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A Useless Campaign?

The Example of a Non-Partisan Candidate in Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Elections

By Adeline Braux, Baku

Abstract

This article analyzes the way a non-partisan (in Azerbaijani: “bitərəf”) female candidate who is not related to the dominant party ran her campaign for the Azerbaijani parliament in a largely uncompetitive election process. After briefly discussing the main obstacles experienced by non-partisan candidates during the campaign, I will describe the strategies she used to carry out an alternative campaign in a centrally located constituency in the capital city Baku. In so doing, I will show that if such a campaign might seem alternative in its form according to the local context and promising due to the candidate's social capital, its background remains fairly classical in terms of the approach adopted and the issues raised, while the outcome turns out disappointing.

Background

Unlike the electoral campaign of 2010, which began several months ahead of the election day, the parliamentary election campaign in 2015 lasted only three weeks. One could say that it does not make any difference in a country where the election results are predictable ahead of the election day, but still it meant that opposition and genuinely independent candidates had even less time to run for a seat or at least to struggle for visibility in a political landscape monopolized by candidates who are members of, or loyal to, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). Incidentally, some opposition formations (Müsavat party, NIDA youth group) announced that they were withdrawing from the election process. Therefore, there were ultimately fewer real independent candidates (meaning not loyal to the majority party) than expected. In the end, out of 125 elected MPs, there were 71 who were affiliated to the ruling party, and 42 nominally independent candidates who can in fact be considered loyal to the authorities. In this context, the simple fact that some genuinely independent candidates decided to carry out a campaign is in itself an intriguing fact. In Azerbaijan few candidates, especially among those affiliated with the ruling YAP, actually campaign; typically, the most that they do is scatter some posters through the constituency in which they compete. Campaigning on regular TV broadcasting is virtually impossible due to the huge financial resources which are necessary: for these elections, one second on TV cost 50 manats (approx. 45 euros).

I chose to focus on a particular constituency, namely the Yasamal 17th constituency (Yasamal 17 üçüncü sayılı seçki məntəqəsi), and more specifically on the case of Mrs. İlhamiyyə Rza, a non-partisan candidate backed by the quasi-independent Ümid Party (Ümid Partiyası, “Party of Hope”). Rza was not officially affiliated to this party, but benefited from some logistical help,

such as the printing of flyers or posters. Yasamal is mostly located in the central district of Baku, but is fairly large and has a population of 250,000 inhabitants. It is made of four electoral constituencies (12, 15, 16, 17), among which one is shared with two other districts, Qaradagh and Binəgədi. The 17th constituency has 33 polling stations and 32,259 voters, but actually neither the candidate's campaign team nor the candidate herself were aware of the exact limits of the electoral constituency. What draws our attention is the fact that this area is home to the old “Sovetski” district, an impoverished neighborhood in central Baku that makes up a considerable part of this constituency. Sovetski is expected to be entirely demolished in the coming years; the process has already started but was delayed for financial reasons. This is not the only area affected by such projects in Baku, but two elements are worth noticing: firstly, a complete demolition is planned; secondly, the inhabitants find themselves in limbo since the work has been postponed for years. As we shall see, this issue featured frequently in Rza's campaign.

According to the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan, voter turnout in this constituency was less than 33 percent during the last parliamentary elections in 2010. In that cycle, the athlete Ulvi Guliyev had been elected under the banner of the ruling YAP party. Sovetski's inhabitants [to whom I spoke] vowed particular discontent with their former MP, who, they claimed, “never turned up in the neighborhood after being elected”. This time, he was trying his chances in a different constituency. For this election, the context in the 17th constituency was more complex than in most constituencies. Indeed, the YAP candidate had to withdraw her candidacy because running was not compatible with her executive branch duties in a district of Baku. Some media also pointed to her alleged family links with Eldar Mahmudov, the former minister of

national security who was fired just days before the election. As a result, a lawyer at one of the largest accounting and consulting companies of the country, who officially campaigned as an independent candidate without any backing, emerged as the favourite, although it is difficult to know to what extent he was close to or independent of the authorities. According to the final results, this lawyer was ultimately elected. Why, then, focus on one of the “losers”? Because amidst the peculiarities of the given constituency and the overall context of elections in Azerbaijan, the candidate we followed seemed to be among the few who carried out what appears to be a conventional campaign according to international standards. In other words, she pursued a range of strategies to convince the voters to cast their ballots for her: she prepared herself well ahead the election day (e.g. she left her former position to focus on her future candidacy), she set up a real campaign team, and organized the promotion of the ideas and policies she supported through various means (door-to-door campaigning, meetings, promotion on social media, etc).

Social Capital

Ilhamiyya Rza, in contrast to most other non-partisan candidates, is endowed with real social capital that may be—and has been—used for an election campaign. In this context, social capital is understood as the whole range of resources, including media knowledge, communication capacities, and a social network. She was

able to gather the social capital over the course of her professional carrier.

She was born in Qazakh, in the west of Azerbaijan, in 1967 but has always lived in Baku. After graduating from the faculty of philology even before the collapse of the USSR, she started a carrier as a journalist on private TV channels and also collaborated with a wide range of Azerbaijani newspapers (opposition outlets: *Azadliq*, *Bizim Yol*, *Yeni Məsəvat*; independent: *Zerkalo*), both in Russian and Azerbaijani languages. At the same time, she has been engaged in social activities, namely for the defence of children's rights. In February 2014, with some other would-be candidates, she created the so-called “Political Club of the 125” (125-lər Siyasi Klubu). In their founding declaration, they expressed worries about the general situation in the country and the problems (the occupied territories, corruption, human rights) that have not been solved so far for “different reasons”. The connections between the members of this club can be seen on social media since the candidates running for office expressed support for their comrades. Therefore, Rza is a person who may be regarded as public, in the same way as her husband, Hamid Hərişçi, a well-known journalist and publicist who anchored some popular television programs with historical content. During door-to-door campaign, Hərişçi was sometimes recognized and would use his fame as a campaign argument, as we witnessed on a couple of occasions. In this campaign, he argued, his wife's team had real know-how in terms of ability to communicate directly with people. Therefore, they tried to get a return-on-equity from their TV activities that might have admittedly given them an edge compared to other independent candidates.

Thanks to this social capital and to her personal networks, Rza was able to set up a devoted campaign team made up of volunteers from different backgrounds: some were friends or relatives who took some days off, others were students who were following her on Facebook where she was one of the most active candidates. She managed her account herself and, according to her husband, Rza was, generally speaking, even carrying out an “interactive campaign”. She had 10 legal representatives. Her headquarters had been, she explained, rented for the duration of the campaign and was shared with a friend while her car had been lent to her by another friend who also paid the driver's salary. From a logistical point of view, she benefited from the support of the Ümid Party, whose values she declared to share. That said, the party's logo did not appear anywhere on her campaign materials.

The study of her campaign material is informative. In her official poster she appears smiling, which is actually fairly uncommon on election posters in Azerbaijan,

Campaign Poster of Independent Candidate Ilhamiyya Rza, 2015



Source: Candidate's Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/ilhamiyya.rza>>

dressed in a lively colour, sporting “non hair-dressed” hair (as she told me). In the background, one can see a playground for children, again an innovative initiative. Her campaign’s slogan was “Sizinləyəm” (I am with you), which she also widely used on her Facebook page. The leaflets which were distributed by her campaign team contained several pictures of the candidate in different situations: during a TV program; on the ground “embedded” in the campaign, talking to some inhabitants; and with her family.

And, last but not least, her professional activities helped her build a network in the local media. She published a few articles in the opposition newspaper *Yeni Müsavat*. But since 80 percent of Azerbaijanis don’t read newspapers, much less opposition newspapers, the impact of such a publication could be only extremely limited.

An Alternative Approach, The Usual Background

The candidate used her social and personal capital during her campaign. She also engaged in conventional campaigning methods, like going door-to-door. Unlike candidates who do not campaign at all, those who carry out an “interactive campaign” directly encounter alienated voters because they are the only ones who come and see them. One might argue that in any campaign unsatisfied voters are the most likely to vow discontent. But in the Azerbaijani context, this may in turn appear still more unfair to these non-partisan candidates since, being the “eternal losers”, they have virtually no chance to share power and responsibilities anytime soon. During a door-to-door campaign swing in Sovetski, a lot of people expressed their despair and exasperation about the limbo they face. Due to the specific situation they were experiencing, Sovetski’s inhabitants were a particular target of Rza’s campaign. In addition to that, people in the region live in small houses in open courtyards and are therefore much more easily accessible than people living in the brand new buildings equipped with secure entry systems. The emphasis on this precise district may also been interpreted as part of the candidate’s emphasis on “care” since her circle stressed on several occasions the fact that she is a woman. As her husband, who is also one of her legal representatives, put it: “Voters are fed up with men, they want to see women being in charge.” The aim of my fieldwork was not to question this assertion, but it may certainly be put into a local context. Indeed, Azerbaijani citizens have largely clientelistic-particularistic expectations and an instrumental view of politics. At the same time, Azerbaijani society is characterized by low trust (30 percent) toward people who are not members of one’s family. Consequently,

political discourses (when they do exist) tend to take on paternalistic or even populist tones. A “good” politician is one who cares about the voters as a father (or, in our case, a mother), would care about his children, taking entire responsibility for their fate and trying to solve their individual problems.

When looking into the details of the booklets that were distributed during the campaign by Rza and her team, one can find questions such as: “Are your salary and study grant needs met? Can your children and your parents find a hospital room? Do young people receive a good education; do they find a job and then create a family? [...] These are some of the issues I will raise in Parliament. And you are also interested in having an answer to these questions, I am WITH YOU! [...] This is not only a promise, this is a guarantee”. At the same time, at her campaign headquarters, the candidate proposed legal consultations to voters, among whom inhabitants of Sovetski were well-represented. At the end of these consultations, people would receive a flyer with information about the candidate’s next meeting.

Among the techniques usually favoured by candidates in elections where local embeddedness is important is segmentation, that is the definition of groups among voters who are targeted according to some specifics. The 17th constituency includes at least four mosques (a substantial number for Baku). During a meeting with her volunteers, before they went distributing some tracts, the candidate asked them to pay special attention to religious voters “who are numerous in our constituency”. In the same way Rza gave two interviews to the website “Deyerler” which is administered by Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the well-known leader of Baku’s Djuma [Cümə] mosque’s community (situated in the Old City, not in this constituency). In one of these interviews (before election day), Rza insisted on the necessity of integrating the more religious milieus into Azerbaijani society. She also touched upon some issues, like the impossibility of wearing a veil in an official picture and, without taking a clear stand on the issue for practical matters, vowed to respect women’s religious beliefs. Besides, during the Ashura, an important day for Shia Muslims, she organised an *ehsan* (traditional dinner) for believers.

Finally, the Internet has also been a crucial means of campaigning for Rza. It enabled her to recruit some volunteers: indeed, some of the young people we talked to at her headquarters told us they had decided to engage after following Rza on Facebook. Actually the young electorate is not the only target: with 17 percent of people having a Facebook page in Azerbaijan, it seems wise to carry out a real campaign on social media. For sure, non-partisan candidates in Azerbaijan are not the only ones who make wide use of the Internet, but owing to

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-