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the political situation in the country, it certainly offers them a crucial tribune for expression. They are also much more active on social media than the candidates of the ruling party.

Conclusion

On November 1, 2015, Rza's main opponent was elected with 82 percent (11,281 votes) with a voting turnout of roughly 50 percent, according to the CEC report¹. The second place candidate received 943 votes and Rza won 825 votes, indeed a fairly disappointing result. Amidst the usual irregularities that plague every election in Azerbaijan, she also had to deal with the arrest of one

of her legal representatives for a few hours. In fact, what seemed worth studying in this campaign were the campaigning methods used by a non-partisan candidate who is not from the traditional opposition and whose profile stands in sharp contrast with that of most other independent candidates. In this regard, the approach I described may be considered alternative according to the local context, but a more thorough scrutiny of the situation shows that the methods at stakes remain fairly common according to international standards. Yet, vote gathering methods may well appear useless in the face of unfair competition before the elections, and widespread manipulations during the vote.

About the Author

Adeline Braux holds a PhD in political science (Sciences Po Paris, 2011). She has been in charge of the Caucasus branch of the Institut français d'études anatoliennes (IFEA-Istanbul) in Baku since January 2014.

Further Reading

"Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan", special issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest No. 55, 24 October 2013.

1 <<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/millimeclis2015.aspx?i=1>>, page consulted November 24, 2015. Voter turnout was 44,2% at 7pm: <<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/archive/millimeclis2015.aspx>>.

To Participate or Not To Participate—That is the Question.

Electoral Strategies of the Azerbaijani Opposition

By Sofie Bedford, Uppsala

Abstract

Elections pose a dilemma for the democratic opposition in electoral authoritarian states. On the one hand, the election campaign is often their only opportunity to get sanctioned access to the public, on the other, through their participation in an election where the outcome is known beforehand they appear to support a democratic charade. This article focuses on the ways in which oppositional actors in Azerbaijan choose to tackle this predicament in relation to the recent parliamentary elections. The analysis and comparison of respective electoral strategies (boycott, campaigning, statements and monitoring) tell us about the roles elections, despite their predictable outcome, play in this type of context. Even though no one in the opposition is 'in it to win it' the Republican Alternative (REAL) movement stands out. Fully aware of their marginalization in society, as representatives of an extremely unpopular 'opposition', their electoral work focused on selling themselves to the public as 'something new,' which is, of course, easier said than done. Nevertheless, their approach and campaign could be interpreted as an attempt to actually convert this into practice.

Background: Opposition—the Perpetual Underdogs

In Azerbaijan, 'opposition' has come to serve as a rather vaguely defined collective label for proponents of dem-

ocratic reforms. Previously such 'genuine' opposition (which differs from what is commonly referred to as pocket opposition, i.e. supporters of the ruling elite that are 'opposition' on paper only) could get sporadic repre-

sentation in the parliament, but since the 2010 parliamentary election, this is no longer the case. The authorities, failing to see the need for political pluralism, are sending the message that opposition is fruitless, pointless and unnecessary. This message applies in particular to the two so-called 'traditional' opposition parties—Popular Front Party and Musavat—which have turned into perpetual underdogs. The population in general, as observers of the opposition's gradual decline, is understandably disappointed with the lack of visible outcomes of 'oppositional' activity. As a result these actors, whether they are political parties, youth groups, human rights activists, other movements or organizations that question the political status quo, are often perceived negatively, as is the concept 'opposition' itself.

The authorities are increasingly undermining the opposition's position by monopolizing informational and economic resources and imposing restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and organization, making it literally impossible for the opposition to reach out to and interact with potential supporters. The exception is the 22-day electoral campaign that, for obvious reasons, becomes an important tool for all oppositional actors. Even though to a certain extent their efforts are coordinated and overlapping, they do not all use this tool in the same way. Below we will take a look at various electoral strategies pursued by the 'opposition' and the reasoning behind them.

Boycott

Boycott is one of the opposition's most well-known tools of protest against un-free elections. The National Council for Democratic Forces (NCDF), an alliance of civil society organizations and opposition parties created to facilitate the promotion of a united oppositional candidate in the 2013 Presidential Elections, decided early in the process to boycott the elections. The general explanation was the lack of competition, open public debate and genuine campaign opportunities, but according to Ali Kerimli, chairman of the Popular Front Party (currently the backbone of NCDF), the fact that the OSCE chose not to send election monitors was a decisive factor. One reason for participating in fraudulent elections, he said, is "to show the world the situation in the country. To achieve this goal, the presence of the OSCE's observers is important."

The voice of the traditional opposition parties is almost completely absent in mainstream media, which are all government controlled. Most likely there is a 'blacklist' of people news outlets at the request of the government are not supposed to interview or even mention. Instead, so called 'constructive' opposition party leaders, MPs, 'experts' and others discuss these

parties and their leaders exclusively in terms of their shortcomings and negative character. Usually the election campaign provides a small, but real, opportunity for the opposition to temporarily overcome this information blockade through the five minutes of TV time allocated to each candidate. "It is not a lot of time, but it gives meaning to the elections that we can at least say what we think," explains the President of NCDF, Jamil Hasanli (Presidential Candidate in the 2013 election). In this election however, according to Azerbaijan's Election Code, only a party with more than 60 candidates was allowed free airtime. In practice this meant the only party entitled was the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party. Opposition parties and groups were forced to pay commercial rates for their TV time, which made this outreach unaffordable, hence unavailable, to them. Both Ali Kerimli and the chairman of the Musavat party, Arif Hajili, describe this lost airtime as an indicator demonstrating that this election was even less free than previous ones. "This time there was not even an illusion of elections," explained Hajili. "Elections are now a formality only." "If we cannot even disturb the elections", said Kerimli "then we do not want to participate. There is simply no meaning—since we do not actually hope to win. We want to win, of course, but we are not hoping for it".

Musavat initially participated in the election campaign, but managed to get only 24 of 73 nominated candidates registered. Just four days before the vote they withdrew even these citing a repressive environment as the main reason. This move appears to have backfired, however. The Central Election Commission informed them that withdrawal was not allowed, and as a result the names of many Musavat members remained on the ballots for Election Day, even though they were no longer candidates. "It would have been easier for us to boycott from the beginning," comments Hajili, "but now we could at least report about the abuse against those who collected signatures for our candidates". Musavat appears to have been the opposition group that suffered the most harassment during their signature collection effort.

The civic group NIDA, which managed to register two of its eight nominated candidates, announced its withdrawal at the same time. As explained by Turgut Gambar, member of the board, the group's initial participation was merely symbolic to "maintain the spirit of protest." Having no illusion of winning, they perceived the campaign as a "process to get to the people" something openly stated in their distributed material as well.

Another noticeable category of actors that chose to boycott—or at least stated non-participation—comprised representatives of the influential (Shi'ite) Mus-

lim communities. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, head of the Center for the Protection of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM) and Imam of the 'Juma' mosque community, proclaimed that his community would neither support any candidate nor participate in the election. Haji Tale Bagirov, head of the Muslim Union Movement and additionally a member of NCDF supported the boycott, as did other religious leaders. The fact that the position of religious leader in relation to the elections was noticed and acknowledged is interesting in itself, as it indicates that religious activism is increasingly seen as something 'oppositional.' I will however save that discussion for another time.

Campaigning

All oppositional actors see the election period as a small window of opportunity. Kerimli vividly described it as "the repression going on holiday [*kanikuli represiyi*]." "We can go to the regions to agitate (which we can otherwise not do). We can tell people there is an alternative," he said, in May 2015. Nevertheless his party decided not to register any candidates. Even though they later withdrew, both Musavat and NIDA took advantage of the increased possibilities for outreach, first by collecting signatures to nominate candidates, later through the distribution of materials (brochures, leaflets), accompanied by continuous use of the Internet to spread information. As far as short-term gains, NIDA saw an increased interest in their work during these weeks of campaigning, and a number of new members.

Although the opposition was generally allowed to carry out their activities, there were noticeable restrictions and violations affecting their ability to campaign. The allocation of generally inaccessible, sometimes remote, spaces for public gathering is one example. Another is voters in some cases being pressured into withdrawing their signatures for certain candidates. Moreover some candidates faced threats demanding that they withdraw. However, Musavat is the only organization which reported actual physical interference, including efforts to detain or even kidnap their activists during signature collection and distribution. In some places Hajili explains, "there was just the 'phone call: if you care about the future you should stop your activity'".

REAL was the only opposition group to see the electoral cycle through. Still, when a member of the board, Erkin Gadirli (perhaps the most prominent REAL activist) decided to renounce his candidacy, many people were confused because they assumed that his action indicated REAL was joining the boycott. It turned out that his decision, made for personal reasons, had nothing to do with the position of the organization. The group's other ten candidates remained in the race and REAL kept

emphasizing the importance of participation. Azer Gasimli's campaign in the 23rd constituency in downtown Baku was an example. "I am not against an *active* boycott," Gasimli explained. "If we are actively boycotting, we should convince the people and ask them to boycott as well. Afterwards we need to be able to show that nobody voted and demand new elections. This demands a large-scale campaign and resources we don't have". Instead, he said, "I decided to use the minimal chance to show ourselves that the elections provide in my constituency. To prove it was possible to conduct a serious campaign with minimal means."

As such, Gasimli's campaign strategy included various online methods, like buying (cheap) advertising space, using 'Google banners,' and striving for maximum social media visibility (on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Linked In and Google +). He considers the fact that his campaign videos were viewed by around 30,000 Internet users a success. Perhaps even more importantly, Gasimli conducted intense offline campaigning, personally going door-to-door. Meeting with 2,000 people in his district, he distributed leaflets and brochures not only presenting him as a candidate and the political program of REAL, but also tackling a variety of specific local problems throughout his constituency.

Gasimli, as well as other REAL representatives, argue that people's frustration with the situation facilitated their interaction with potential voters. The Azerbaijani people, they say, do not believe in the government, the opposition, or the elections. The fact that REAL is positioning itself as something 'new,' not formally involved with the 'traditional opposition,' helped them get access. In the end, Gasimli received 2,738 votes, which was 15 percent of the total. It is (assuming that falsification generally does not involve removing any votes for the opposition but rather adding votes for the others), according to him, four times more votes than the "united opposition" won in either 2010 or 2005.

Monitoring

Monitoring during Election Day was another important strategy for the opposition. Through their participant-observation methods, they could testify to the fact that, in contrast to the official figures claiming that voter turnout was 55.7 percent, the actual number might have been as low as 10 percent. All opposition groups participated in exposing the election realities through official observation. Activists from NCDF participated as election observers despite the boycott and wrote directly on Facebook how many (or rather how few) voters they saw in each polling station. According to Kerimli this strategy had impact. "People who doubted before saw this information and realized that these were not real

elections. We think about 10 percent of the population participated—so you can say that the people did boycott the election,” he says. Musavat, even after it had quit the election, still carried out its observation mission, coordinating its activities with REAL and NIDA. These organizations, on average, estimate the real participation rate to be 5–6 percent in the polling stations they observed. Throughout the day, they were also sharing the results online, plus videos of irregularities showing “carousel voting,” “ballot stuffing,” intimidation of observers, and other abuses. “There was total falsification,” notes Gasimli. “I have videos, photos, and protocols to prove this”. According to his observers, only 3,500 voters in his constituency actually came to the polls, which would put the participation level at 10 percent and his share of the votes considerably higher than the official result.

Statements

Issuing public statements is related to the boycott strategy. NIDA, Musavat and REAL jointly announced that they would not recognize the outcomes of the elections, as it is “certain that the election results will not represent people’s votes.” They publicly demanded the cancellation of the parliamentary elections on November 1 and called for new elections. Moreover, they demanded the release of political prisoners; creation of normal conditions for free and fair elections; change of the principle of forming electoral commissions under full control of the authorities; and equal opportunities for conducting the campaign to provide free air time for public debate. Making such a statement was a symbolic act to attract attention to existing problems. Likely, this act is done as much, if not more, for the international community as for the domestic audience. A number of statements were directed towards various international bodies, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). “We have done what is possible under these conditions,” says Gadirli. “The statement was a moral issue”. Some, like Gasimli, are also taking this method of pro-

test even further by filing official complaints with local courts where they will be rejected in order to later appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

A more intricate way of highlighting the illegitimacy of the situation and showing that elections are “predetermined” was pursued by Hasanli, who one month before the election (October 9) released a forecast of the future composition of the parliament. From his list of MPs who he predicted would be “assigned” positions, only three of the names differed, giving his forecast 96 percent accuracy. Additionally NCDF also publicly condemned the election calling them “the most shameful in the history of Azerbaijan.”

Conclusion

Nobody, neither in the opposition nor in the population at large, expect that ‘change’ will come from elections. Under current conditions in Azerbaijan, elections are, for the opposition, mainly a tool to get the message out, albeit the ways the actors use this tool varies. Noting there was even less room for maneuvering than previously they decided to boycott the whole or part of the electoral process. NCDF, Musavat and NIDA did try to take advantage of the possibility that the election period provided in terms of participation, monitoring, issuing statements and so on, but it appears that many of them saw these elections merely in terms of what was *not* given to them and what they could not do because of it. This, in my view, differs from the approach of REAL that decided these elections where what they made of them. Being ‘the new guys,’ developing as an organization independently—unattached to other oppositional actors either by family relations or previous affiliations, of course provided a certain competitive advantage. This is not to say we can expect them to win the next election, or perform some other miracle, but perhaps if they persist in this approach it might work towards at least partly reversing the complete marginalization of the ‘opposition’ in Azerbaijani society.

About the Author

Dr. Sofie Bedford is a researcher at the Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University currently working on a project focusing on political participation in Azerbaijan and Belarus.

Recommended Reading:

- LaPorte, Jody. Hidden in Plain Sight: Political Opposition and Hegemonic Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31 (4) 2015: 339–366.
- Sultanova, Shahla. Challenging the Aliyev regime: Political opposition in Azerbaijan. *Demokratizatsiya. The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22 (1) 2014: 15–37.