

Azerbaijan's 2005 elections: Can CSOs seize the moment?

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Azerbaijan's upcoming parliamentary elections (to be held November 6, 2005) are currently a hot topic in Eurasian news because of the region's recent "revolutionary elections." International observers are wondering if Azerbaijan could be next. However, there are other reasons—reasons related to the country's internal political development—to pay attention to the coming elections. Given the conflicts over a new electoral law, economics, and corruption, the ruling and opposition parties are gearing up for the electoral battle ahead. This already intense political season has created space for civil society organizations (CSOs) [1](#) to push for free and fair elections. Whether they will be able to take advantage of this opportunity, and help advance Azerbaijan's democratization, depends on whether they can overcome both internal and external challenges during the pre-election period.

The November parliamentary elections are important for several reasons. First, they will implement new sections of the electoral code (some approved in 2002 and some in 2005). For example, for the first time, all 125 members of parliament will be elected in single-member constituencies in a single round (rather than a mixed system of proportional representation and single-member constituencies). While the impact of this change remains to be seen, some have argued that single-member constituencies (first-past-the-post) will not benefit established political parties. Second, President Ilham Aliyev stated his desire to conduct free and fair elections in a May 2005 executive order on the improvement of election practice in Azerbaijan, and earlier this year released 115 political prisoners, including members of the opposition (jailed following unrest during the 2003 presidential elections). Third, Azerbaijan's reputation in the international community will be affected by the character of these elections, and that reputation impacts Azerbaijan's ability to secure international support in solving internal problems (like ethnic conflict or economic underdevelopment) as well as the possibility of its future integration into the European Union. Fourth, the elections will occur just about the time that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline will begin operation, which will sharply increase Azerbaijan's oil exports and perhaps world attention to the country's political development and democratization.

However, CSOs have their own reasons for taking a more active role in the electoral process. Watching the crucial role that CSOs played in the recent revolutionary elections in Georgia and Ukraine has energized Azerbaijani civil society groups to get involved. Just as youth groups (like Pora and Kmara) had worked with students in Ukraine and Georgia to raise awareness of the upcoming elections and urge participation in opposition demonstrations,

youth organizations—such as Yox (No), Megam (It is time), and Yeni fikir (New thinking)—have been created in Azerbaijan, where they claim to play a similar role.

Other CSOs in Azerbaijan are very active in organizing nonpartisan election observation and voter education activities. These groups—the Election Monitoring Center, For the Sake of Civil Society, and Law and Development (among others)—strive to maintain a neutral political position. The strengths of such national observation organizations are their familiarity with the local customs, political environment and language. In addition, they are more cost-effective than international observers.

Some CSOs are motivated by their disappointment with the performance of opposition parties in 2000 and 2003 and their distrust of political parties' ability to represent their interests faithfully in parliament. After finding both the mechanisms available to lobby parliament and the parliament's willingness to involve CSOs in the policy-making process insufficient, these groups have decided to take matters into their own hands. They have either established their own election coalitions—such as Public Leaders, Independent Media 2005/Union of Journalists, Union of Youth Organizations, and Bloc of Lawyers—or partnered with the election blocs of different political parties—such as Union of Intelligentsia, Protection of Women's Rights, or Media Rights Union—and are actively pursuing seats in parliament in order to eliminate obstacles that hinder the development of the nongovernmental sector and independent mass media.

Given these CSOs' activities, President Aliyev's stated desire for free and fair elections, and the increased international and domestic attention focused on the elections, might CSOs be able to help advance Azerbaijan's democratization and the representation of CSOs in parliament in November? It depends. Both external and internal challenges have the potential to limit CSOs' ability to impact the election process. Their primary challenges are legislative barriers, distrust produced by imitation CSOs and coordinating their work around a clear message.

As mentioned above, CSOs consider it important that elections be observed by local as well as international delegations. However, according to electoral law, CSOs that receive more than 30% of their funding from foreign sources cannot participate in election observation. Because fundraising inside Azerbaijan is very underdeveloped, this description applies to many of the most active CSOs. While, in theory, the law allows CSO members to observe elections as individual citizens (rather than as CSO members), in practice, this legislation seriously impedes the work of local election observation. It means that CSOs are unable to mobilize, educate and coordinate observers and makes individual observers more susceptible to intimidation since they lack the protection of a larger organization. (The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and other international organizations, have found that national observers are more often subject to

intimidation than international observers.) This law also impedes CSOs' financial transparency since it leads them to hide the money they receive from international donors in order to preserve their ability to field observer teams. Such a law tarnishes the government's will to conduct free and transparent elections, and both international and local civil society organizations should pressure the Azerbaijani government to reconsider this legislation.

The work of CSOs in the electoral process is also complicated by the establishment of puppet CSOs (or NGOs) by political groups in order to promote their own agendas. The existence of such groups—which claim the same status as nonpartisan CSOs—makes it difficult for CSOs to mount election observation efforts that citizens can trust and tarnishes their accomplishments in doing so.

The most challenging internal obstacle that faces most CSOs (and political parties as well) is their inability to articulate a clear message and work together to promote that message. They tend to criticize government plans rather than formulate independent solutions to the problems facing Azerbaijan, and they lack crucial skills like coalition building. Too often, their messages are driven by the personal interests of strong personalities, which contribute to the fragmentation of mission among them.

The success of democracy in Azerbaijan depends largely on the political will of civil society and the authorities to conduct free and fair elections. If these groups cannot demonstrate the political will to ensure transparent and democratic elections, then changes in the election code and new election technologies—such as inking voters' fingers and using transparent ballot boxes—will have no impact.

The will of the ruling elite to conduct free and fair elections will be demonstrated during the election campaign and on Election Day. If the president and his supporters are truly willing to undertake progressive political and economic reforms (as they say), they should also be interested in conducting free and fair elections. In addition, strong and constructive opposition in the parliament could give the president the leverage he needs to fight conservative and corrupt bureaucrats and implement the serious economic and political reforms he has mentioned.

The will of civil society to have free and fair elections can be seen in the work of groups involved in the election campaign, voter education and election observation. However, its most important manifestation will be in voter turnout for the elections: high turnout will indicate citizens want democratic elections. To achieve this goal, CSOs should work not only with elite civil society groups in big cities and district centers, but also with people in regions remote from urban areas in order to spread democratic values throughout Azerbaijani society.

Most Azerbaijanis believe that the democratization of their country is inevitable. Otherwise, chaos and instability will overcome the country's political and economic systems. However Azerbaijan's path to this destination remains unclear. Whether civil society organizations have developed the momentum they need to advance free and fair elections will be obvious in November. Then we will know if these elections mark the beginning of a new page in Azerbaijan's progress towards democratization or whether they are only a lost opportunity.

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Notes

1 *Today, there are an estimated 3,000 NGOs in Azerbaijan, but only 10-20% of them are actively involved in the social and political life of the country.*