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Strategic Insight

Electoral Survival of the Most Corrupt? Azerbaijan, Georgia, and American Regional Goals

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Between 15 October and 2 November 2003, contentious elections took place in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Polling was accompanied by government intimidation, results falsification, and clashes between citizens and security forces. Both elections also came at a time when incumbent governments were weak. The election campaigns also drove regime rhetoric about simmering conflicts with neighbors (Azerbaijan) and breakaway groups (Georgia) farther to the right.

Although the Azerbaijani government's anti-democratic rhetoric, vote-rigging, and post election repression were much greater than the Georgian regime's meddling in their elections, the Western international community was more critical of Tbilisi, and Georgians themselves proved unwilling to settle for rigged polling. The Azerbaijani government weathered the immediate post-October 15 disturbances. In Georgia, President Shevardnadze has been forced to [resign](#), as leading opposition politicians are cobbling together a new regime and preparing for new elections.

Because of their strategic location at the nexus of South Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (along with Armenia) are the pivotal [Caucasus](#) countries, indispensable to American interests when it comes to energy, competitive diplomatic power projection, and the War on Terror. During the 1990s, access to [Caspian oil and gas](#) drove U.S. policy in Azerbaijan-Georgia. Post-9/11 priorities have hastened the development of American-Caucasus military ties through the Partnerships-for-Peace program and other bilateral initiatives.

American policy makers also need to consider Russia's interests in the Caucasus. In particular, as a core area of the Former Soviet Union (FSU), this region is part of Moscow's "Near Abroad" where it hopes to limit American influence. Russians played a spoiler-kingmaker role in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, securing the ascent of ex-Communist Party boss Haydar Aliyev as President. Likewise, Russia has at times assisted the Armenians in their occupation of sovereign Azeri territory, just as it has offered succor to the [Abkhazian](#) and [Ossetian](#) separatists in Georgia. Russia also has attempted to re-colonize the energy industries in these countries, focusing on electricity and gas supplies in Georgia (as well as Armenia). The Kremlin periodically accuses both Tbilisi and Baku of providing assistance to Chechnyan separatists.

Azerbaijan and Georgia's direct neighbors also have much at stake in their domestic health and alliances. This is particularly true of Iran and Armenia. To the south, Iran fears its 25 million ethnic Azeri citizens might wish to join Azerbaijan, setting off a wave of minority group succession. Petro-politically, Iran is not blind to American efforts to hem in Tehran. Just now moving into construction, the [Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan](#) pipeline (BTC), threatens to ship Central Asian oil away from Iran and towards the West through Turkey.

For Armenia—still technically at a state of war with Azerbaijan over the disputed [Nagorno-Karabakh](#) and [Nakhchivan](#) regions—a strong, Georgia-aligned Azerbaijan supported by Turkey and now firmly

integrated into American regional security plans is a more credible opponent. Conversely, if cascading instability within Azerbaijan forced the regime into right-wing policies to shore up support, it could result in a renewed shooting war between the two countries.

Recent developments have created a paradox. In other words, why does the situation appear to have stabilized in repressive Azerbaijan, while events led to the exit of the incumbent regime in relatively more open Georgia? And, what does the evolving situation in Azerbaijan and Georgia mean for U.S. strategy?

Regimes and Oppositions

Azerbaijan's presidential elections occurred on 15 October, while Georgia's parliamentary polling followed on 2 November. Voting came at an awkward time for both regimes and opposition parties. In the case of Azerbaijan, though ex-communist party boss [Haydar Aliyev](#) had been the veritable Czar of Azerbaijan for thirty-four years, his diminishing health was obvious by spring 2003. As of August 2003, he was ruling the country from a hospital bed in Cleveland; now he is gradually turning over power to his son, [Ilham](#). Known more for gambling and drinking than administration and statecraft, Ilham Aliyev overcame initial opposition within the ruling [New Azerbaijan Party](#) (YAP), to ascend first to the nominee for president, then into the prime minister slot, and then finally, into the president's chair shortly before the elections.

Ilham Aliyev's rise to power fits in with two political patterns. The first is dynastic. Haydar Aliyev had long been farming out key government and economic positions to family members. Anointing his son as presidential heir-apparent was thus perhaps unsurprising—but it is the first instance of family-based ruling dynasty creation in the FSU, based, of course, on communist-era elites.

The second political pattern could be called the Yeltsin-Putin approach. By gradually making way for Ilham, Haydar Aliyev elevated his son to Azerbaijan's political zenith while endowing him with the power of incumbency in the chief executive slot—just as Boris Yeltsin did with Vladimir Putin prior to the 2000 elections in Russia. This maneuvering, however, did not placate Azerbaijan's opposition parties. Contrary to other Muslim FSU states, Azerbaijani intellectuals possess a memory of a democratic era from 1918-20 after the fall of the Czarist Empire.^[1]

The Azeri movement to break out of the Soviet Union from 1989 was spearheaded by the Azerbaijan People's Front (AXC). The Front's Ebulfaz Elçibey became independent Azerbaijan's first non-communist President, ousting the Soviet hold-over Ayaz Mutalibov in June 1992 after the latter had failed to prevent Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Yet, [Elçibey's](#) excessive pro-Turkish and American orientation caused Russia to undermine him in favor of Aliyev. Ethnic war with Armenia and Russian hegemonic designs in the Caucasus weakened further Elçibey's insecure position vis-à-vis Soviet era nomenklatura. A military revolt paved the way for Aliyev's rule in summer 1993, or the demise of a budding democratic regime in the most cosmopolitan of ex-Soviet Muslim republics.^[2]

Since 1993, recrimination as well as Aliyev regime repression have produced a fragmented opposition. In the run-up to the October 2003 elections, three chief opposition leaders emerged. All veterans of the early 1990s, they have become so riven by personal and political rivalries as to facilitate the Aliyev regime's efforts to undermine a united opposition.

The most popular opposition leader is [Isa Gambar](#), leader of the new Musavat Party, so named to recall the previous 1918-20 era of Azerbaijani democracy. With many members formerly active in the AXC, Gambar's party inherited the mantle of the latter's democratic opposition stance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Regime suppression of Musavat in the 1995 elections and severe intimidation in the 2000 parliamentary polling reinforced this sense, while Elçibey's 2000 death has elevated Gambar as the arguable leader of Azerbaijani resistance to an Aliyev dynasty.

Following Gambar in popularity is Etibar Mammedov. Originally part of the clandestine AXC in the 1980s, he broke with Elçibey to form the National Independence Party (AMIP) in 1992. Having supported

Elçibey's ouster, AMIP was treated with kid gloves by the government, until Mammedov ran against Aliyev in the 1998 presidential elections, where unofficial results gave him nearly 30% of the vote—the official tally was 12%. Mammedov is viewed with contempt by other opposition parties, as a one-time Aliyev lackey and spoiler of opposition unity. There is tremendous personal animosity between him and Gambar.

Though Azerbaijani political aspirants bemoan the lack of opposition unity, they refuse to compromise to achieve unity. Since the late 1990s, opposition leaders have engaged in mutual recrimination over alleged willingness to be coopted by the Aliyev regime. In April 2003, they agreed in principle to form an alliance, but again personal ambitions and vendettas prevented alliance formation. This past August, an opposition summit in London, supported by various NGOs including the American National Democratic Institute, could not get past the Mammedov-Gambar rivalry. One last attempt at opposition unification on 8 October failed. Gambar apparently believed that he was sufficiently popular to forgo alliances.^[3]

Just as important, Azerbaijan's post-1993 opposition leaders do not cut Western-style democratic visages. Gambar's party is in effect a shell held together by his personal charisma and authoritarian control. Its [newspaper](#) is as much a mouthpiece for Gambar himself as is state media for the Aliyev regime.

Nevertheless, these candidates enjoy tremendous popular appeal, as symbols of opposition around which clustered intellectuals, economically-depressed Azeris from Baku and the outlying regions, as well as some who felt the Aliyev decade had done nothing to regain Nagorno-Karabakh.

Georgia

[Eduard Shevardnadze](#), the USSR's last foreign minister, emerged as a savior president of Georgia in 1993, after the anti-Soviet leader [Zviad Gamsakhurdia](#) had failed after his election in May 1991 to eschew a cult of personality-based, vehemently chauvinist nationalism favoring cronyism over rule of law. Through January 1992, opposition party-affiliated militias turned Tbilisi into a war zone. Ultimately, an ad hoc Military Council deposed Gamsakhurdia and invited Shevardnadze to become president.^[4]

Though he is adored in the West since the Gorbachev years,^[5] Shevardnadze's domestic popularity has steadily eroded. His popularity has been hurt by ethno-territorial disputes which have remained unresolved since the Gamsakhurdia period. The first involves [Southern Ossetia](#). In 1991, Ossetians began moving towards union with their northern cousins. War lasted from 1991 until a Russian-mediated ceasefire in July 1992. Shevardnadze inherited a Southern Ossetia ever on the verge of resuming hostilities and making endless demands on an impoverished state sector.

The problem in [Abkhazia](#) has proven more enduring. There had always been tension between the autonomous region of Abkhazia and Tbilisi, as well as between the 18% Abkhaz minority and 44% Georgian population within Abkhazia. When the Abkhaz moved to secede from Georgia in summer 1992, violence broke out.

As Shevardnadze came into office, the Abkhaz appealed to the Russians for support, resulting in a series of routs for the Georgian army. Shevardnadze's only recourse was to appeal to Russia to mediate and for "peacekeepers." There has been no concrete resolution of the conflict, with periodic Abkhaz incursions into Georgia proper. Shevardnadze's prestige suffered as the conflict continued and he was seen to facilitate Russian interference in Georgia's politics.

Russian economic interference also is undermining the incumbent regime's popularity. Without its own oil, Georgia is perennially financially challenged—even though it is the greatest per capita recipient of U.S. aid after Israel.^[6] Impoverishment is particularly acute in the energy sector, which has provided Russian companies (and political influence) entrée into the country. Gradually, Russian firms have come to dominate the electricity and gas sectors, causing difficulties for Shevardnadze at home as well as with the United States.^[7]

Finally, though without Haydar Aliyev's "family ties" approach to government and economy, Shevardnadze has been accused of being incapable of democratization, given his solidly Soviet background. His tendency to rely on local [strongmen](#) who support him in return for near autonomy makes him vulnerable to these accusations.

Unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia's political opposition has been included in the political process for some time. [Mikheil Saakashvili](#), leader of the National Movement, served in Shevardnadze's government as justice minister until he broke with the president in 2001. [Nino Burjanadze](#), currently speaker of Parliament and from 23 November interim president, joined in late September 2003 with [Zurab Zhvania](#) of the United Democrats Party, a past parliamentary speaker (1995) who had been quite close to Shevardnadze in the mid to late 1990s, heading the latter's Citizens Union of Georgia from 1993. Unlike Azerbaijan, then, the regime had not hounded opposition out of political bodies, choosing to outmaneuver rather than illegalize it.

Shevardnadze's domination of national-level politics alienated past allies, but did not produced opposition unity. From mid October, Saakashvili's National Movement emerged as most popular, though as in Azerbaijan, it is all about the charisma and approach of Saakashvili himself. In his mid-30s, his support base in the Tbilisi municipality and confrontational style—the party's slogan is "Georgia without Shevardnadze"—catapulted him into the limelight.^[8] Saakashvili held rallies in ethnic minority regions of Kvemo Kartli and Ajaria, where local strongmen had been allowed near autonomy in return for delivering a coerced pro-Shevardnadze vote. National Movement rallies in these areas often turned confrontational.

Less provocative, the Burjanadze-Zhvania bloc's calls for "revolutionary changes without revolution" appeal to intellectuals and the urban bourgeoisie.^[9] The center-left Labor Party led by Shalva Natelashvili has reacted similarly to the National Movement. Ultimately, personality-focused politics and rivalries have meant that creating a pre-election unified opposition front proved impossible.

In October 2003, therefore, Azerbaijanis faced a choice between a corrupt, authoritarian regime with an un-tested new dynastic heir, and two opposition candidates with little experience and inclination to cooperate, and whose appeals to democracy rested on an uncertain record. Furthermore, their early 1990s association with the AXC might have lessened their appeal somewhat. Though Aliyev had gradually strangled society while pilfering the economy, he was at least a strong leader, able to keep Armenia at bay and clear the political playing field of confusion—the AXC had not, though it was anyone's guess whether the young Ilham could.

A few weeks later, Georgians voting in parliamentary elections could choose between a party whose leader seemed to lack any dynamism while he attempted to closely manage politics, and opposition parties whose leaders exhibited some governing experience but were only moderately less disunited than the opposition in their southern neighbor. The surging popularity of Saakashvili in particular, however, drove Shevardnadze's sagging "For a New Georgia" bloc (FNG) to associate with right wing elements, such as Tamaz Nadareishvili, leader of the anti-secessionist Abkhaz government in exile (in Tbilisi).^[10] For both Azerbaijan and Georgia, then, domestic politics linked up with regional issues.

Campaign Irregularities or Business as Usual?

In both countries, official polling results suggested respectable showings for opposition candidates but no real change in the dominance of the ruling regime. Also, pre-election polling and exit interviews diverged from official election results. This was particularly the case in Azerbaijan. After the election, the official final results listed President Aliyev as victor, with 76.84% of the vote. Official results gave Isa Gambar 13.97%, with none of the other six candidates gathering more than 4% of the vote.^[11]

All independent polling groups produced different results. On one side of the spectrum, the Russian Interfax news agency's exit poll indicated an Aliyev victory of only 63%, with Gambar receiving 25%, and Mammedov 3.1%. The [Turan Information Agency's](#) poll gave Gambar the largest number of votes, at

46.2%, with Aliyev taking only 24%. Finally, Gambar partisans, cast the Gambar victory more conclusively, claiming that "90% of those who came to the polls voted for... Isa Gambar."[\[12\]](#)

In Georgia, official preliminary results on 3 November claimed that the government's FNG received the most votes, at 26%. Saakashvili's National Movement came in second at 22.6%, while the leftist Labor Party obtained 15% and the Ajarian regional party affiliated with the regime received 8.5%. The Burjanadze-Democrats received only 8.2% of the official vote.

As with its southern neighbor, the results of independent polling differed from those of the government. A count by the Georgia-based [International Society for Fair Elections](#) found Saakashvili's party to be the victor, with 26% of the vote, while Shevardnadze's bloc received only 19%. Labor and Burjanadze obtained 17% and 10% respectively. By polling 23,000 Georgians, the American [Global Strategy Group](#) concurred in this alternate ranking.[\[13\]](#)

Concerns about election "irregularities" emerged even before the Azeri balloting. The regime deployed several tactics to undermine opposition. The most benign involved closing roads or halting bus service to towns where rallies were scheduled, and declaring Sunday a work day, thus preventing public sector workers from attending such rallies. In one such instance on 14 September in the northern town of Yevlakh, nearly 10,000 people still came to a rally for Etibar Mammedov.[\[14\]](#)

More ominous were police detentions of party representatives. Worse still, during late September and early October, riot police regularly interdicted rallies of the Musavat party in Baku, injuring scores of attendees and detaining others. In other instances, supporters of Musavat or AMIP were provoked into riots by (likely hired) supporters of Aliyev.[\[15\]](#)

On election day, many Azerbaijanis, particularly in regions where the opposition was strong, found that their names had not been included in the official voters' lists. Conversely, in some precincts, more names than actual voters were included on the lists, enabling YAP to stuff ballot boxes with pre-marked ballots in favor of Ilham Aliyev. Lines were long, and the presence of video cameras and police units at polling stations intimidated many people—particularly those state sector employees who had been told that voting for Musavat or AMIP would result in dismissal from work. In some cases, police intimidation turned to violence outside polling stations.

The Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's preliminary report on the Azerbaijani elections (16 October 2003) was reluctant to fully condemn the elections. Though "the election process still fell short of international standards in several respects," OSCE rapporteurs pointed to "positive aspects," including "a genuine choice for the voters" due to eight candidates; "an active campaign with public participation"; a new election code with "additional safeguards against fraud"; and "satisfactory" technical preparations as well as "an important element of transparency" due to speedy publication of balloting results.[\[16\]](#)

A stinging dissent emerged from the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe. Writing on 18 October, IDEE observers declared that "if the word 'elections' is to retain its original meaning, the events of October 15th in Azerbaijan have to be described by a different term." Scoring the heavy police presence, intimidation, and monitoring of voters' actions, IDEE asserted that the "election process was marked by planned and goal oriented falsifications." Ultimately, since IDEE observers found that "elections were not free,... not equal,... not just,... [and] not transparent," their mission declared "the presidential elections of October 15, 2003 in the Republic of Azerbaijan cannot be qualified as what in the practice of civilized nations is called 'elections'.[\[17\]](#)

In response to murmuring among Western diplomats and watchdog groups, the OSCE revised its earlier view. Its final report of 12 November 2003 sharpened previous language to say that the elections "failed to meet OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections. The overall

process reflected a lack of sufficient political commitment to implement a genuine election process." As a result, 15 October "was a missed opportunity for a credible democratic process."[\[18\]](#)

The election process was not as corrupt in Georgia. There were isolated instances of violence among political groupings in the immediate pre-election days, just as in several regions, government officials saw it as their duty to provide greater campaign opportunities to the ruling FNG, and to sideline opposition parties. Further, several delays in preparations for balloting reduced voter confidence in the process itself.

A persistent problem involved voter lists. In several locations voter lists were hand-written, opening up the possibility of large numbers of people being excluded.[\[19\]](#) Elsewhere, opposition candidates found their names excluded, either from the voters' lists or from the slate of candidates.

On election day, Georgians did not experience as much corruption and violence as did Azerbaijanis. For most, particularly in Tbilisi, the dominant experience was of waiting long hours in lines as government-instigated confusion about voter lists meant that some polling stations—again, in opposition precincts—did not open until late afternoon, discouraging citizens from voting. When they did open, opposition party monitors often found far more marked ballots than registered voters, suggesting what Burjanadze called "unimaginable" ballot-stuffing. In other places, police and ruling party supporters absconded with ballot boxes, taking them to FNG headquarters.[\[20\]](#)

Fluid Aftermaths

Immediately after Azerbaijani presidential elections, one might have predicted civil war or coup. Large anti-Aliyev rallies in Baku and other cities were met by physical brutality and arrests. At a rally on 16 October, 15,000 opposition supporters clashed with almost 5,000 policemen. When police began rushing protesters, opposition supporters resisted with metal pipes, tree branches, and sharpened stakes. Five people were killed, including two police. As a local [Human Rights Watch](#) official wrote "Azerbaijani police are notorious for violently suppressing protesters... This is the worst case that we have seen during the election process."

In the next two days, police made over 200 arrests in Baku and at least 100 more in other areas, a large number being journalists and election officials who refused to confirm balloting in their areas of responsibility. Calm returned by 18 October, as security forces set up checkpoints to prevent protesters from entering the capital. On 20 October and 24 October further waves of arrests targeted protesters and journalists.[\[21\]](#)

Opposition leaders themselves aggravated matters, suggesting readiness to deploy anti-democratic measures for the sake of rectifying election malfeasance. Gambar in particular was guilty of this. Even before the election, Isa Gambar wrote an open letter to the Azerbaijani armed forces, appealing to them to oppose the government if it falsified the vote—calling for a non-democratic coup in order to secure democracy.[\[22\]](#)

After the election, rather than calling for restraint and *civil* disobedience, Gambar continued to call for violent opposition to police. Speaking at a press conference, Gambar asserted "we will achieve it [victory] by people fighting for their votes." Disregarding the caution that "we do not intend to solve this problem with violence,"[\[23\]](#) crowds chanting "Isa, Isa" apparently heeded his call.[\[24\]](#)

The Azerbaijani opposition also was somewhat confrontational towards Western observers. Aware of the U.S. administration's tacit support for Ilham Aliyev, Gambar wrote to President Bush that the "the silence of the international democratic community can lead to dismal consequences."[\[25\]](#) Shortly after polling, another opposition leader accused the United States of conspiring with Aliyev to prevent opposition candidates from returning to Azerbaijan.[\[26\]](#) Likewise, the Musavat paper was uncompromising, declaring "Isa Gambar is the president... All the foreign observation missions... know this is a fact."[\[27\]](#)

Ironically, the election meddling as well as violent popular protest and police reaction was much greater in Azerbaijan than in Georgia, where citizen responses resembled more closely civil disobedience, and the Shevardnadze government permitted most forms of demonstrations and marches. Even so, Shevardnadze was forced out. From 2 November, the major issues were whether opposition supporters could maintain sufficient popular momentum; could Shevardnadze fracture delicate opposition unity through negotiations; would the security forces keep the regime in power; and was Shevardnadze prepared to go to the mat in defense of his presidency.

Opposition went into action from 4 November. That day, Saakashvili and others held a large rally in Freedom Square near Tbilisi's municipal offices. Demonstrations continued throughout the next weeks. An immense gathering in Tbilisi on 8 November drew over 10,000 protesters. A subsequent protest vigil outside parliament and the Presidential Palace defied forecasts of unsustainable opposition momentum.[\[28\]](#)

12-22 November proved to be the critical ten-day period. On 12 November, the Central Elections Commission ordered re-voting in 16 of the country's 85 districts, further undermining confidence in the original balloting. The same day, three presidential advisers quit, claiming Shevardnadze was relying on "anti-democratic forces" to remain in power. A week later, the head of Georgia's Broadcasting Authority also stepped down.[\[29\]](#)

On 22 November, supporters of Saakashvili and Burjanadze seized the Parliament building, announcing a "bloodless, velvet revolution."[\[30\]](#) Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze declared herself interim president. Shevardnadze declared a state of emergency, and signaled his intent to activate army and interior ministry forces.

Ultimately, three chief developments averted civil war in Georgia. First, the incumbent regime no longer possessed the confidence of the state's instruments of coercion. On 21 November, the Secretary of the Georgian National Security Council admitted "major irregularities." The Minister of State Security was already suspected of supporting the opposition—some even claimed that officials assisted the opposition takeover of Parliament. Later on 22-23 November reports surfaced of entire military units going over to the opposition. On the 23rd, Saakashvili further detached the military from the regime, saying "we have almost achieved victory. The Police and Internal Troops have taken the people's side."[\[31\]](#)

A second factor preventing a total breakdown was the eleventh-hour international mediation. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Lynn Pascoe pushed Shevardnadze to talk with the opposition, while Secretary of State Colin Powell, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan all telephoned Shevardnadze to pressure him towards compromise. In particular, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov arrived in Tbilisi on Saturday 22 November as a mediator for Shevardnadze and the opposition. Sunday evening, he brought Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, Burjanadze, and Zhvania together for a final meeting, where the three main opposition leaders affirmed their insistence a post-Shevardnadze Georgia.

Third, just as he brought a peaceful end to the Soviet Union in 1990-19, Shevardnadze elected to take the high road out of Georgian politics by resigning the presidency. As he said on 23 November, "I see that this could not have ended bloodlessly... and so it is better that the president resigns."[\[32\]](#) Unlike every other post-Soviet leader in power since 1993 in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Shevardnadze left office peacefully. The contrast with Azerbaijan could not be greater.

In Georgia, the tone of both opposition and regime was much less violently confrontational than in Azerbaijan. Though declaring "protest action is an extension of politics," Saakashvili also said "I think people should express their will peacefully," with only "peaceful and democratic" actions being appropriate.[\[33\]](#) Speaking a week after the elections at a Tbilisi rally, he told listeners "I am not going to overthrow the government by force."[\[34\]](#)

Likewise, while claiming "unprecedented transparency, a high level of civic control, and a massive involvement of mass media"[35] for the election—all true in relative terms— Shevardnadze did admit that "a number of inaccuracies in the electoral rolls were found... a fact is a fact." [36] Later, the Georgian [Central Elections Commission](#) Chairwoman highlighted the fact that the opposition had won 70% of the vote by official counting. She went on to say that on a scale of one to ten, "the election received three-plus, no more... we never denied the drawbacks, as well as the violations that really happened at some precincts." [37] Though more cosmetic than substantive, such statements provided the kind of atmospherics enabling Shevardnadze to leave office through the door and not in a casket, with Saakashvili asserting it was a matter of national honor to provide "guarantees of absolute security" to the ex-president and his family. Neither opposition nor regime in Azerbaijan mustered such dignity.

US/European Engagement

Part of the reason leaders in Baku had less to worry about than those in Tbilisi may involve the different approach of U.S. and European policy makers to each country. International leaders appear to have been much more lenient towards Aliyev than Shavardnadze. Prior to 15 October, American and European diplomats did not act to pressure the Aliyev regime into greater electoral openness. When asked about the precipitous elevation of Ilham, [State Department](#) officials responded "we don't pick peoples' candidates... We just ask that they hold free and fair elections."

Likewise, there was no visible pro-democratic arm-twisting by Western leaders. EU-affiliated groups such as the OSCE did send over 600 monitors to the Azerbaijani elections, ultimately criticizing its defects, yet only after other groups' much harsher condemnations. Just as important, engagement prior to the election was minimal. The OSCE/ODIHR's interim report, published 9 October, while noting "inappropriate police action,... an atmosphere of intimidation and fear," and practices creating "an essential lack of confidence in the judiciary and in state institutions," it did praise Azerbaijan, indicating that "technical preparations for the election are well advanced," and that for the first time Azerbaijanis had a real choice of candidates. [38]

After the election, American policy makers sent mixed messages to Baku. On 18 October, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage contacted Imam Aliyev to congratulate him on his "strong performance." Focusing on BTC, the War on Terror and containment of Iran, Armitage indicated "our desire to work closely with the Azerbaijani government." As the situation deteriorated temporarily in the country, however, critical American voices emerged. On 20 October, deputy State Department Spokesman Adam Ereli indicated "we share those concerns over what appears to be a wave of politically motivated arrests over the weekend.... We also call on the opposition parties to act peacefully and within the law."

Only a week after the polling did the State Department issue a warning commensurate with the dangers Azerbaijanis faced, though again it hedged its bets: "The United States will work with president-elect Ilham Aliyev... but we believe Azerbaijan's leadership missed an important opportunity to advance democratization." By sending such mixed signals to an inexperienced leader not reared in a democratic environment, the U.S. government likely allowed Ilham Aliyev to act as he wished. [39]

By contrast, Euro-American engagement in Georgia had been growing since this past summer. In July, former Secretary of State James Baker visited Tbilisi on President Bush's behalf to get government and opposition to agree to a process that would lessen election fraud. After some encouraging noises, however, the regime did not implement the plan. In September, the Department of State actually cut back aid to Tbilisi. Though part of this was related to corruption and a stalled privatization process, another reason for the cutback related to foot-dragging on ensuring a democratic election. [40]

A month before the election, another American delegation visited Tbilisi under the auspices of the [National Democratic Institute](#). Including Senator John McCain, former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, as well as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili—of Georgian extraction with several contacts in the country—this group met with regime and opposition leaders, election officials

and prominent businessmen, emphasizing that the upcoming elections would be "a critical test for the country's democratization."

During and after the election, international attention remained strong. After excessive lenience towards Aliyev, the international community sent over 2,000 monitors to Georgia for the elections. The OSCE signaled its supervision of the balloting would be quite close.^[41] In its interim report, the OSCE was initially more frank than it had been with Azerbaijan. Already on 3 November, it criticized "serious delays and changes in the electoral preparations,... serious acts of violence during campaign events," and an inability of FNG members to "distinguish between party and state resources." Further, OSCE rapporteurs noted "credible reports" of ballot-stuffing, and the presence of "large numbers of unauthorized persons in polling stations... some of whom interfered in or directed the process."^[42] EU and American leaders also monitored post-election developments closely, urging restraint and dialogue.^[43]

Why, then, was there less pressure on Azerbaijan? Part of the answer lies in geopolitical realities. Given its status as a Caspian Sea state, its strategic value in terms of energy, the War on Terror, and containment of Iran made the risk of alienating Azerbaijan's government appear too great. If it turned towards Russia or Iran, the loss would be immense for the United States. Of course, none of Azerbaijan's neighbors desired regime change either.

More fundamentally, whereas democratization and transparent politics are values for which one can strive with some chance of success in Georgia, the situation appears much grimmer in Azerbaijan. Ilham Aliyev possesses none of the diplomatic acumen or sincere Western political-cultural inclination evident in Shevardnadze, whose regime was in any event more open than that of the "Aliyev Mafia." Conversely, whereas Saakashvili, Burjanadze, and Zhvania are all reasonably moderate politicians with working experience, opposition alternatives in Azerbaijan are not as yet horses worth betting on. Their track records as leaders are quite poor, as they have demonstrated just as much demagoguery and cronyism as have the Aliyevs. Finally, their engagement with the West and the United States in particular has not transcended berating Washington for supporting the incumbent regime in Baku.

The best the West could hope for in pushing democracy aggressively in Azerbaijan would be a popular revolt that would run away from Gambar or Mammedov, and would require tremendous American efforts to convince Armenia not to take political advantage of domestic Azerbaijani chaos.

American Challenges and Choices

The situation in Georgia remains fluid. As speaker of the parliament, Nino Burjanadze assumed the acting presidency on 22 November 2003. The popular Saakashvili, however, is likely to view Shevardnadze's departure as his own entry ticket to the presidential palace. Opposition leaders have tentatively agreed to new elections in early January. If they are monitored on a non-partisan basis by all major parties as well as international observers, a new regime could establish legitimacy.

What does this all mean for American regional strategy? It appears that pushing for democracy in Georgia led to the fall of a longtime American friend not quite autocratic by regional standards. Refraining from such pressure in Azerbaijan resulted in the continuation of a regime that came to power by pushing out the American friend Elcibey in 1993, and is only slightly less repressive than governments across the Caspian in Central Asia.

The chances of peaceful regime change were greater in Georgia because the opposition leadership had governing experience to the extent of being somewhat "in-system" at the time of the election, and was ready to cooperate to a minimum degree. Conversely, the regime itself sought to negotiate in order to survive, thus legitimizing the opposition's complaints further. Shevardnadze then proved unwilling to bloody his people to remain in power. On the international level, European and American engagement was sufficiently sustained and intense to make Shevardnadze see that a forceful crackdown would have

undesired international consequences. Likewise, Euro-American attention likely emboldened a domestic opposition that had always seen itself as Western leaning in political inclinations.

The Azerbaijani opposition was too factionalized, while a regime built on family ties proved resolute in its defiance of popular protest. International engagement was not sustained, and not entirely in support of the opposition; rather, the key regional countries and global players were prepared to recognize Ilham Aliyev as president and reap the strategic and economic rewards. These two elections provide a lesson in the survival of the "corruptest," one sure to be taken by neighboring countries' repressive leaders.

In both countries, the United States favored incumbent leaders throughout the last decade as more coherent points of contact able to manipulate state and economy to our strategic interests. Working with non-democratic leaders for the sake of larger regional strategic and energy considerations can have negative ramifications for American prestige and ability to cultivate relationships with today's opposition and tomorrow's potential leaders. In this respect, the post-1979 U.S. experience with Azerbaijan's southern neighbor Iran is instructive.

Azeri opposition leaders themselves have repeatedly indicated the negative impression left on them by official American and oil company "coddling" of the Aliyev regime. They might share the view of some American editorialists that "compared with the promise of oil and gas riches in Azerbaijan,... or the country's easy grant of overflight rights to U.S. planes bound for Iraq, democracy is unimportant to this administration."[\[44\]](#) Ominously, the Musavat Party paper recently asserted that "if the USA doesn't recognize Isa Gambar as president, but instead Ilham Aliyev ... then long live Osama bin Laden."[\[45\]](#) By contrast, at least in the short term interim President Burjanadze and presumptive heir Saakashvili plan to preserve the pro-Western, pro-NATO approaches of their predecessor.[\[46\]](#)

American leaders might take some concrete measures to alleviate mistrust towards the United States. Immediate recognition of the interim Georgian government has helped. Re-opening flows of economic aid is also quite important—after all, one of the reasons aid was cut involved insufficient democratization. Likewise, signaling sustained commitment to BTC, and affirming the territorial indivisibility of the Georgian state will help, just as it might permit the US to influence domestic Georgian politics in the direction of the leader it prefers, and lessen Tbilisi's dependence on Moscow.

As for Azerbaijan, something of a double game is in order. On the one hand, U.S. economic, political, and strategic power projection interests will not be served by cold-shouldering an incumbent regime that appears to have put down local opposition. Conversely, strong-arming Ilham Aliyev risks eliminating any influence U.S. officials might have. He could thus be driven by an entrenched family oligarchy to more extreme policies. Still, U.S. diplomats might encourage Ilham towards greater inclusiveness in upcoming municipal elections with incentives on the NK issue. Further, cultivating stronger links with opposition leaders might help to tone down their inflammatory rhetoric.

Rather than revealing hypocrisy, often reluctant American willingness to deal with repressive Caucasian leaders reflects the inescapable fact that Georgia and Azerbaijan occupy a geographic location rendering them indispensable to the United States. American diplomats and generals simply cannot ignore unsavory Caucasian leaders in a security environment shaped by the War on Terror, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and an Iran actively pursuing both Caspian Sea influence and nuclear weapons. American leaders also require regional cooperation to combat rising terror/organized crime networks supported by a drug trade stretching from Afghanistan through to European Union countries. Furthermore, U.S. policy makers are well aware of the need to cultivate friendly relations with Caucasus rulers in order to secure the kind of energy bridges that can somewhat weaken OPEC's leverage over Western economies.

The central determination American leaders must make in reference to choke-point areas of the world—such as the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, Central America—is when a leader's domestic position has so weakened as to outweigh the benefits of cooperative relations with an incumbent regime. In highly fluid environments, we must calculate when it becomes necessary to cultivate meaningful liaisons with

opposition figures, and even assist them to obtain power, either through signaling American opprobrium towards autocratic leaders, or perhaps more intrusive measures. In parallel to this, as these choke-point areas are by definition international, American leaders might actively plan for scenarios that involve cultivating UN/EU active engagement so as to generate either domestic political change or ruler-opposition compromise before we confront internal political chaos and internecine violence with regional and global ramifications.

Such sensitivity to local dynamics is perhaps most important in the Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia. A political meltdown in either risks restarting civil war in Ossetia or Abkhazia, and interstate war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, as rulers and opposition vie with each other in playing the nationalism card. In the case of Abkhazia and Ossetia, Russia will be unable to remain unconcerned, while Turkey, Iran, and Georgia itself will detect direct national interests at stake in renewed Armenian-Azeri fighting. Finally, given its regional security and energy access concerns, as well as its evolving status in Central Asia, the United States will have to engage all its instruments of hard and soft influence in a region which is still at the margins of our out-of-theater capabilities, and is viewed by Russia as its own turf.

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