

THE 2005 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN: INFLUENCING FACTORS¹

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Two years after he was elected head of state, Ilkham Aliev was confronted with the threat of a possible political crisis in Azerbaijan. On 6 November, 2005, the country went to the polls to elect the parliament. According to the opposition leaders, the process abounded in serious

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violations and massive falsifications of the election results. The ruling elite, however, insists that the country had all the conditions for a fair, transparent, and democratic election campaign. From the very beginning, international organizations spared no effort to make the elections a fair process. At the very beginning of the election campaign, the United States, the key actor in the region, sent contradictory signals about its possible response if falsifications were revealed and recognized.

It should be said that the current political processes in the republic began in 2003, after the death of President Heydar Aliev, who kept the country under strict control. After Ilkham Aliev, his son, was elected president of the country, he found himself completely dependent on the "old guard." Decentralization of the state's political structure began; the political situation became very complicated: some of the cabinet members entered into an open confrontation with others and created influential groups for this purpose. Chairman of the State Customs Committee Kemalladin Heydarov and Minister of Economic Development Farkhad Aliev were locked in a struggle for influence on the president and his closest circle. Bitter rivalry among different groups inside the ruling elite has always been a prominent feature of the country's political life, even though many foreign observers were inclined to describe the situation as a confrontation between power and opposition.

On the eve of the presidential election, the leading opposition parties, which stepped up

their activity, added to the tension created by the growing contradictions between the key cabinet members. The opposition leaders threatened a Color Revolution if the ruling elite failed to organize fair elections. The country's leaders responded to these radical statements with harsh measures and resolutely stemmed the opposition's attempts to rally people in anti-government actions, including demonstrations in the center of Baku. At the same time, some of the top bureaucrats, while demonstrating their loyalty to the president and the ruling party, were maintaining unofficial contacts with the opposition. Shortly before the election, they stopped pretending and revealed their bias toward the opposition leaders and their cause. In fact, several weeks before the election, Azeri society was living in anticipation of an orange revolution. The law enforcement bodies took every measure to prevent destabilization; the opposition leaders were absolutely convinced that a revolution offered the only possibility of changing the regime and coming to power.

The current events can be described as an ongoing political struggle between the ruling Novy Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) Party, the opposition bloc Svoboda (Freedom), and other forces. In other words, the parliamentary election became an episode in a bitter power struggle, the first round of which went to the president. Several weeks before the election, Ilkham Aliev surprised everybody by making several political moves to forestall an attempt at a coup d'état. Still, political tension remained.

Domestic Factors

Plots inside the Ruling Elite

The revolution of which so much had been said inside the country and out started from above. The inordinate events that took place late in October 2005 spoke of a revolution. It was then that the final split in President Ilkham Aliev's circle became obvious. Purges in the upper echelons of power began. The joint statement about a plot headed by former parliamentary speaker Rasul Guliev (wanted for embezzlement and wide-scale corruption) issued by the Ministry of National Security, Ministry of the Interior, and the Prosecutor General Office came as a surprise to many.

Significantly, accusations of plotting against the state and funding the opposition were brought not only against Guliev, but also against some of the top members of the ruling elite, as well as the most influential of the oligarchs. This total onslaught of the law enforcement bodies on cabinet members disloyal to the government ended in the dismissal and arrest of Minister of Economic Development Farkhad Aliev, Minister of Health Ali Insarov, manager of the Presidential Administration Akif Muradverdiev, head of the Azpetrol Oil Company, the largest in the Southern Caucasus, Rafiq Aliev, and some other official persons. According to the authorities, they were accomplices of the plotters. The arrests were not enough: the country's leaders tightened their control over the social and political situation and upgraded security at all strategic installations.

The active prevention measures taken by the young president came as a surprise to many in Azerbaijan, while some political observers detected the strong will of the president's father. We might suppose that the president was apprehensive of the powerful oligarchs who served as his ministers, wielded large capital, and enjoyed authority in the business and political communities. He might have been concerned about the possibility of the most influential cabinet members siding with the traditional opposition to carry out radical changes. The discontented part of bureaucracy was prepared to join forces with the opposition to change power or, at least, to weaken the president's position.

The blow the president delivered to the influential groups inside the ruling elite dramatically changed the alignment of forces and political balance. Reshuffling at the top triggered a gradually deepening political crisis. The serious political changes carried out on the eve of the parliamentary election and official accusations against the influential minister-oligarchs of plotting to seize power speak of a high degree of mistrust and very complicated relationships at the top.

The purges inflated the president's rating: by exposing the ties between Guliev and the corrupt cabinet members, Ilkham Aliev undermined popular confidence in the opposition. However, his own party, Novy Azerbaijan, lost several points: all the arrested bureaucrats were its members. As soon as former Minister of Health Insarov admitted that he had been involved in plotting against the regime, many of the "old guard" members were immediately excluded from the ruling party. The purges might extend into the post-election period, while the key posts in the government will go to new people. This will inevitably trigger another round of redistribution of national wealth.

By acting resolutely, the president routed all those in the top echelons of power who had betrayed him and sided with the traditional opposition. It seems that he realized his father's team had taken him hostage and would not hesitate to dump him when the opportunity presented itself. There are still many "old guard" men in the ruling elite; they are still influencing political developments in the country and are capable of challenging the president and the young members of his team of reformers. Time will show how the president will respond to this challenge; it is obvious, however, that the active "old guard" members who retained their posts will have to retire sooner or later. Young politicians will replace them.

Rasul Guliev—Heydar Aliev's Comrade-in-Arms and Ilkham Aliev's Main Opponent

It looks as if some of the top bureaucrats placed their stakes on Guliev who, along with other "old guard" members, worked alongside President Heydar Aliev. In 1994, Guliev spared no effort to restore Heydar Aliev, the patriarch of Azerbaijan's politics, to power. When Heydar Aliev was elected president of this oil-rich country, Guliev became the speaker of the parliament, the second top official in Azerbaijan. In 1996, they stopped being comrades-in-arms; the former speaker joined the ranks of

opposition and emigrated to the United States where he received the status of a political émigré. Very soon he became the leader of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan; since that time he has been in close contact both with the opposition leaders and with former bureaucrats disappointed in the current policies. Several years later Guliev joined the group of influential leaders of the traditional opposition. In 2003, when Ilkham Aliev ran for president, Guliev made an attempt to come back to challenge the main presidential candidate, but was banned from the race.

Two years later he tried once more to join the election race. Being repeatedly warned about imminent arrest upon his arrival in the capital, he stubbornly insisted that he would come back on the eve of the 2005 parliamentary election. Indeed, under the pressure of all sorts of international organizations and heads of some Western states, the authorities registered him as a parliamentary candidate. Guliev's political career received another boost; he moved to London to be closer to Azerbaijan. While the republic's law enforcement bodies made public their intention to arrest him upon arrival, the opposition was rallying forces to greet him at the airport.

Closer to 17 October (the date Guliev was expected in Baku), political tension rose; the airport and adjacent territory were cordoned off by special units and the army. Many people really did believe that this notorious opposition leader was coming back home; privately, some top officials approved of Guliev's intention and made no effort to conceal their loyalty to him. The aircraft by which the ex-speaker planned to return landed in Simferopol (Ukraine), where the local Interpol Bureau, acting on sanctions of the Azeri authorities, arrested him as an internationally wanted person. Several days later the Ukrainian court freed Guliev and refused to extradite him on the grounds that Baku was guided by political reasons. President Aliev flatly rejected any political underpinnings in Guliev's case.

Guliev went back to London where he resolutely condemned what the Azeri government had done and confirmed his resolution to come back to Baku between 1 and 3 November. The leader, whom the opposition regarded as savior of the nation, failed to keep his word and stayed in London. In Azerbaijan, however, tension was mounting. This was partly explained by the fact that many of Guliev's supporters among the opposition, bureaucrats, and businessmen were arrested on suspicion of organizing mass street disorders and of plotting against the country's leaders. The ex-speaker's failure to come back and take part in the parliamentary elections weakened the leading opposition parties. The political intrigues around his intention to return stirred up the opposition, yet the ruling circles clearly demonstrated their strength and did all they could to retain complete control over the events. It became obvious that Guliev, as the key opponent of the authorities, had lost another round.

Why the Opposition Lost

I have already written that the opposition was resolved to introduce radical changes and did not rule out a revolutionary scenario. Late in 2003, when Ilkham Aliev was elected president, the opposition made an abortive attempt to overthrow the regime without any serious support from the United States and the international community as a whole. In the wake of the presidential election, the authorities used every political instrument available to rout the cornered opposition. It took the opposition circles a long time to recover; late in 2004 the opposition parties, still in disarray, lost the municipal elections without much struggle. This, however, did not do away with the radically-minded voters—the opposition parties were merely biding their time.

This explains why long before the parliamentary election of 2005, the opposition camp was steeped in bitter debates. Some time later the three political parties, the most active opponents of

the ruling regime—Musavat (Equality), Popular Front, and the Democratic Party—united into an opposition bloc called Azadlyg (Freedom). From the very beginning, the bloc expected to win the election and come to power by putting pressure on the president's administration. The Musavat and Democratic parties were headed by former speakers of the parliament and prominent politicians Isa Gambar and Rasul Guliev; Ali Kerimli, a young politician and supporter of reforms, headed the Popular Front.

A new opposition bloc named Novaia politika (New Politics) came to the stage with prominent politicians (first president of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov, who lives in Moscow, former chairman of the National Independence Party Etibar Mamedov, and leader of the National Unity Movement Lala Shovket Gadjeva) among its members. During the election campaign, the latter changed its stance and, after political consultations, signed an agreement with the Azadlyg coalition.

The Novaia politika bloc is soft opposition: it does not insist on a regime change, but favors cardinal political and socioeconomic reforms. The Azadlyg, however, hopes that strong support at home and abroad, in the West, will trigger a Color Revolution. At the very start of the election campaign, some of the members of the radical opposition were openly talking about this possibility, if wide-scale falsifications of the election results were revealed.

No wonder international organizations and the leading Western countries demanded that the Azeri leaders organize at least superficially democratic elections. This inspired the opposition and allowed it to revive its political life in Azerbaijan. The start of the election campaign, however, was marked not only by fierce confrontation, but also by arrests of opposition members and restrictions put on street rallies. The relations between the two opposing camps became very complicated; international structures reported on cruel suppression of the protest actions. At the same time, under Western pressure, Baku retreated somewhat; political tension was further relieved by the president's instructions on improving the election procedure. Society as a whole took these important measures favorably, yet the opposition remained suspicious and doubted that the local official structures would abide. Significantly, all these factors taken together—the president's instructions and removal of the most odious of the top bureaucrats—completely undermined the position of the radical opposition. Confronted with accusations that some of the officials funded the opposition and were involved in plotting against the ruling regime, the radical opposition lost confidence, which compromised its leaders. The risk of a Color Revolution greatly diminished—the majority realized that a revolution was next to impossible.

The badly organized, underfunded, and small opposition proved to be much weaker than the ruling top, which, despite the split in its ranks, managed to retaliate and prevent a political storm. The opposition, meanwhile, made a serious and typical political mistake: it failed to close its ranks and pool its meager resources. In other words, it failed to agree on a common political strategy and nominate the best people. Its weakness primarily stemmed from the absence of an ideological platform able to lure the voters away from the opposite camp. This was further aggravated by the discredited political past of the opposition leaders who had been in power, with little success, in the early 1990s. Most of the nation remembers this period as a political and economic mess and military inadequacy in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though today people are more bothered about the rising corruption than their negative memories, the opposition has failed to mobilize the masses for a struggle against the ruling regime.

The opposition naturally enjoys the support of Western-oriented social groups and the social "bottom." Displeased with the ruling regime, they want democratization and Westernization. This is not enough, however, to rally the nation in a Color Revolution. As distinct from Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan where mass protracted protests forced the law enforcement bodies to retreat, in Azerbaijan all security structures are closely controlled by the republic's leaders resolved to suppress all radically-minded political opponents of the president.

On the Aims and Responses of Foreign Actors

Voting Day and the Voting Results: International Comments

It was clear from the very beginning that the voting process was no less important than the results, therefore, the voting ended calmly. The next day, however, when the Central Election Commission officially announced the preliminary voting results, political tension mounted. According to the official figures, the ruling Novy Azerbaijan Party won 63 seats out of 125; the Azadlyg opposition bloc, 7 seats, and the rest of the seats went to small pro-governmental parties and independent candidates. This means that the ruling party retained its dominating majority, while the opposition failed to get a blocking stake. It should be said that these figures differed greatly from the results of the exit polls carried out by PA Government, a well-known American consulting firm. The firm became, de facto, an international arbiter of the honesty and transparency of the election. Its information for 10 polling stations differed from the official figures.

The opposition immediately announced that the results had been falsified and demanded another round of voting. Its leaders publicly declared that they would limit themselves to peaceful means for the sake of the country's democratization. At first the authorities denied that numerous violations had taken place and insisted there had been no problems. The observers sent by the OSCE and some other organizations were of a different opinion. The U.S. State Department agreed with the European observers, offered unexpectedly critical comments, and called on the country's leaders to investigate all the violations immediately. The CIS observers, however, stated that the election had fully corresponded to democratic principles and the laws of Azerbaijan.

Still, a storm of international criticism forced the Central Election Commission to say that the voting results for 10 polling stations should be re-checked to remove all doubts. Under the pressure of mass protest rallies in the capital's heart demanding that the election results be annulled, the government demonstrated its willingness to sort things out. Some of the bureaucrats guilty of falsifications were fired; there is the possibility of talks between the government and the opposition with Western mediation.

Meanwhile, the number of those who want the election results annulled is mounting, which encouraged the opposition to close ranks and begin forming a national democratic front to annul the election results. It seems that the radical opposition is doing its best to bring out as many people as possible into the streets. It is not clear whether the absolute majority wants another round of elections, yet it is obvious that the Western democracies are increasing their pressure on Aliev's administration and are stiffening their criticism. The encouraged opposition is pouring much more effort into its attempt to rally the masses—in fact, the gross errors of local administrators and numerous violations on election day left the opposition no other opportunity. If they continue insisting on their demands, the powers that be might be confronted with a serious political crisis: the future depends not only and not so much on the opposition as on the country's leaders.

Geopolitical Interests of Moscow and Washington

Baku belongs to the sphere of strategic interests of Russia and the United States, two key actors in the Southern Caucasus: Armenia has always served as Russia's outpost in the region, while the United States consolidated its position through Azerbaijan. America is undoubtedly interested in Caspian oil, its extraction, and its transportation along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The White House is helping

to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; it is encouraging the democratic processes in the republic and obviously intends to station its mobile units there.

When America was politely asked to quit Uzbekistan, its interest in Azerbaijan increased to change the balance of forces in the Southern Caucasus. Ilkham Aliev has re-adjusted his foreign policy accordingly. Today, two American radar stations are functioning close to the Russian and Iranian borders. America did a lot to help Baku set up a military center to monitor suspicious ship and aircraft movement in the Caspian Sea zone. Donald Rumsfeld and other American military have been frequenting Baku, which means that the military component of bilateral relations is coming to the fore. This shows that Washington would rather preserve the status quo in order to be able to continue extending its military cooperation with Baku.

On the other hand, Russia, traditionally an anti-revolutionary force, is working hard to increase its influence in Azerbaijan. The Russian Federation clearly wants to maintain the status quo in this South Caucasian country. More than that: good personal relations between the two presidents have already raised the contacts between the two countries to a higher level. Moscow does not want American military bases in Azerbaijan; America might move in on the pretext of guarding the pipeline or putting pressure on Iran. Unwilling to quarrel with Moscow and Tehran, the people at the helm in Baku have to balance between Russia and the United States, on the one hand, and Iran and the United States, on the other.

This led to a paradox: the need to balance between the two key powers—Russia and America, which want stability in the republic—forced the president of Azerbaijan to meander between them, thus creating conditions for another Color Revolution. Significantly, when the election campaign was drawing to its end, Sergei Lebedev, Director of the RF Intelligence Service, and Daniel Fried, Assistant U.S. State Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, visited Baku to meet President Aliev (separately) behind closed doors to discuss the domestic political situation. It takes no wisdom to guess that Lebedev came to help the young president avoid a Color Revolution. This is indirectly confirmed by the mounting anti-Russian sentiments in the opposition ranks; they became even more pronounced when the Russian and Azerbaijani special services, acting together, arrested some of the top bureaucrats and powerful oligarchs.

The American functionary came to keep the president away from too harsh measures, if not against the disloyal members of his closest circle, then at least against the radical opposition. It is hardly correct to say that the White House supports the opposition—it is using it as an instrument of pressure. It seems that in the context of a much fiercer power struggle in the post-election period, the U.S. will try to retain its influence in the republic and help mold a new evolutionary model of its political transformation under which the opposition will acquire a third of the parliamentary seats and start working together with some of the members of the ruling party to help the president implement a program of political liberalization and economic reforms.

The United States does not want political destabilization, even though it always wanted to weaken the regime—not overthrow it. It looks as if the American administration has finally realized that Color Revolutions might prove destructive. The developments in Kyrgyzstan have cured it of its earlier euphoria. Washington does not need chaos in Azerbaijan which might create a lot of problems for the pipeline's continued functioning and bring oil prices to a new peak. America's restraint in the post-election period will probably be interpreted as the White House's political concessions to its oil-related interests. This will further complicate the situation in Azerbaijan, a country rich in hydrocarbon resources.

What is in Store?

Politically, 2005 was an important year; while next year might prove to be even more interesting if the opposition prefers to squabble with the regime. The country's leaders have two roads open to

them: either to agree to by-elections in some of the constituencies, thus allowing the opposition to win more seats, or to face a new wave of mass protest. The future of power in Azerbaijan depends, to a great extent, on its consolidation, which significantly increased after the arrests of insufficiently loyal functionaries. The ruling elite, however, might split on other key political issues; time alone will show whether the head of state is capable of dealing with recalcitrant team members. It has become clear that Ilkham Aliev is resolved not only to stay in power, but also to reinforce his position in order to be reelected in 2008.

The president must prove to strategic investors that he is the key to the country's stability and democratic reforms: this will help him avoid a wide-scale crisis and stay in power. The opposition, on the other hand, will have a chance to come to power if its leaders manage to convince Washington and other Western democracies that it has the nation on its side and that it can preserve stability. In any case, today the country has a favorable chance of gradually changing its political system under the supervision of the powers that be. This variant, however, calls for the inevitable redistribution of the property of the former oligarchs with all the ensuing political and economic consequences. Concerned about possible unfavorable developments, Washington and Moscow will actively contribute to a political settlement in Baku and will together work on a mechanism of cooperation to maintain and strengthen stability in Azerbaijan.

Today, the country needs new strategic prospects of profound political change, more freedom for its citizens, and radical reform of the government. The country must restore its territorial integrity, weed out corruption, and confirm democratic values. Official Baku can achieve this if all the constructive forces agree to work together.