

Azerbaijani presidential election fixed with the approval of Bush and Putin

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On November 31 Ilham Aliyev will be inaugurated as president of Azerbaijan. Two weeks earlier, Azerbaijanis entered the polling booths to elect their president, not that it made any difference. The outcome was preordained courtesy of a crude stitch-up approved by both the US and Russian governments. Once the fabricated result was announced, both Washington and Moscow congratulated Aliyev.

Ilham Aliyev takes over from his father Heidar Aliyev, the previous president, and emulates him in his readiness to fix elections. The Organisation of Security and Cooperation described Azerbaijan's 2000 parliamentary election, presided over by Aliyev senior, as a "crash course in the different methodologies of manipulation."

Aliyev junior wasn't kidding when he repeatedly declared during campaigning, "I will be trying to be as my father in my life. He has always been an example to me." Government officials gave Ilham Aliyev 80 percent of the total vote and the nearest challenger Isa Gambar, leader of the Musavat Party, only 12.6 percent. In contrast, more than one independent exit poll found Gambar leading with 46 percent and Aliyev trailing badly with 24 percent. The day before the poll, a spokesperson for New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) showed a BBC journalist completed ballot papers marked for Ilham Aliyev complete with official stamps. Widespread ballot box stuffing was reported, and election observers noted how pro-government forces gathered outside polling stations intimidating voters.

Since the election, the government has embarked upon a ruthless campaign of repression. Many hundreds of journalists, opposition figures and local officials have been detained and demonstrators savagely beaten. HRW described the post-election Aliyev offensive as a "massive and brutal crackdown." In Baku, two people, one of them a child, died in unrest after the announcement of Aliyev's victory, while pensioners and children were beaten black and blue by government forces.

The widely acknowledged real winner of the election, Isa Gambar, is currently under house arrest. His Musavat party name means equality, but represents no progressive alternative to an Aliyev-style kleptocracy. The only equality Gambar demands is of access to Azeri oil riches for himself and his clique.

Other prominent opposition leaders are being held at the Interior Ministry's notorious anti-organised crime department, which HRW says "routinely uses torture and other physical abuse against detainees."

Paul Bouckaert, HRW's Baku representative, described the current situation gravely: "Azerbaijan is going through its most serious human rights crisis of the past decade."

Various human rights and electoral organisations have reported detained opposition figures being tortured. The favourite Azerbaijani police method is "flaka"—the beating of the soles of the feet with a stick. Wounds can become infected and prisoners sometimes require amputation. Psychological torture has also reportedly been utilised by pro-government forces, typically consisting of threats against the families of those held. As yet, the Aliyev government has failed to release any names or numbers of those held in government custody.

Belatedly, the White House joined international calls for an investigation into what it coyly calls "election irregularities," stating "we believe Azerbaijani's leadership missed an important opportunity to advance democratisation by holding a credible election."

In sharp contrast, independent monitors sent by Washington denounced the Azeri election as nothing less than a "sham."

State Department officials also admitted that immediately after the election result was announced, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had congratulated Aliyev junior on his "strong performance." Defending their salutation, State Department spokesman Adam Ereli explained, "His strong performance was a fact. That is recognition of an objective fact."

This was a "strong-arm performance," carried out with the benediction of Washington and Moscow, that included mass political harassment, bribery and intimidation accompanied by sabre-rattling at neighbouring Iran and at Armenia.

Aliyev telegraphed his fraudulent intentions in the run-up to the election, stating how the Azerbaijani people had already made up their minds, and blaming any election inconsistencies on local officials currying favour with Baku. The less prosaic truth is that most had already been threatened with the loss of their employment and worse should they not participate in ballot-stuffing and the like.

Local officials and police were instructed by Baku to disrupt and harass opposition rallies by closing roads into towns hosting rallies, extend state employees' working hours, and even declare Sunday a working day to prevent participation. In full view of international electoral observers, Aliyev goons physically attacked and verbally abused oppositionists

In the run-up to the Azerbaijani poll, a New York federal grand jury indicted a Swiss lawyer for his alleged part in illicit payments to top officials in Azerbaijan by a Western business consortium. Hans Bodmer, of Swiss law firm Meiss Blum & Partners, is facing a two-count indictment of conspiring to facilitate payments between Oily Rock Group Ltd. and Minaret Group Ltd., both registered in the Virgin Islands, and officials from SOCAR (the Azerbaijani national oil company) and the state property commission.

The alleged intention was to coerce privatisation of SOCAR into the hands of foreign investor group Minaret, headed by Czech Viktor Kozheny and Oily Rock. Investment fund Omega Advisers and US Senate majority leader George Mitchell are connected to the deal.

Bodmer was allegedly a conduit for bribes to ensure the Oily Rock-led consortium's piece of the Azeri oil privatisation bonanza. Bribes, reportedly delivered in suitcases by executive jet, amounted to millions of dollars.

According to a source familiar with the Bodmer investigation, the White House had advance knowledge of the pending indictment against the Swiss lawyer. Consequently, neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney met Aliyev before the election, despite his numerous recent visits to the US to visit his sick octogenarian father and confer with lesser White House officials.

Echoing its relationship with Kazakhstani leader Nursultan Nazarbaev, the Bush regime is conducting relations with Baku backstage. Washington commentators call it "Nazarbaization".

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are both Caspian oil states, blatantly corrupt and nepotistic. Indeed, Nazarbaev is reputedly linked to an ongoing corruption probe involving New York merchant banker James Giffen. Nevertheless, Republican support does not waver; and in the run-up to the Azeri election, the White House publicly declared outright support for the Aliyev dynasty and their New Azerbaijan Party.

The Bush government has no intention of chastising the Aliyevs and possibly allowing Russian influence to increase in Baku. For its own purposes, the Putin government shares Washington's support for Aliyev and has ample experience dealing with corrupt and nepotistic regimes in the former Soviet republics.

After capitalist restoration, Aliyev senior told close associates how the Politburo no longer resided in Moscow, but in Washington. However, Moscow refuses to relinquish control in its backyard to the US without a fight—a point highlighted by the recent opening of a Russian airbase near the Kyrgyzstan capital Bishkek, just down the road from an already existing

American one.

The Putin government wishes to curry favour with the ruling clique in Baku and endorsed the dynastic succession from Heidar to Ilham before the rigged election. The web site Eurasianet.org, supported by the multimillionaire George Soros, recently stated that it believes Russia is winning the race to influence Baku. Moscow has now dropped its opposition to the construction of a multibillion-dollar pipeline to pump Azeri oil across the Caucasus to the eastern Turkish coast.

The wider danger of both the US and Russian governments' ambitions in Azerbaijan is the destabilisation of other former Soviet states in the Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus regions. Already, the incumbent Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze is signalling his intention to "do an Aliyev" in the upcoming election in Tbilisi and is tentatively seeking approval from Washington and Moscow.

Shevardnadze's nephews and son-in-law are amongst the leaders of Georgia's largest business clan. Speculation surrounds the president's son Paata, currently a UNESCO diplomat, possibly running to succeed his father when his term closes in 2005. Meanwhile, in the new Kazakh capital Astana, Nursultan Nazarbaev hopes to emulate the Aliyevs and groom his eldest daughter Dariga, the country's biggest media baron who has just started her very own political party, as his successor.

For its part, Washington is prepared to pay any price to protect its investment in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. If that means anointing a series of fraudulent regional elections, then so be it. Regional commentators fear that the widely ridiculed gambler and braggart Ilham will not prove up to the task of taking over from his despotic father. The instability created by his succession could even push Azerbaijan into again declaring war with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. During campaigning, Aliyev junior explicitly threatened Armenia, whereupon US ambassador John Ordway called a news conference to declare that the Bush regime opposes a military solution to the fate of the disputed territory that lies within Azerbaijani borders but contains a substantial ethnic Armenian population.



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