest in their work during these weeks of campaigning, and a number of new members.

Although the opposition was generally allowed to carry out their activities, there were noticeable restrictions and violations affecting their ability to campaign. The allocation of generally inaccessible, sometimes remote, spaces for public gathering is one example. Another is voters in some cases being pressured into withdrawing their signatures for certain candidates. Moreover some candidates faced threats demanding that they withdraw. However, Musavat is the only organization which reported actual physical interference, including efforts to detain or even kidnap their activists during signature collection and distribution. In some places Hajili explains, "there was just the 'phone call: if you care about the future you should stop your activity'".

REAL was the only opposition group to see the electoral cycle through. Still, when a member of the board, Erkin Gadirli (perhaps the most prominent REAL activist) decided to renounce his candidacy, many people were confused because they assumed that his action indicated REAL was joining the boycott. It turned out that his decision, made for personal reasons, had nothing to do with the position of the organization. The group's other ten candidates remained in the race and REAL kept

emphasizing the importance of participation. Azer Gasimli's campaign in the 23rd constituency in downtown Baku was an example. "I am not against an *active* boycott," Gasimli explained. "If we are actively boycotting, we should convince the people and ask them to boycott as well. Afterwards we need to be able to show that nobody voted and demand new elections. This demands a large-scale campaign and resources we don't have". Instead, he said, "I decided to use the minimal chance to show ourselves that the elections provide in my constituency. To prove it was possible to conduct a serious campaign with minimal means."

As such, Gasimli's campaign strategy included various online methods, like buying (cheap) advertising space, using 'Google banners,' and striving for maximum social media visibility (on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Linked In and Google +). He considers the fact that his campaign videos were viewed by around 30,000 Internet users a success. Perhaps even more importantly, Gasimli conducted intense offline campaigning, personally going door-to-door. Meeting with 2,000 people in his district, he distributed leaflets and brochures not only presenting him as a candidate and the political program of REAL, but also tackling a variety of specific local problems throughout his constituency.

Gasimli, as well as other REAL representatives, argue that people's frustration with the situation facilitated their interaction with potential voters. The Azerbaijani people, they say, do not believe in the government, the opposition, or the elections. The fact that REAL is positioning itself as something 'new,' not formally involved with the 'traditional opposition,' helped them get access. In the end, Gasimli received 2,738 votes, which was 15 percent of the total. It is (assuming that falsification generally does not involve removing any votes for the opposition but rather adding votes for the others), according to him, four times more votes than the "united opposition" won in either 2010 or 2005.

Monitoring

Monitoring during Election Day was another important strategy for the opposition. Through their participant-observation methods, they could testify to the fact that, in contrast to the official figures claiming that voter turnout was 55.7 percent, the actual number might have been as low as 10 percent. All opposition groups participated in exposing the election realities through official observation. Activists from NCDF participated as election observers despite the boycott and wrote directly on Facebook how many (or rather how few) voters they saw in each polling station. According to Kerimli this strategy had impact. "People who doubted before saw this information and realized that these were not real

elections. We think about 10 percent of the population participated—so you can say that the people did boycott the election,” he says. Musavat, even after it had quit the election, still carried out its observation mission, coordinating its activities with REAL and NIDA. These organizations, on average, estimate the real participation rate to be 5–6 percent in the polling stations they observed. Throughout the day, they were also sharing the results online, plus videos of irregularities showing “carousel voting,” “ballot stuffing,” intimidation of observers, and other abuses. “There was total falsification,” notes Gasimli. “I have videos, photos, and protocols to prove this”. According to his observers, only 3,500 voters in his constituency actually came to the polls, which would put the participation level at 10 percent and his share of the votes considerably higher than the official result.

Statements

Issuing public statements is related to the boycott strategy. NIDA, Musavat and REAL jointly announced that they would not recognize the outcomes of the elections, as it is “certain that the election results will not represent people’s votes.” They publicly demanded the cancellation of the parliamentary elections on November 1 and called for new elections. Moreover, they demanded the release of political prisoners; creation of normal conditions for free and fair elections; change of the principle of forming electoral commissions under full control of the authorities; and equal opportunities for conducting the campaign to provide free air time for public debate. Making such a statement was a symbolic act to attract attention to existing problems. Likely, this act is done as much, if not more, for the international community as for the domestic audience. A number of statements were directed towards various international bodies, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). “We have done what is possible under these conditions,” says Gadirli. “The statement was a moral issue”. Some, like Gasimli, are also taking this method of pro-

test even further by filing official complaints with local courts where they will be rejected in order to later appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

A more intricate way of highlighting the illegitimacy of the situation and showing that elections are “predetermined” was pursued by Hasanli, who one month before the election (October 9) released a forecast of the future composition of the parliament. From his list of MPs who he predicted would be “assigned” positions, only three of the names differed, giving his forecast 96 percent accuracy. Additionally NCDF also publicly condemned the election calling them “the most shameful in the history of Azerbaijan.”

Conclusion

Nobody, neither in the opposition nor in the population at large, expect that ‘change’ will come from elections. Under current conditions in Azerbaijan, elections are, for the opposition, mainly a tool to get the message out, albeit the ways the actors use this tool varies. Noting there was even less room for maneuvering than previously they decided to boycott the whole or part of the electoral process. NCDF, Musavat and NIDA did try to take advantage of the possibility that the election period provided in terms of participation, monitoring, issuing statements and so on, but it appears that many of them saw these elections merely in terms of what was *not* given to them and what they could not do because of it. This, in my view, differs from the approach of REAL that decided these elections where what they made of them. Being ‘the new guys,’ developing as an organization independently—unattached to other oppositional actors either by family relations or previous affiliations, of course provided a certain competitive advantage. This is not to say we can expect them to win the next election, or perform some other miracle, but perhaps if they persist in this approach it might work towards at least partly reversing the complete marginalization of the ‘opposition’ in Azerbaijani society.

About the Author

Dr. Sofie Bedford is a researcher at the Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University currently working on a project focusing on political participation in Azerbaijan and Belarus.

Recommended Reading:

- LaPorte, Jody. Hidden in Plain Sight: Political Opposition and Hegemonic Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31 (4) 2015: 339–366.
- Sultanova, Shahla. Challenging the Aliyev regime: Political opposition in Azerbaijan. *Demokratizatsiya. The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22 (1) 2014: 15–37.

“What Will They Think About Us?”: The Importance of International Recognition of Elections

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

This article deals with the question of democratic legitimacy and analyzes the importance of international recognition of elections for newly independent countries. Taking the case of the November 1, 2015 Parliamentary Election in Azerbaijan, I look into the question of why it is so important for the Azerbaijani elites to be recognized as a democracy. Among other things, I argue that the democratic ideal has become “commercialized” and is being used as a tool of hegemony by various bigger states towards smaller ones in international politics. The use of the tool of external recognition for democratic elections by the Russian Federation proves the claim of instrumentalization of the concept.

Introduction

In a famous Soviet movie called “Osenniy marafon” (Autumn Marathon) two Russian men and one Dane are drinking vodka one morning in the kitchen of a St. Petersburg apartment. When one of the Russians refuses to drink with the excuse of work the other Russian tells him that he should drink, “otherwise what will he (the Dane) think about us?”

Professionals working with the post-Soviet space know that most of the time it, indeed, looks like this. There is strong pressure, in many areas, sometimes cultural sometimes moral to “be or behave like them”. This type of motivation has paved the way for various interesting developments in the post-Soviet space. Election practice is only one of them, but an extremely important one, because it shows “that we are a democracy, just like them”.

My aim in this article is about trying to shed light on the question of international recognition of the elections in general and to discuss specifically what happened during the November 1 Parliamentary Election in Azerbaijan this year.

My central argument is that post-Soviet hybrid regimes turned into what they currently are because of the pressure of the global environment and commitments they took vis-à-vis the international community.

Election Background

On November 1, 2015, Azerbaijan held its fifth parliamentary election since independence. The results of the election were not a surprise for many. The ruling party candidates together with non-partisan candidates took the majority of seats. Additionally, candidates from a dozen so-called opposition parties obtained one to two seats each. It is important to note that normally non-partisan MPs and MPs from opposition parties vote in line with the ruling party in the parliament and the composition of the parliament should be viewed as one

solid bloc rather than a community of various political ideologies. This is not to say, though, that the Azerbaijani parliament is completely politically neutral, since some of the MPs seem to be related to particular power groups and/or powerful people inside the state system (they can be called “oligarchs”).

Accordingly, the role of the parliament is formal and many understand that it is the agreement and consensus among the groups inside the state rather than the voters’ will which defines the composition of the parliament.

Ultimately, the role of the parliament in Azerbaijani power politics is quite passive, and it is heavily subordinated to the executive. The parliament is in fact a reliable safeguard of the strong domination of the executive and a good legitimating tool for the ruling elite. Its strong attachment to the executive power makes the legislating process smooth and compliant with the dominant interests of the executive leaders.

Nevertheless, there is also an ambiguity here. As opposed to the role it plays now, parliament’s potential functionality is much higher. The parliament, indeed, has potential powers (historically and through the constitution) to be functionally transformed into a vigorous challenger to the executive branch. This is what happened on the eve of independence, when power was changing hands through the decisions made at the sessions of the then Supreme Soviet (in Azeri: “Ali Sovet”); in effect, the legitimation of power took place through this body. Parliament was the institution, which legalized the return of the former communist leader Heydar Aliyev as the country’s leader in 1993.

Also, it seems that the parliament in Azerbaijan is one of the most visible elements of the liberal-democratic form, of representative democracy as members of the parliament are elected from constituencies and formally they are supposed to represent citizens. Certainly, there are other institutions pointing to formal democracy like elections (in general), the Commissioner on

Human Rights (Ombudsman), elected local self-governance, among others. However, the parliament stands out as the biggest semi-independent collective body, which has the capacity to challenge executive power.

The False Appeal of Democracy

Here, an important question should be asked: What were the reasons for this sort of hybrid governance to emerge in some countries in the post-Soviet area? Among other things, I link it to the appeal of democracy and will elaborate on this.

For most of the post-independence period, “democracy” was a widespread, hard-to-challenge and almost hegemonic concept in the public discourse. Although there was resistance from the so-called “old guard” (sometimes in the form of identifying democracy and freedom with chaos and anarchy) this could not damage the globally backed normative appeal of democracy and its supporters have had moral superiority and the intellectual upper hand in all debates. The discourse of democracy was prevailing.

The third wave of democratization, which began in the mid-1970s (Huntington), and democracy’s success in Eastern Europe in the post-1990s has turned the concept into a political fashion. Almost all post-Soviet states declared themselves a democracy and started (or at least pretended) to implement liberal-democratic reforms. Newly independent states also declared their loyalty to the democratic way because this is what the superpowers demanded from them. It was sort of a carrot, reflection of the soft power, and element of the “cultural hegemony” of the West.

The idea of democracy has become popular because its appeal was a popular one. It addressed the issue of human life and governance with the attractive appeal of “power to the people” (almost in the same manner as Soviet rule used similar slogans) after the long years of the Soviet totalitarian regime.

Because it was the “promotion of democracy”, the democratic form of government was portrayed as the best one. Also because it succeeded in Western Europe and the United States, it was assumed that it should succeed elsewhere. The normative character of the discourse of democracy as the best form of government dwarfed the balanced debate around it as just a form of government, which mostly gained importance and popularity in the second half of the 20th century in Western Europe and later in other regions around the world.

Although after some period of time Western leaders and decision-makers realized that democratic rule was not so simple to implement in most of the areas of the former Soviet Union, the West, and particularly, the United States did not give up on the idea of promoting

democracy and continued to include the discourse into its programs and policies. It is hard to say whether, with or without support from the West, but in some places democratic elections did take place, paving the way for the establishment of renewed forms of governance. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine are quite exemplary in this regard. In Georgia, the rule of President Shevardnadze was replaced by the popular rule of President Saakashvili. Charles Fairbanks claims that Saakashvili’s policies aimed more at modernizing rather than democratizing the country, realizing that the former is more important than the latter at the beginning of the independent state building.

My assumption is that one important omission of democracy promotion was the fact that it did not take into account (or equalized) the social, political and economic modernization of the countries that were targeted.

So, Why Would They Care?

On November 24, 2015 during his speech to the newly elected parliament, President Aliyev said:

“These elections demonstrated again that Azerbaijan is committed to democracy. In Azerbaijan all democratic institutions function successfully. All freedoms—freedom of speech, political freedoms, freedom of association, freedom of conscience and religion—are protected in the country. These elections proved once again that these freedoms exist here.”¹

The official newspaper Azerbaijan described in detail the positive reactions of several Israeli media outlets regarding the November elections in Azerbaijan. The newspaper also reported that “many international observers and foreign journalists have noted that elections in Azerbaijan by some parameters could be considered exemplary.” The newspaper quoted the personal observation of Vlad Zernitsky, the editor-in-chief of Radio Israel 1: “I observed voting in six polling stations. Everything was so fair and well-organized that it raised no questions.”²

The fundamental question for me is not whether these statements are right or wrong. The question that I struggle to understand is why it is important for the Azerbaijani state that the so-called international community recognizes elections. Why do they care?

First of all, my assumption is that since democracy has become a fashion of the 1990s, appearing demo-

1 Speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the first session of newly elected Milli Majlis, November 24, 2015, <<http://www.president.az/articles/16862>> (author’s translation).

2 “The elections in Azerbaijan are highly appreciated”, Azerbaijan Newspaper, November 19, 2015 <<http://www.azerbaijan-news.az/index.php?mod=3&id=83688>> (author’s translation).

cratic is important for the various newly independent countries as a form of affiliation with economically and politically advanced nations, mostly those of North America and Western Europe. Although the number of non-democratic countries is quite high around the world, the majority of them, if not all, claim to be a democracy and reject labels like “authoritarian” or “dictatorship”. Therefore, the conduct of elections in a single country puts it automatically into the “maybe democratic” category. This uncertainty is important as it creates a debate: a pre- and post-election debate on whether elections were free, fair, and democratic. However, it does not seriously damage the country if they were not. By merely conducting elections, the country already frames itself as democratic, since elections are possible only in a democracy.

Secondly, it seems that international legitimation is part of domestic persuasion and hegemony. This seems to be one of the strong reasons why the authorities in Azerbaijan are eager to have international observers for elections. The international stamp of approval is an important ritualistic act, which also stems from the ingrained mentality that everything local is of low quality; everything Western or European is much better. This is also a vestige of the Soviet system, when locally produced goods were always considered of a lower quality than the imported ones.

Repeated statements from state officials about the presence of numerous international observers from international organizations and foreign governments point to this tendency. Ali Hasanov, presidential aide, said 500 international observers came to observe the November 1 parliamentary elections. The OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) proposed 30 long-term observers to follow the election process countrywide, as well as 350 short-term observers to follow election day procedures, including voting, counting, and tabulation of results.³ At the same time, the presidential aide also said that the number of observers proposed by OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was too high for a country the size of Azerbaijan.⁴ He referred to financial and accommodation problems related to the deployment of ODIHR observers, although observers are funded directly by participating states and not by the host government. Also, in the same interview, Hasanov made it clear that

it is not only the number but also the “biased” character of ODIHR observation that the government was unhappy about.

On September 11, OSCE ODIHR made a decision not to observe the November 1 Election in Azerbaijan. The ODIHR Director said: “The restriction on the number of observers taking part would make it impossible for the mission to carry out effective and credible election observation. Regretfully, we are compelled by these actions to cancel the deployment of ODIHR's observation mission for the parliamentary elections. The Azerbaijani authorities' insistence on a restricted number of observers is directly counter to the country's OSCE commitments and in contradiction to ODIHR's election observation mandate”.⁵

President Ilham Aliyev stated that ODIHR rudely violated its mandate by adopting the above-mentioned decision. Following up after the elections, presidential aide Ali Hasanov stated that since the EU accepts the results of the elections and is ready to work with the new parliament, the absence of the OSCE ODIHR mission cannot undermine the results of the elections⁶.

An interesting statement came from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In an interview to the APA Agency, a high-ranking Russian diplomat said that he was surprised by ODIHR's decision. He also noted that ODIHR's criteria of numbers of observers to be deployed are unclear: “They sent two observers to Germany and then wanted to send 600 to Kyrgyzstan”.⁷ In addition to that and in line with the geopolitical battle of rhetoric, Chairman of Russian Central Election Commission Vladimir Churov stated that: “The absence of one monitoring mission did not affect the results of the elections”⁸.

Conclusion

Echoing Fukuyama, Jurgen Habermas claimed that “while there have historically been many forms of legitimacy, in today's world the only serious source of legiti-

3 OSCE ODIHR, Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, Needs Assessment Mission Report, August 31, 2015, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/179216?download=true>>

4 “Enough observers arrived in Azerbaijan to monitor parliamentary elections, Presidential aide Ali Hasanov”, Azertac, November 1, 2015, <http://azertag.az/en/xeber/Enough_observers_arrived_in_Azerbaijan_to_monitor_parliamentary_elections_Presidential_Aide_Ali_Hasanov-897986>

5 “Restrictions imposed by Azerbaijan compel cancellation of parliamentary election observation mission, says ODIHR Director Link”, OSCE ODIHR Press Release, September 11, 2015, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/181611>>

6 “Ali Hasanov: No ODIHR observers can cast doubt on the legitimacy of elections”, Contact.az, November 3, 2015, <<http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Politics/110300135188en.htm#.VIRf6NZbw0Q>>

7 “Rusiya XİN: DTİHB-nin Azərbaycanca müşahidəçi göndərəkədən imtina etməsi çox təəccüblüdür” (Russian MFA: We are surprised to find out about ODIHR's refusal to send observers to Azerbaijan), APA, November 2, 2015, <<http://m.apa.az/?c=show&id=403396&l=az>>

8 “Churov: Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were democratic”, News.az, November 2, 2015, <<http://news.az/articles/commentary/102372>>

macy is democracy”⁹. Many would think it is a controversial statement, perhaps, as increasingly more nations today, in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, slide back from democratic to authoritarian forms of government.

However, closer analysis of how national power elites behave in international and domestic environments reveals the inevitable tendency to succumb to the democratic form and discourse.

In a modern world of nations, it is important to appear democratic not only for the local audiences, but also to claim democratic legitimacy internationally. It even helps sometimes to “become a democracy” and gain enormous points globally, as in the case of Georgia.

Using the old Marxist terminology, we might perhaps claim that the form of democracy has become more important than the content. This sort of “commercialization of democracy”, as John Keane puts it, is becoming a norm of modern international and domestic politics.

Also, democratic legitimacy and the issue of recognition of “democraticness of election” becomes something valuable for the country “under recognition”. Bigger foreign actors with an interest in smaller countries play with the recognition issue and use it in order to gain more favors and gain more influence over the countries that need that democratic recognition.

About the Author

Rashad Shirinov is a PhD Researcher in Political Philosophy at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

9 Habermas, Jürgen. “The Political” The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology”, in E. Mendieta and J. Vanantwerpen (eds.) *The Power of Religion in The Public Sphere* (New York, Columbia University Press 2011) p. 24 quoted in Bas Leijssenaar, Judith Martens & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.) *Futures of Democracy* (The Netherlands, Wilde Raven, 2014).

CHRONICLE

8 October – 27 November 2015

8 October 2015	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian signs a decree setting 6 December 2015 as the date for a national referendum on the country's planned constitutional reform
8 October 2015	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says that Georgia is making progress on its path to NATO integration during a press conference following a meeting with Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli and Georgian Foreign Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Brussels
9 October 2015	Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Davit Dondua says that Georgia is not likely to be offered a NATO membership action plan (MAP) at the NATO's summit in Warsaw next year
10 October 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during an unannounced visit to Baku to discuss bilateral cooperation and regional security
11 October 2015	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze says that Georgia will consider gas supplies from Russian gas company Gazprom to add to what the country is already receiving if the offer is commercially viable
12 October 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili congratulates Alexander Lukashenko on his re-election as President of Belarus, saying that he is confident that friendly relations between the two countries will further develop
13 October 2015	The chairman of the Azerbaijani Central Bank says at a parliamentary session that the country is considering a possible free floating exchange rate for the national currency, manat
14 October 2015	Data released by the National Bank of Georgia show that money transfers from abroad to the country in the first nine months of 2015 have declined by more than 26.7% year-on-year
16 October 2015	Leaders of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), in which Armenia and Azerbaijan are members, sign a statement on combating international terrorism and an agreement on military cooperation at a summit in Kazakhstan
16 October 2015	Russian President Vladimir Putin says that the CIS member states could create a joint border force, citing the critical situation in Afghanistan
17 October 2015	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev dismisses National Security Minister Eldar Mahmudov, who served since 2004
19 October 2015	The leader of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, says that he plans to initiate steps for a referendum on joining the Russian Federation
20 October 2015	Seven officials with the National Security Ministry in Azerbaijan are arrested on charges of abuse of power following the dismissal of the National Security Minister
20 October 2015	Chief of the General Staff and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Viktor Muzhenko, visits Georgia and meets with Chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, Major General Vakhtang Kapanadze, in Tbilisi to discuss military cooperation between the two countries
21 October 2015	The head of the Georgian Rustavi 2 television channel, Nika Gvaramia, accuses the Georgian government of blackmailing and threatening him if he does not "step aside" from his position
24 October 2015	A Georgian leader of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party, Giga Bokeria, is questioned by officials of the State Security Service in connection to an alleged "conspiracy to overthrow" the government
27 October 2015	Former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili speaks of the need to diversify gas supplies in Georgia through purchasing more gas from Russian state company Gazprom and increasing transit of Iranian gas
29 October 2015	Wiretapped recordings emerge of two phone conversations by former Georgian President and current governor of the Odessa region, Mikheil Saakashvili, in which he discusses the need to "defend" the Rustavi 2 television channel through "physical confrontation"
30 October 2015	Rustavi 2 television channel head Nika Gvaramia says that he will no longer call for a rally of viewers in defense of the channel following the release of wiretapped recordings of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili calling for defending Rustavi 2
1 November 2015	Ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) claims victory in the country's parliamentary elections which were boycotted by opposition parties

2 November 2015	Central Election Commission (CEC) chief Mazahir Panahov says that the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) has won the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections of 1 November in Azerbaijan with a voter turnout of under 56 percent
5 November 2015	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meets with Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili during a visit in Tbilisi and pledges the “strategic partnership” and the further development of friendly relations between the two countries
6 November 2015	Nine civil society organizations in Georgia release a statement condemning the ruling of a Tbilisi court to replace the top management of the television channel Rustavi 2 as “unlawful”
10 November 2015	EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini praises Georgia’s “good work” in implementing the visa liberalization action plan during a visit to Tbilisi
12 November 2015	Human rights defender Arif Yunus is released from jail in Baku due to ill health, but is not allowed to leave the country
16 November 2015	The opposition United National Movement party (UNM) launches the start of a campaign to increase the monthly pension by 50 Georgian laris to 210 Georgian laris from next year
17 November 2015	Deputy Head of Georgia’s State Security Service, Levan Izoria, says that although Georgia is not on the list of countries with a high risk of terrorist attacks, threats are “treated seriously”
19 November 2015	Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin hails direct dialogue with Georgia following a meeting with the Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, in Prague
20 November 2015	Protesters rally in the Armenian capital of Yerevan against constitutional changes that would transform the country into a parliamentary republic
22 November 2015	The Georgian State Security Service says they have arrested a Georgian man upon his return from Turkey on terrorism charges
24 November 2015	Access to at least two pro-Islamic State websites in Georgian language is blocked

Compiled by Lili Di Puppò

For the full chronicle since 2009 see <www.laender-analysen.de/cad>

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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