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Azerbaijan—COVID-19 and a Divided Opposition

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the Azerbaijani government to crack down on political opponents, selectively targeting opposition leaders and activists.

Introduction. A Special Quarantine Regime

The outbreak of COVID-19 has affected political and economic landscapes all over the world. Many critical authors, such as Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, alert that normalisation of restrictive measures that have been taken by governments may potentially lead democratic societies into digital authoritarianism (Žižek, 2020). Other authors warn about the further strengthening of authoritarian and hybrid regimes such as in Hungary and Turkey (Bieber, 2020), including the implementation of digitalised methods of surveillance and collection of private data (Limbago, 2020).

Azerbaijan has its place among authoritarian countries. The history of Aliyev's regime begins with Heydar Aliyev, who was appointed as the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1969 and continued to rule after a six-year break in 1987–1993 until 2003—followed by his son, Ilham Aliyev, who still rules today.

However, it is not a closed and fully-fledged dictatorship, such as Turkmenistan or North Korea, but rather a hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime, as the country holds elections and has a multi-party system (LaPorte, 2015). In such regimes, elections are not genuinely free and fair and the multi-party system exists mostly formally. While opposition parties are allowed to compete, they have no real chance of winning elections, except when it meets the government's interests (Howard and Roessler, 2006). One specific characteristic of the regime is its “red lines,” e.g., direct criticism of the ruling family. Crossing a “red line” may potentially lead to imprisonment.

The authorities declared a special quarantine regime on March 24, which has since been prolonged until May 31 (May 1, Reuters 2020). Measures include the prohibition of entrance into Baku from regions, the closure of the Baku Metro, shopping malls, squares and parks, enterprises, and organisations. Citizens have been obliged to send an SMS to a particular number to get out of their homes for a maximum of three hours (Juvary, 2020). The government launched a caring service for citizens over 65. According to Code of Administrative Offenses, violation of the rules of the special quarantine regime imposes a material fine up to 200 manats (\$117) for first-time offenses, and administrative arrest up to 30 days in the event of repeated violations.

Since the quarantine regime was announced, three journalists and more than a dozen oppositional activists have been arrested, being accused of violating the quarantine, disobeying police, and spreading disinformation. International organisations warned that the government is using the quarantine regime for a new crackdown on the opposition (April 16, HRW, 2020).

According to official statistics for May 12, the overall number of infected in the country is 2693, with 1735 successful recoveries and 33 deaths (May 12, KoronaVirusInfo, 2020).

The Elections and COVID-19

Azerbaijan held snap parliamentary elections on February 9, 2020. The ruling party's argument for the snap elections was that the parliament, following the President's “new reformist strategy,” needed a renewal (Guliyev: 2020, 9). The government aimed to improve its image by letting a few younger progressive and oppositional candidates participate in the elections. However, leakage of video reports on widespread electoral fraud on social media and re-election of many former parliamentarians shattered these efforts (February 10, OSCE, 2020). As a result, it has negatively affected the legitimacy of the regime.

The outbreak of COVID-19 started within little more than a month after the elections. To overcome the economic difficulties of citizens, the government proposed a stimulus package. Under the plan, each unemployed person would receive 190 manats (app. 112\$) per month in April and May. The government would also provide financial support for small and medium-size entrepreneurs who had been affected by the lockdown. According to the official media report, 2.5 billion AZN (app. \$1.5 billion) from the state budget was allocated to reduce the economic effects of the quarantine regime. (April 11, Azertag, 2020). Additionally, the Coronavirus Response Fund was created based on donations totalling around 113 million AZN (app. \$66 million) (May 5, Report, 2020).

Critical commentators, such as independent economists Togrul Veliyev and Natig Jafarli, mention that the “majority of day labourers in temporarily closed sectors are left without a livelihood,” and due to the fall in oil prices and pandemic restrictions, problems in tourism

and logistics are visible (Kitachayev, 2020). Mass unemployment due to the quarantine regime and reduced income have affected working and middle-class families. Additionally, the fall of oil prices creates long-term risks for the oil-dependent economy of Azerbaijan, and may potentially lead to further belt-tightening.

A Dialogue and Crackdown in Time of COVID-19

In mid-February, several meetings between the Head of the Department for Relations with Political Parties and Legislative Authority of the Presidential Administration, Adalet Valiyev, and opposition parties representatives, including the Republican Alternative Party, took place (February 29, Turan, 2020). However, two major oppositional parties, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (APFP) and the Musavat Party, did not participate in this process. They insisted that specific discussion topics should have been announced beforehand. The leader of the APFP, Ali Karimli, argued that through the imitation of dialogue, the authorities had the goal of “reviving the tale of reform,” while those who rejected this format were labelled as “radicals opposed to reform” (March 10, Turan, 2020).

The first sign of a new crackdown against the opposition, journalists, and bloggers can be found in President Ilham Aliyev’s Nowruz speech on March 19 (Kucera, 2020). He addressed issues related to coronavirus, praising the governmental countermeasures, and mentioned that there were “provocations” from the “fifth column”:

“At the same time, we see open provocations. Where do these provocations come from? From the very fifth column, from the enemies who are among us, the elements calling themselves opposition, the traitors who receive money from abroad.”

In the same speech, Ilham Aliyev stressed the dialogue between political actors and the governments “deniers”:

“As for the groups that rejected the dialogue proposal, they know better. In any case, I have already said this but want to reiterate that we will not be the losing side, and there will be no place for traitors and corrupt representatives of the fifth column in the new political configuration. Azerbaijan is cleaning up, as it should, from traitors and representatives of the fifth column.”

After this address, a wave of charges against and administrative arrests of party activists started. More than 20 activists of the Popular Front Party were accused of violating the “special quarantine regime” and received 10 to 30 day prison sentences (April 30, OC Media, 2020). Additionally, an eminent opposition figure, former political prisoner and a member of the Musavat Party who is known to be close to Ali Karimli, Tofiq Yagublu, was arrested and charged with hooliganism.

From the other side, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan acquitted the chairman of the ReAl Party Ilgar

Mammadov and human rights defender Rasul Jafarov and dropped all criminal cases against them (Afandiyeva, 2020). Interestingly, both Ilgar Mammadov and Tofiq Yagublu were jailed convicted of “organising mass riots” and using “violence against police officers” in the town of Ismayilli in January 2013. The acquittal of Ilgar Mammadov legally allows his further participation in elections.

It could be assumed that the regime’s new strategy includes a change in its treatment of the ReAl Party, reciprocating its decision of participation both in the parliamentary elections and in Aliyev’s dialogue proposition. Simultaneously, the “old opposition” has again been declared the enemy and has been a target of the new crackdown.

“The Enemies of the Nation”

The fact that the main opposition parties criticised the organisation of meetings with government officials and the overall structure of the proposed dialogue caused an extreme reaction of the government. The President’s emotional and harsh response and the use of such labels as “the fifth column” and “traitors” assured the radical exclusion of the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, Musavat Party, and other critics (such as the activists of the NIDA Civic Movement and critical bloggers) from the political landscape, portraying them as a threat to the nation and stability. Ali Ahmadov, the deputy chair of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party, used a virus metaphor on his Facebook post, writing that there are “two viruses” in Azerbaijan: COVID-19 and the opposition (hinting at the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party) (April 23, OC Media).

President Aliyev, in his speech on April 14, stated:

“They want an increase in the number of dead, they want an increase in the number of patients, they are glad that people are dying. That is, it is hostility not against the government, but the state. I call everything by their names. If someone is hostile to our people, the state, then he has only one name—the enemy.” (April 15, JamNews, 2020).

In this excerpt, the President used an extreme label, “the enemy of the nation,” hinting at the “old opposition” parties. Although these labels have been used in his speeches before, their repetition in the situation of the pandemic serves to revive the language of “fifth column” and conspiracy theories to neutralise opposition criticism amid lingering economic problems, and to justify the introduction of strict control measures.

The Digitalisation of Repressive Practices

COVID-19 restrictions were extended into the digital realm, where the authorities sought to cut off the opposition from their audiences on social media.

A day before Aliyev’s second speech, the internet service of the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party’s leader Ali Karimli was disrupted (April 23, OC Media, 2020).

For Karimli, who has no access to local TV channels, interviews with pro-opposition internet-based news outlets are the only way to communicate with the public.

Along with the internet disruption, the mobile connection has been blocked within Karimli's apartment, which means that neither he nor his family members are allowed to leave the house as it is impossible to notify via SMS that they are going out.

More than 20 arrested party activists and three journalists were accused of violating the special quarantine regime; two of them reported that they had been tortured in detention (April 30, OC Media, 2020). Two pro-democratic activists, Ilkin Rustamzade of the NIDA Civic Movement and critical blogger Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, both ex-political prisoners, have claimed to have received insulting messages from unknown phone numbers not registered in Azerbaijan (April 23, OC Media, 2020). In addition, a critical online news platform abzas.net experienced hacking which resulted in its news archive for the previous month being deleted (April 24, Azadliq, 2020).

However, this is not the first digital pressure on the government's critics. The government has long used "cheap and widely available" digital tools against its opponents before, such as malware and phishing emails (see Runey and Kaminski, 2018). Many independent media websites are still blocked, while the government uses a "troll army" on social media. However, social media, an important alternative source of information, is freely available in the country.

Thus, Azerbaijan is far away from the Chinese model of authoritarian digital management. The government's intent is to weaken existing critical voices and to muzzle them in exceptional and risky situations such as the recent pandemic, not to establish a fully controlled society, which has no access to independent media sources.

Conclusion: Authoritarianism after COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the oil price crash occurred after unpopular parliamentary elections, at a time when the regime felt more vulnerable to criticism.

About the Author

Bahrüz Samadov is a PhD candidate at Charles University Prague. He obtained his MA at Central European University. In his PhD research, he focuses on authoritarian hegemony in Azerbaijan from a heterodox and post-structuralist political science perspective. Currently, his research activities are supported by the grant SVV 260 595: "Political order in the times of changes." He is also a political activist and author of several opinion articles on Azerbaijan.

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A series of detentions and the effective house-arrest of Ali Karimli that followed targeted opposition figures with mobilisation potential and experience whom the government considered as potential instigators of bread-and-butter protests. Their arrest has been a preventive measure to pre-empt possible mass mobilisation in the wake of the unpopular February vote.

The reaction of the Azerbaijani government to potential political, economic, and social risks in times of pandemic crisis shows that the crisis has not heavily affected its customary logics and practices. As the pandemic occurred concomitantly with a time of proposed "political dialogue," the special quarantine regime has been used for renewed crackdown on the demonised opposition, mainly on the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party and independent critical activists and bloggers.

Importantly, the political logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) has been applied within the opposition camp, splitting it into the "dialogic" Republican Alternative Party, and the "old" but "principal" Azerbaijani Popular Front Party and others, deepening the controversy within the oppositional forces.

By favouring the strategy of manageable dialogue, the government seeks a new plan aiming not just to weaken the opposition, but also to demonstrate to European institutions and Western governments its capacity to cooperate with "constructive" political forces together with the continuous "political reforms." To prove that, the only deputy member from the ReAl Party, Erkin Gadirlı, was included in the delegation of the Azerbaijani legislative body to PACE (April 27, Turan, 2020).

At this stage, the Azerbaijani government uses digital suppression only on concrete targets and not for the transformation of the country into a "digital Gulag." The internet limitation for the APFP leader is likely a temporary measure. At the same time, the arrests and imprisonments of APFP activists had been normalised before the pandemic. Quarantine has both been used as an opportunity for a new crackdown and played the role of administrative exercise for the authorities.

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