

WHO'S WHO IN THE AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION



An Occasional Paper

THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

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by Fariz Ismailzade



Occasional Paper



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**The views expressed in this report are solely of the author and do not represent the views of this or any other organization.*

On October 15, Azerbaijanis will go to the polls to elect their next president. Seven candidates are running for the most prestigious and powerful position in the country. Who will become Azerbaijan's president for the upcoming five years will depend not only on the personal qualifications of the candidates but also the general political context in the country, developments in the region, and the history of the electoral process in Azerbaijan.

The Political Context for the 2008 Azeri Presidential Elections

Azerbaijan is experiencing a unique period in its history. Not only is it independent for the second time but it is for the first time stable, prosperous, and investing in its future. Indeed, the past 18 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of 15 newly independent republics in the territory of the empire have brought magnificent transformation for Azerbaijan from a poor, unstable, and chaotic country into an island of peace, stability, and prosperity in the sensitive region of the South Caucasus.

The present regime in Azerbaijan is reaping big dividends from the hard geopolitical work done in the mid-1990s, namely: establishing a cease-fire with Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; signing oil contracts with Western multinational oil and gas companies; investing in new pipelines that bypass Russia and Iran; forging normal, working relations with all powers in the region; and stabilizing the country from within.

Since 2003, these investments have started producing results, and billions of dollars in oil revenues started pouring into the country. The living conditions of people have improved significantly in comparison to the 1990s, and the country's overall development seems to be on the right track.

The Azeri government has been able to utilize oil revenues to further upgrade the country's infrastructure. Given the current prices in the world markets for oil and gas, it is expected that Azerbaijan will generate more than \$200 billion in revenues from energy projects. More than \$10 billion has already been accumulated in the State Oil Fund and a significant amount of that money[?] has been spent for social and infrastructure projects. More than 1600 new public schools were built in the past 5 years and more than 600 were repaired. New hospitals, sports facilities, culture houses, theaters, and parks have been built across the country. More than \$1 billion has been invested in roads, bridges, and underpasses. New residential buildings are emerging in Baku and other cities every day, and new refugee settlements are being built to eliminate refugee tent camps.

The Azeri economy has been expanding at a rate of 25-30% GDP growth annually.¹ Three years ago the budget of Azerbaijani government was approximately \$3 billion. In 2008 it reached \$12 billion. Poverty has been reduced from 50% to 16%, and unemployment has virtually disappeared.² On the streets of Baku, one increasingly comes across migrant workers from China and India. Not only is Azerbaijan the fastest growing economy in the world, but it is also the one undergoing the

1 Ministry of Economic Development. www.economy.gov.az.

2 "Poverty Level Decreased in Azerbaijan", Trend News Agency, January 11, 2008.

most significant reforms: indeed, according to the World Bank's "Doing Business 2008" report, Azerbaijan made significant improvements in its business climate, jumping a record 66 points in the report's rankings.³

In the regional context, Azerbaijan is pursuing a truly independent foreign policy. Unlike Armenia, which is heavily dependant on Russia, or Georgia, which has burnt all bridges with Russia and now depends heavily on the European Union and the United States, Azerbaijan continues to have normal relations with both the West and Russia. This is an exceptionally difficult task considering the conflicting interests between the regional powers. In addition, Azerbaijan manages to accommodate and find common ground with Iran, China, and Turkey, as well as the EU. Pursuing a balanced foreign policy helps Azerbaijan maintain cordial relations with all but also remain truly sovereign on national security issues and other issues of high importance to the country, such as pipelines, military bases, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Although often pressured by Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan has nevertheless avoided a full-scale conflict or crisis with these regional powers, something that Georgia failed to do. Azerbaijan treats all regional countries with respect and likewise expects the same from its neighbors. It is truly a miracle that the country has managed to walk a tight rope and still avoid confrontation, considering that the region often seems rife with ethnic conflict and social instability.

Azerbaijan has not only managed to establish a stable and prosperous situation at home, but is also finding ways to drive economic development in the broader region of the Caucasus and Central Asia. As a locomotive of regional development, Azerbaijan heavily invests in infrastructure and business projects in Georgia, Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Turkey. These investments aim to foster a good neighborhood policy, promote sustainable economic development, and maintain peace in the region.

Given the current period of relative stability and economic prosperity, the next task for Azerbaijan's authorities is to focus on the post-oil boom period and ensure that the current pace of economic development and social improvement is maintained after 2025, when oil exports are expected to end. In this regard, Azerbaijan has started investing in strategic projects that would keep the country's economy afloat. These projects are focused on sectors of the non-oil economy, such as transportation, tourism, agriculture, and information technologies.

Azerbaijan wants to become the transport hub of the greater Eurasia region and has the perfect geographic location for that goal. Becoming the gateway to and from Central Asia will bring significant revenues from cargo transits. For that purpose, Azerbaijan has devoted significant resources to building roads, ports, and bridges on its territory and loaned almost \$400 million to the Georgian government to build the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway. Once completed, this railway will connect the railway systems of Europe and Asia and transform Azerbaijan and Georgia into a transit route for more than 20 million tons of cargo from China to Europe and back.⁴

3 Doing Business Report, World Bank. <http://www.doingbusiness.org/Features/Feature-2008-21.aspx>.

4 For information on the rail project, see Taleh Ziyadov, "The Kars-Akhalkalaki Railroad: A Missing Link Between Europe and Asia," *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, April 19 2005.

Azerbaijan is also engaged in political discussions with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to build trans-Caspian pipelines and become the export route for Kazakh oil and Turkmen gas. It has significantly upgraded its port and shipyard on the Caspian Sea and built new warehouses capable of storing Kazakh grain and other goods from Central Asia.

Investments in the information technology (IT) sector, tourism, and agriculture remain a priority for Azerbaijan's government. The Ministry of IT and Communications has launched a special project to study the feasibility of establishing special tax-free zones for the IT industry. The vision is to turn Baku into the region's IT hub. CISCO, Microsoft, and Intel have been contacted at high levels about launching operations in Baku.⁵

All of these political, social, and economic developments are important to understand as a context for the elections. With such a massive influx of oil and gas revenues, and the resulting economic prosperity and construction all over the country, the ruling regime has a clear upper hand in the competition for the presidency. Azerbaijan's opposition, with its limited resources and inability to catch up with a dynamically changing country, has still not been able to formulate a clear message to the electorate. With these political and economic circumstances, the election campaign has differed from past elections in a very significant way.

5 "IT sector in Azerbaijan expanding", Washington Profile, January 10, 2007.

Previous Elections in Azerbaijan and the Current Election Campaign

Azerbaijan has held several presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections, as well as referendums, since the collapse of Soviet Union. All of these elections were hotly contested by opposition parties and independent candidates. However, there has never been a consensus that the electoral process was fair and transparent. During the presidencies of Ayaz Mutalibov, Abulfaz Elchibey, Heydar Aliyev, and Ilham Aliyev, opposition parties and international organizations have expressed dissatisfaction with election procedures. These objections, however, do not necessarily mean that the election results did not reflect the corresponding reality. Often, the winners were indeed the most popular candidates who would have received the most votes anyway, regardless of election falsifications. Nevertheless, in the past local-level officials have been tempted to interfere with the electoral process in order to please the incumbent candidates.

Nevertheless, the electoral process in Azerbaijan and the general level and pace of democratization in the country have passed through an interesting and meaningful process of reform, transformation, and evolution. All of these changes will certainly impact the present electoral process as well.

Above all, it should be noted that Azerbaijani voters have become less emotional and more pragmatic over time. If the initial years of the post-Soviet period in Azerbaijan were characterized by chaos, internal strife, and active political rivalry, the subsequent years under Heydar Aliyev injected more pragmatism into domestic politics. People became busier, with a more comfortable economic lifestyle, and the revolutionary times of early 1990s were quickly forgotten. Thus, the electorate has become less interested in elections and more interested in “what can we get from candidates.” In that context, the resources, reputation, and power of the candidate play an ever-greater role in the electoral process.

Candidates are often asked by voters to repair roads, electric lines, parks, homes, and schools, and to provide jobs for the community. These, of course, are not the direct tasks and job duties of the candidates, demonstrating that voters have become more money driven than ideology driven. Thus, those candidates who have money have a clear upper hand in the electoral process. This is important to understand, because often when international organizations press for free and fair elections, they do not understand that the results of these free and fair elections will not mean that a democracy will come into power; rather, criminal elements or wealthy business oligarchs will simply buy votes.

Secondly, opposition forces and parties have been continuously on the decline in the country, from one election to another. While opposition parties presented a credible alternative to the ruling regime in the 1990s, after 1998 their inability to unite, develop a creative election platform, reach out to the voters, engage in grassroots campaigning, or target real-life issues ensured repeated defeats in elections. Of course, government pressure also played its own role. But most local and international pundits have come to the conclusion that the opposition forces' outdated tactics, rivalry among their leaders, and out-of-touch relations with voters led to gradual disappointment among

the electorate.

The consequence of such losses has been that Azerbaijan seems to be ready to progress into a new period in which a new type of opposition will be needed, and the current leaders of the mainstream opposition will not be able to survive. The fact that they have run their respective parties for more than 18 years and failed to produce results indicates that they need to step aside and allow to a new generation of opposition leaders to emerge.

With each election, it has become clear that radicalism, revolutionary attempts to overthrow the government, pressure on the authorities, and reliance on international organizations and foreign powers are less and less visible in the political life of the country. The new opposition needs to rely on issue-based debate, grassroots activism, targeted messaging, and broad civilized dialogue with the ruling party. The post-election violence that took place in 2003 and 2005 will be difficult to repeat, because the government crackdown on the violent protestors was very harsh, setting a strict precedent that no violence or use of force will be tolerated. It was a clear message to the opposition parties that the centralized government maintains control over the situation in the country and will not allow any political party to come to power through street fighting.

It is also noteworthy to point out that Azerbaijanis experienced major instability and political chaos in the early 1990s, both from civil war and from the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, Heydar Aliyev's message of stability and gradual development was very much appreciated by a majority of the population. People were willing to sacrifice some of their freedoms and liberties for the sake of a strong government that would restore order, ensure basic stability, and promote economic development. These became the primary priorities of the population. Thus, prior elections were held in the context of preserving stability, maintaining slow but gradual progress and a transformation towards democracy, and ensuring a transition of power from Heydar Aliyev, who ruled Azerbaijan for almost 30 years, to his heir Ilham Aliyev.

Having highlighted the general environment which surrounded elections in the post-Soviet period, it is also important to note that the authorities did not stick to a single election system, but instead continuously sought ways to improve the process. A major concession was made in 2000 in accepting a proposal from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) that Azerbaijan's election commission be formed on a parity basis, with 50 percent of the seats in the election commissions going to the ruling party and 50 percent to the opposition. This was a gesture of good will, which the opposition did not use properly. Instead of accepting the seats, the opposition boycotted the first sessions of the election commissions. The boycott, in turn, paralyzed the whole election process. In the end, the government was forced to realign the election commission to break the deadlock and award the majority of the seats to the ruling party.

Other improvements included the use of transparent voting boxes, envelopes, numbered ballots, ink for fingerprints, and exit pollsters to tabulate a parallel vote. Candidates have been allocated free airtime on state and public television to broadcast their messages to voters. Most importantly, voter lists have been posted online for each registered voter to check his name on the list ahead of time and correct possible mistakes. This essentially eradicated the problem related to voter lists, which in the past had frequently been inaccurate and non-transparent. For the first time, web-cams

are being used in polling stations to monitor the accuracy of the election management by precinct election commissions.⁶

The modifications in the election code also addressed observers: those positions are now allowed to be filled not only by candidates or organizations, but also by individuals. Most of the voting stations were repaired and supplied with heating and electricity in order to avoid common problems associated with blackouts in the early 1990s. District election commissions were equipped with computers and internet for the faster transfer of information to the central election commission.⁷

Not one of these improvements, however, will ensure 100 percent transparent, free, and fair elections unless the people are fully educated and aware of their rights and responsibilities and are willing to hold the government accountable. With voters playing a passive role in the democratic process—unaware of election rules and procedures and generally uninterested in the electoral process—democratization will continue to experience major obstacles. And this is a natural phenomenon, because after more than 70 years under the totalitarian Soviet regime, people simply do not believe in their own power and do not want to assume a more active role in governance or the decision-making process. It will likely be several generations before people are fully aware of their rights and are willing to be proactive players in the governing process.

The six opposition candidates, although considered “loyal and soft opposition,” nevertheless use live airtime on Public TV to bash the authorities for the current problems in the country, as well as to draw voters’ attention to their platforms and vision for the country’s future. Nevertheless, the process is generally much more civilized and normal than before.

The country’s mainstream opposition parties, such as the Musavat party, the Popular Front party, the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, and several others have boycotted elections. They have justified their decision by citing a lack of adequate campaign opportunities, domination of the election commission by the representatives of the authorities, absence of reforms in the election code, and unfavorable conditions in the local media. International organizations have condemned this boycott and expressed a desire to see these parties compete and use the election campaign to address the nation instead of sitting at home.

Actually, these opposition parties do not boycott the elections completely. Some of them will field observers at the polling stations while others will actively agitate among the public. But all of them are refusing to nominate their own candidate.

It is not the first time that the opposition parties are boycotting either the election process or the results of the elections. In the 1998 presidential elections, most of the opposition parties, with the exception of the National Independence Party, stayed out of the election process for similar reasons. Nevertheless, then-President Heydar Aliyev won the elections, and everyone quickly forgot about the election process. But the boycott cost the opposition not only a unique chance to unite and mount a strong challenge to President Heydar Aliyev, but also led to its loss of popularity with the general public. Similarly, some opposition parties boycotted the results of the parliamen-

6 Interview with Mazahir Panahov, chairman of CEC on Public TV, October 12, 2008.

7 For maps and voter registration, see www.infocenter.gov.az.

tary elections in 2000 and 2005 and preferred to stay outside of parliament rather than use it as a platform for articulating the country's problems. Municipal elections in 2004 and a referendum of 2002 were also boycotted by the opposition.

The authorities, when asked about the current boycott of the elections by the mainstream opposition parties, skillfully point to the fear among opposition leaders—such as Isa Gambar, Ali Kerimli, and Lala Shovket Hacıyeva—of losing another election and losing further popularity among the public. It is not a joke that all of these opposition leaders, having been in charge of their parties for more than 18 years, have yet to produce results. In a way, the current boycott is a perfect “face-saver” for the opposition leaders, who can use the same old excuses for staying at home.⁸

The boycott opens new opportunities for the country's politics. Above all, the candidates in the race are less radical than those who preferred to stay out of race. None of them have a major opposition party structure behind them, nor do they openly advocate violence in the streets following the elections. Almost all of them would be happy to finish second or third and show their rivals that they were the best of all alternatives. Thus, one can assume that the elections will pass without serious irregularities because the authorities simply do not need to commit fraud to make the incumbent president a winner. Without serious irregularities and certainly without serious intentions by opposition candidates to stir violence after the voting, one can imagine that the general electoral process will be rather smooth this time. There are already signs of this. All of the candidates have access to Public TV, can agitate among voters and distribute their posters in the streets. In the words of one of the candidates, Gulamhuseyn Alibeyli, who broke away from Ali Kerimli's Popular Front party, “the election process is normal.”⁹

Should the elections turn out normal, this will not only differ significantly from the country's previous elections but will also significantly improve Azerbaijan's standing in the region, vis-à-vis both Georgia and Armenia. The latter, for instance, experienced serious turmoil after its own presidential elections in early 2008, when 8 people were killed and hundreds were wounded in the post-election violence. In Georgia, police also violently dispersed an opposition rally last November. Should Azerbaijan avoid such turmoil in its own elections, it will receive a solid trump card in the ongoing negotiations with Armenia.

The boycott of the elections by the mainstream opposition parties also shows the change of generations within the opposition camp. The new candidates, such as Iqbal Agazadeh, Fazil Gazanfaroglu, Gudrat Hasanguliyev, and Gulamhuseyn Alibeyli, are no less vocal about the country's problems, but they do favor a more pragmatic and participatory approach in the national discourse.

Opposition parties in Azerbaijan are entering an interesting stage, since they have simply lost touch with the population because of the country's ever-increasing wealth and their inability to adapt to new realities, both strategically and tactically.

8 Mammadov Ilgar, “Boycott of these elections is explained by the weakness and helplessness of opposition,” *Day.az*, October 11, 2008.

9 *DAY.AZ News Site*, October 4, 2008.

The radical opposition's boycott of the elections in Azerbaijan will make no meaningful difference to the voters. Most of the extreme opposition leaders are already unpopular among the population. However, their decision to boycott the elections has helped younger, softer, and more pragmatic opposition figures to enter the country's political scene, which has been otherwise dominated and monopolized by the old-guard opposition parties. The boycott also helps the authorities conduct elections in a free and calm manner and thus gain points for having reached a milestone in democratic development. It is expected that President Aliyev will easily win the elections, but the actual losers will not be the candidates who are running, but those who stayed at home.

Profiles of the Running Opposition Candidates

Gudrat Hasanguliyev Party of United Popular Front



Gudrat Hasanguliyev represents the new wave of opposition leaders in the country. Although the traditional opposition considers him a “sell-out,” Hasanguliyev has been growing in recognition among the voters. A lawyer by education and training, Hasanguliyev used to be an active member of the Popular Front party. Before that, he was involved in the Popular Front movement in the late 1980s-early 1990s, fighting against the Communist regime. During those years, Hasanguliyev joined the “Yurd” political grouping, which later formed the core support base for Ali Kerimli (first deputy chairman of Popular Front Party during Elchibey’s chairmanship and, after Elchibey’s death, chairman of the party).

Thus, Hasanguliyev quickly became Ali Kerimli’s right-hand man and worked as his adviser and legal representative. Hasanguliyev’s political career progressed during the parliamentary elections in 2000, when he was nominated by the party to the Central Election Commission. Not only did he become a member of the CEC, but he was also elected its secretary, a seat allocated for the opposition parties. Charismatic, good-looking, and intelligent, Hasanguliyev was believed to be best able to represent the opposition’s interests in the CEC.

However, after his promotion Hasanguliyev quickly broke with Ali Kerimli and, with a group of other others who had split with the Popular Front party, decided to form his own party and lay claim on the brand of the Popular Front. A court subsequently rejected this claim, although the inistry of Justice previously awarded Hasanguliyev the right to use this name for his political party. Thus, Hasanguliyev had to settle for a different name for his party: the “Party of United Popular Front.”

Ali Kerimli and other traditional opposition parties accused Hasanguliyev of selling out the in-

terests of the opposition and becoming a puppet for the authorities. Furthermore, Hasanguliyev was believed to be supported by the regime for the purpose of attacking Ali Kerimli and discrediting him. Indeed, Hasanguliyev often bashed Ali Kerimli in his public speeches, accusing him of usurping power after the death of Elchibey, monopolizing the voice of the Azeri opposition, lying, representing populist views, and being insincere. For that reason, Hasanguliyev was mistrusted by the public and held in very low esteem.

Hasanguliyev participated in the 2003 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections. He failed to gather more than 3 percent of the votes in the presidential elections, but was elected into parliament in 2005. He used the parliament as a venue to criticize U.S. policy in Iraq, urging the Azerbaijani government to withdraw peacekeepers from Iraq and Afghanistan; he also criticized the state budget and drew attention to the problem of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. Hasanguliyev generally avoids harsh criticism of the regime, focusing instead on foreign and regional affairs.

Hasanguliyev's party seems to be doing well in terms of financial support. There are rumors that he is closely connected to some ministers and oligarchs, who allegedly support his party to ensure that there is a political tool which they can use to play political games. Hasanguliyev keeps a large staff in his party and publishes his own party newspaper (*Xalq Cephesi*), while also maintaining a website—something other parties cannot often afford.¹⁰

Hasanguliyev has been active in Azerbaijan's civil society, not shying away from public events, conferences, workshops and debates. His popularity somewhat increased in years past due to the discreditation of Ali Kerimli, his main opponent, in the eyes of public and also due to his frequent appearances on TV. It is clear that Hasanguliyev has been working in tandem with the authorities, fulfilling the role of the "soft opposition." During the current presidential election campaign he suggested that Azerbaijan's name be changed to "Northern Azerbaijan." He has also proposed focusing on stimulating an export-oriented economy: for instance, he suggested that a bicycle plant be built in Baku instead of a new airport in Lankaran in order to prevent the import of bicycles from China.¹¹ Hasanguliyev also expressed pessimism about the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh being resolved anytime soon and urged that the military budget be increased by 25 percent, along with allocating 80 percent of the Oil Fund's money to the defense industry in order to be able to return the occupied Karabakh territories by 2011.¹²

During one of his live speeches on TV, Hasanguliyev addressed the issue of religious radicalism in the country and accused the Nardaran village of Baku of spreading religious fundamentalism. As a result, 200 residents of Nardaran village promised to sue him in court. Hasanguliyev himself sued the Central Election Commission last month for not receiving as much funding for the election campaign as the other political candidates. The Supreme Court voted in favor of Hasanguliyev.¹³

10 Hasanguliyev's party website can be found at www.hasanguliyev.az.

11 Day.az News Site, October 9, 2008.

12 Day.az October 8, 2008.

13 Day.az News Site, October 8, 2008.

Igbal Agazadeh Umid (Hope) Party



Igbal Agazadeh is the chairman of Umid (Hope) party. He has been active on the Azerbaijani political scene only since 2000, when he was elected to parliament. Before that, he was associated with several parties and often changed his affiliation. At some point, he was even in tandem with a former president of Azerbaijan - the pro-Russian Ayaz Mutallibov.

Agazadeh has been the most vocal critic of the authorities during this election campaign. He has targeted poverty and inflation, made emotional speeches on Public TV about unnecessary construction and street repair work, and accused the government of hiding the problems of rural areas and only showing successful neighborhoods to foreigners. In that respect, Agazadeh has been gaining some sympathy from voters, although it is clear that he also belongs to the so-called “soft, loyal opposition.”

An interesting development in Agazadeh’s political career occurred in 2003, when he aligned himself with Musavat party chairman Isa Gambar and officially endorsed his candidacy in the elections. After the elections, supporters of Musavat protested the results, and violent clashes erupted on Baku’s main Freedom square. Igbal Agazadeh lead the opposition protestors as Musavat members and police forces engaged in brutal fighting. He was even shown on TV jumping on a wall, waving the flag, and calling on opposition members to attack police and army forces.

After that, Agazadeh was arrested by the authorities and served almost 18 months in prison together with other opposition leaders. At that time, many people considered him a political prisoner. But Agazadeh and other jailed opposition leaders were released after the international community mounted intense pressure, and he was elected to parliament again in 2005. This became a source of suspicion about Agazadeh, and many in the opposition ranks believed that he was playing a “double game.” Indeed, a widespread rumor was that Agazadeh was awarded a position in the parliament for inciting the opposition to mount street demonstrations and thereby discrediting them in the eyes of public.

It is not clear what happened in reality and whether Agazadeh indeed had some sort of agreement with the authorities. But certainly his membership in the parliament would not have been possible without approval from the top levels of the government. After his election to parliament, Agazadeh split from the traditional opposition and was often involved in ugly fights with Ali Kerimli in the local press.

The “Umid” party promotes better social protection, especially for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Agazadeh originally comes from Fizuli, a region in the Karabakh area, and thus his popularity among IDPs and refugees is especially high. Agazadeh promised that if he is elected president, he will take a very firm position towards the Minsk group and push it to be more proactive in the peace process.

Agazadeh has often complained that his posters are being torn down in the streets of Baku. He also stressed that the local executive authorities sometimes interfere with the election process. Generally, however, Agazadeh has been advocating dialogue between the authorities and the opposition.

Hafiz Hajiyev Modern Musavat Party



Hafiz Hajiyev is the most vocal and least respected of all the candidates. Among the general public, he has acquired the nickname “Fish Hafiz” due to his previous career as the head of the fish factory in the country.¹⁴ Hajiyev received this derogatory nickname for his disrespectful, ugly, and often ungrounded attacks on the opposition candidates and their family members. Many voters believe that such ugly attacks do not correspond to the mentality and culture of Azeri people. Specifically, Hajiyev has brutally criticized Ali Kerimli, labeling him a homosexual, and Isa Gambar, calling him an “agent of the KGB.” The name of Hajiyev’s party speaks for itself. He considers Isa Gambar the illegal chairman of the oldest party in the country—Musavat—and wants to use his Modern Musavat party to destroy Gambar’s political agenda.

Hajiyev is clearly a “puppet of the authorities.” He receives money from them to bash opposition leaders, and even in the 2003 presidential elections he became involved in a fist fight with a representative of Ali Kerimli on live TV.

Nobody in the country really knows what the Modern Musavat party stands for, except criticizing opposition leaders. The Azeri public generally has very little respect for the party’s agenda. During this presidential campaign, Hajiyev has been surprisingly vocal on corruption and bureaucracy. He has accused some ministers of taking bribes and doing a great disservice to President Aliyev. More specifically, he focused on gas shortages in households and called for the resignation of the chairman of the “Azerigas” monopoly, Alikhan Melikov. Hajiyev also accused Minister of Economic Development Heydar Babayev and Minister of Agriculture Ismat Abbasov of creating a monopoly in the business environment. He has also often accused the CEC of providing unequal conditions for the candidates. Hajiyev informed the media that ministers exert psychological pressure on him and even threaten him with murder.¹⁵

Hajiyev has called for the replacement of 80 percent of all officials and ministers. He explained this demand, stating: “Most of the ministers are inefficient. I don’t understand: how [can] a simple rain paralyze the work of the capital city?”¹⁶

14 Almost all opposition newspapers in the country use this nickname.

15 Today.az News Site, October 13, 2008.

16 Day.Az News Site, October 11, 2008.

Being populist in his traditional style, Hajiyev promised to return Karabakh in 6 months if he is elected president: “I will allocate only 3 months for the peaceful negotiations and after that I will start and win the war in 3 months.” Furthermore, Hajiyev promises to free low-income families from taxes, demands that each official pays \$1 billion into the national budget, and pledges to use that money to strengthen the army.

Gulamhuseyn Alibeyli Independent Candidate



Gulamhuseyn Alibeyli is perhaps the most respected but least charismatic of all the candidates for president. He is a professional lawyer who served as a member of parliament from 2000 to 2005 and was also the chairman of the Supreme Council of Popular Front party. One of the right-hand men of Ali Kerimli, Alibeyli was considered the second-most powerful person in the Popular Front party. His calm, professional, and issue-based debate skills attracted much support for his candidacy. Alibeyli also refrained from confrontations in parliament, never accusing anyone with radical statements and rarely calling for the resignation of the president. Instead, Alibeyli always favored substantive discussions, civilized dialogue, and active participation. For that, even members of the ruling party respected Alibeyli and valued his legal expertise. As a result, Alibeyli was included in the Azerbaijani parliament's official delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe.

Due to Ali Kerimli's boycott of the current elections, Alibeyli gradually split from Kerimli and officially announced his resignation from the party in the summer of 2008. Alibeyli believes that the opposition should not stay at home and instead use every opportunity, whether in parliament or on national TV, to address the concerns of the voters during the election campaign. The initial disagreement between Alibeyli and Kerimli actually started in 2005, when Kerimli favored a more radical position towards the authorities after the parliamentary elections and even called for a boycott of the parliament. Alibeyli, who was originally elected to parliament but later had his mandate revoked as a punishment by authorities for the radical position of Kerimli, started showing dissatisfaction with the policy of Popular Front. His departure from the party was a huge blow to the party's political power and public image.

Alibeyli does not have his own political party, and thus his campaign is experiencing serious difficulties. Alibeyli also lacks funds for active political campaigning and is not linked to authorities in order to receive money from them.

Being a lawyer himself, Alibeyli used live airtime on Public TV to call for changes to the constitution and the re-distribution of powers between the executive and legislative branches. Alibeyli believes that Azerbaijan's problems derive from a lack of democracy and improper balance of power. If elected president, Alibeyli promises to limit the powers of president as his first step.

For his legal messages, Alibeyli seems to be slightly disconnected with the mainstream population, which wants more radical messages on the economy and social protection. In his meetings with the voters in Ganja, Alibeyli promised to raise salaries for doctors and teachers. Alibeyli accused the government of falsifying statistical reports on the economy and called attention to the dependence of the Azeri economy on oil. He also promised to attract more investments to the non-oil sectors of the economy.¹⁷

The Karabakh conflict is also the focus of Alibeyli's election platform. Alibeyli accused the Minsk group co-chairs of bias and called for the end of the Minsk group's mandate. He said that Azeri oil policy should be used to pressure the international community to draw greater attention to the Karabakh conflict.

It is possible that Alibeyli is simply using the election campaign as a means to launch his own political party. If so, his future political party will be much more respected than the traditional opposition and will also avoid the label "loyal opposition." It will most likely be a party that will favor an issue-based debate without any calls for revolution.

17 Turan News Agency, October 7, 2008.

Fazil Gazanfaroglu Great Revival Party



Fazil Gazanfaroglu is also considered one of the leaders of the new wave of Azeri opposition. He used to be a member of the Popular Front movement and a close associate of Abulfaz Elchibey. Later on, as a member of the Popular Front party, he helped Elchibey in the capacity of deputy chairman of the party. After Elchibey's death, Gazanfaroglu split from Ali Kerimli, whom he accused of usurping power and betraying the principles of Elchibey. This occurred during the 2000 parliamentary elections, when Ali Kerimli's participation in the work of parliament was perceived by many in the opposition as a "sell-out" to the authorities.

Ironically, the situation now is completely the opposite: Ali Kerimli advocates a boycott and Gazanfaroglu insists that participation in the electoral process is a good opportunity to reach out to Azeri voters. After the split with Ali Kerimli, Gazanfaroglu and other anti-Kerimli members of the Popular Front established their own party and entered a long legal and political struggle with Kerimli over the name of the "Popular Front" party. International organizations and local media labeled Gazanfaroglu's wing as the classical Popular Front, and Gazanfaroglu's wing never received the sympathy that Kerimli had. Eventually seeing the fruitlessness of this struggle, the classical wing of the Popular Front party decided to register under a different name, "Party of the Classical Popular Front."

Gazanfaroglu eventually split from them as well and formed his own party, called the "Party of Great Revival." This was done after Gazanfaroglu was drafted into the army, where he served one year. Local analysts believe that Azeri authorities purposefully drafted Gazanfaroglu into the army in order to separate him from the opposition and change his mind about local politics. There are rumors that Gazanfaroglu is related to some high-ranking officials and has always been prepared to serve as a "fifth column" inside the Popular Front. Like many other officials in the ruling party, Gazanfaroglu hails from Nakhchivan. These rumors further strengthened after his election to parliament in 2005, which many saw as a sign of him being placed into the "soft and loyal opposition" group.

Indeed, after his return from the army, Gazanfaroglu criticized the opposition more vocally than the ruling party. He accused them of inaction, a lack of creativity, usurpation of power, and a passive attitude toward the problems of the voters.

In the current campaign, Gazanfaroglu has been very critical of the authorities but in very delicate language. He has urged closer cooperation with NATO and upgrading the Azeri army to NATO standards. He has also advocated for better social conditions for army officers and soldiers, including higher salaries. He has also been critical of the Minsk group, saying that the international negotiators are hurting the rights of the Azerbaijanis, and urged that Azerbaijan stop working in the Minsk group.

In his televised statements and debates, Gazanfaroglu called for civilized relations between the opposition and authorities.¹⁸ He said that the time for revolution has passed and that it is now time for both camps to sit down in a normal dialogue and find ways to solve the country's strategic problems. For example, Gazanfaroglu said: "[The] [o]pposition wants to come to power in a peaceful way. These debates during the presidential elections are much more popular than during previous elections. We have a normal chance to pass our message to the voters."¹⁹

Overall, there are two main slogans that Gazanfaroglu is using in the election campaign: "Trust the Truth, Trust the People" and "Worthy Society, Untouchable Property, Fair State".²⁰ Although he did not plan to run in the elections and initially wanted to support another candidate, Gazanfaroglu later decided to nominate himself and spend about \$40,000 for campaigning. Nevertheless, Gazanfaroglu complained about the government's lack of interest in helping the country's political parties.

18 Debates on Public TV.

19 Day.az October 7, 2008.

20 Day.az News Site, October 7, 2008.

Fuad Aliyev Liberal Democratic Party



Fuad Aliyev is the youngest and least experienced of all the opposition candidates. He is new to national-level politics, although he previously ran for parliament and has also made statements in the local media. Aliyev is not especially charismatic, and his Azerbaijani language skills need some improvement. That is why the public views him as a dark horse, who is simply trying to boost his name recognition nationally.²¹

Aliyev was previously a member of the Liberal Party of Azerbaijan, headed by Lala Shovket Hajiyeva. Later on, he split from her and formed his own party, calling it the Liberal Democratic Party. This party is almost non-existent in Azerbaijan's political arena. Out of 30 official representatives in Aliyev's election campaign, nine belong to one family, which points to a shortage of membership in this party.

From Aliyev's public and TV speeches, it seems that he is a very intelligent man. But he lacks the charisma, experience, and money to run a proper presidential campaign (for much of the campaign, Aliyev even lacked an election headquarters). Instead, his debates on Public TV often sound like he is running for a parliamentary seat, because he raises issues of local concern: a certain water problem in his district, a certain pensioner's problem, a certain street's pavement condition, and so on. During his televised speeches, Aliyev has even announced his phone number, which citizens can call to deliver their local concerns. However, Aliyev consistently fails to raise issues of national concern and importance.

It is not clear how Aliyev managed to collect the required amount of signatures to register for the elections. But his platform does include some controversial issues. For example, in one of his statements, he called for Russian to be given the status of the second state language. Aliyev believes that the level of education in the country has been lowered significantly in the past 20 years, and that only a return to the cultural and educational values of the Soviet period can help fight illiteracy.

Aliyev also advocates minimizing cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO, as well as Azerbaijan's withdrawal from GUAM (an organization facilitating cooperation among Georgia, Ukraine,

21 Survey of ELS company (Fuad Aliyev came last in the polls). Zerkalo Newspaper, October 10, 2008.

Azerbaijan, and Moldova). This seems like a rather pro-Russian election platform, something that has never before been seen within the Azerbaijani opposition. Aliyev also argues that Azerbaijan should join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Aliyev favors constitutional reforms in the country and proposes decreasing the president's term from five to four years. He also promises to conduct reforms and boost the powers of the legislative and judicial branches of the government. Among other reforms proposed by Aliyev are the restoration of the proportional system of elections to parliament, establishment of the post of vice president, and the creation of a presidential-parliamentary republic.

Aliyev's debating style is very friendly, non-aggressive and non-revolutionary. Aliyev appears cautious not to say anything that would upset the authorities. He even announced that his election campaign will not be targeted against any specific personality. Aliyev has dubbed his election campaign "Fair Play" and his election slogan is "from Freedom of Ideas to the Supremacy of Law."²² The election tactics of Aliyev's campaign have been rather creative, from using election balloons to inviting international observers.

22 1News.Az News Agency, October 8, 2008.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan continues to witness a unique period in its history as it experiences a generational shift within the Azeri opposition. The old guard opposition has not proven that it can keep up with the pace of change in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the government remains confident in the prospects for the future of politics in Azerbaijan as the October 15 election – compared to previous elections – should be quite civilized and not nearly as radical in the past. Soft opposition candidates have preferred to focus their attention on real problems, maintaining an issue-based debate as opposed to the personality-driven debate of past elections.

Thus, the progress in the electoral process represents a significant step toward democracy for Azerbaijan. While the presidential election in itself does not mean that Azerbaijan is a western democracy, the current election does represent a continuing evolution of the political process and the desire of various parties to express their views and thoughts on the direction of the country. Other elements are also needed, including the rule of law, government accountability, and human rights, but over time Azerbaijan will likely continue to evolve politically in a direction that upholds these views and increasingly conforms with western standards. Compared to previous elections, the October 15 election should be a continued positive step in that direction, particularly when other countries of the South Caucasus show signs of regressing and moving backward in their paths to democracy.