

Mass protests in Azerbaijan against oligarchs

Clara Weiss
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Mass protests took place in the Azerbaijani town of Ismayilli on the night of January 23 directed against the governor of the region, Nizami Alakbarov, and his family of oligarchs. Ismayilli (population 14,400) lies about 200 kilometres west of the capital city of Baku.

Nizami Alakbarov, the regional governor, is the brother of the country's minister of labor and social protection, Fizuli Alakbarov. The Alakbarovs are one of the richest and most influential families in Azerbaijan. The police and military brutally attacked the protesters and a state of emergency was declared in Ismayilli and adjacent regions.

The protests broke out, according to residents, after Vugar Alakbarov, the son of the labour minister, rammed a taxi with his SUV. He is alleged to have been drunk. Following the accident, Vugar got out of his auto, cursed and started to beat up the taxi driver. Residents then came to the assistance of the driver. As events unfolded, between two and four thousand people took to the streets calling for the resignation of the governor.

The protesters set fire to the SUV, a Toyota Land Cruiser and two motorcycles, plus a villa and a hotel owned by the Alakbarovs. Stores belonging to family members in the city were also destroyed and set on fire. The protests began around 11 pm and ended four hours later.

The government initially denied that Vugar Alakbarov had been involved in the incident. Nizami Alakbarov blamed provocateurs for manufacturing a crisis. "Some aggressive forces pointed the crowd to my house and a pogrom was organized," he said.

An anonymous protester then told Eurasianet.org: "We [local residents] are not idiots to make a pogrom if he was not there. Vugar is known in the region, and it was he who was beating a taxi driver there".

He continued: "People are unhappy with the corruption and obstacles [hindering] farmers and

businessmen that are created by the local administration. We are tired of unemployment, poverty, corruption and the climate of fear".

The Alakbarov family has apparently taken over most of the forest and farmland in the area around Ismayilli—a region primarily dependent on agriculture—thereby preventing local farmers and small entrepreneurs from conducting their business.

On Thursday a curfew was imposed in Ismayilli. Interior ministry troops were sent into the area, blocking all roads leading to the town. Internet clubs in the city were closed, and the Internet censored by the authorities. A number of posts on social networking sites expressing sympathy with the protests have been deleted. The government even tried to prevent the distribution of video footage of the unrest on YouTube. Nevertheless, tens of thousands have already viewed videos of the riots in Ismayilli.

According to the Turan News Agency, a state of emergency was declared in the neighboring regions of Agsu, Gabala and Goychay, with an increased police presence on the streets. Police attacked protesters at a solidarity rally in Baku on Saturday.

The protests against the governor also continued in Ismayilli January 25. In the evening, there were violent clashes between police and hundreds of demonstrators. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets against the protesters who responded by throwing stones.

Several people were injured and one protester is reported to have died of his injuries in hospital. Angry residents also complained that many young children were affected by the massive use of tear gas. A three-year-old girl apparently suffocated due to the gas. Reports about the number of those arrested vary from 20 to 100 people and local residents claim that some prisoners were tortured by police.

There is widespread anger in Azerbaijan about the massive social inequality, unemployment and poverty

that prevail. Similar protests took place in March 2012 in the Guba region, which borders Ismayilli to the north. At that time over 10,000 people took to the streets and eventually forced the local governor, Rauf Habibov, to resign.

As is the case in the other former Soviet republics, much of the population in Azerbaijan has been plunged into poverty by the demise of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism. Manufacturing and agricultural production have declined dramatically, while the social infrastructure has completely collapsed.

The country's economy has experienced a boom since the late 1990s thanks to oil and gas reserves situated around the Caspian Sea. The gross domestic product has increased eightfold since 2000. However, the profits made from the export of raw materials have flowed mainly into the pockets of a few oligarchs, while a large proportion of the working population has to survive on low-paid jobs.

Due to its dependence on commodity exports and the price of oil on the world market, Azerbaijan was hard hit by the world economic crisis of 2008. Annual economic growth fell to 5.7 percent in 2010, down 25 percent from 2007. In 2011 the figure was 0.1 percent and in 2012 around 3 percent.

According to official data, the unemployment rate is about 5 percent, and 11 percent for young people. However, only about one in four of the unemployed is actually registered. Poverty and unemployment are particularly acute in agricultural regions like Ismayilli. In 2010, an estimated 42 percent of the country's population lived in poverty and in many regions the rate was over 50 percent. The northwest of the country, where Ismayilli is located, is one of the poorest regions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the war with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which lasted from 1988 to 1994 and cost between 20,000 and 40,000 lives, also turned about one million of the nine million inhabitants of the country into internal refugees. The conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh has continued to simmer since the end of the war and has been further fueled by the governments of both countries to divert attention from the social problems.

Azerbaijan has been ruled since 1993 by the Aliyev family, in alliance with a number of other oligarchic families, including the Alakbarovs. The current

president of Azerbaijan is Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father Heydar in 2003. The Aliyev family controls enormous wealth and a large part of the Azerbaijani economy.

According to the *Washington Post*, the then 11-year-old son of the president acquired a villa in Dubai in 2009 valued at \$44 million—an amount that an average worker in Azerbaijan would earn in around 10,000 years. The Western powers prop up the authoritarian Aliyev regime, since Azerbaijan is an important supplier of raw materials to the European Union and a strategic ally of the US and Israel against Iran and Russia.



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