

## ELECTION ANALYSIS Azerbaijan

### FAILURE BY DESIGN

by Shahin Abbasov



Funeral procession for President Heydar Aliyev.

The presidential election of October 15, 2003 in Azerbaijan created a new political reality in the country: the possibility of power sharing among parties. Former president Heydar Aliyev, who had governed the country for a decade, did not

participate in the presidential elections. Instead, his son Ilham represented the ailing leader's party, fanning the opposition's desire for a free and fair election.

The hopes of many were dashed when the new electoral code, mandating the formation of local election commissions, was adopted in May 2003. Despite opposition protests and international pressure, the ruling party, Yeni Azerbaijan, retained full control of the central and local election commissions.

Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father as president, winning 76 percent of the vote by official figures. Isa Gambar of the Musavat Party finished second with 12 percent and Etibar Mamedov of the National Independence Party gained less than 10 percent. But opposition parties and international monitors disputed the results, claiming widespread fraud, ballot-stuffing and voter intimidation. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission confirmed that falsifications were widespread.



Police face demonstrators in Baku.

Several factors contributed to the failure of the electoral process in Azerbaijan. Opposition candidates faced serious obstacles throughout the campaign. The role of the mass media was very disappointing. All five local TV channels openly supported Aliyev. Only three opposition newspapers, *Yeni Musavat*, *Azadliq* and *Hurriyet*, supported opposition candidates and their total circulation was less than 40,000 readers. Opposition candidates received no more than two percent of the total broadcasting time on state and private television channels and were portrayed in an extremely negative light.

The day after the election, clashes between Gambar supporters and police in the streets of Baku led to at least one death and more than 100 injuries. Gambar declared himself the winner, but could not manage to render serious resistance because he had only three to four thousand Musavat party supporters in the streets and, within one day, they had been suppressed.

The opposition made two serious miscalculations: they failed to unite behind a single candidate and underestimated the support Aliyev would enjoy from his father's team. Also, compared with their counterparts in Georgia, Gambar and Mamedov failed to overcome their own narrow self-interests. They spent all their TV-time criticizing Aliyev and his father, offering almost no alternative programs of their own.

Aliyev also won because he enjoyed the complete support of his party, he conducted an active campaign and he raised the salaries of state employees and the pensioners on the eve of elections. Moreover, many people voted for Aliyev because they feared destabilization in the country in the event of Gambar's victory.

Several challenges face Azerbaijan under Aliyev. First, civil society may be threatened. The opposition has been greatly weakened and will not be able to mount any significant resistance in the coming months. Aliyev, unlike his father, has refused to meet representatives of the international organizations that criticized the election.

Independent media are also under threat.

Second, an upsurge in radical Islamist movements is possible. All three Sunni mosques in Baku receive support from organizations in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Every Friday, more than 10,000 people gather to pray in them, a figure exceeding the combined turnout at rallies organized by 20 opposition parties during the campaigns. If Aliyev's economic reforms fail and

prospects for democratic change do not improve, extremist Islamic movements in Azerbaijan may intensify.

2004 will be a crucial year for Azerbaijan. The country needs to pursue democratization, economic reform and the continuation of a pro-Western policy while it deepens national stability, secularism and independence. What can the U.S. government and various international organizations do to help Azerbaijan? Most importantly, they should focus on supporting civil society and the independent media. It will remain important for Washington to balance its welcome support of Aliyev's economic reforms with a push to launch political ones, of which opening up the political landscape to the opposition is a major first step. **E**

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