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The 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: The Neglected Category of Independents

By Farid Guliyev, Baku

Abstract

About 35 percent of Azerbaijan's parliament members are independents and an even larger number of independents routinely run for parliament. Who are those independents and should we take them seriously? In this article, I show that independents are not a uniform group, and there are three main subtypes: public figure independents, "fake" independents, and independents vying for public visibility. I briefly provide examples for each subtype and argue that with the downfall of traditional opposition parties over the past 10 years and the disturbing irrelevance of political parties in general, non-fake independent candidates have taken up, within the prescribed limits, the job of airing popular grievances. Election cycles allow independents to take a more proactive stance and run grassroots and social media campaigns. Future research should not disregard independents as mere pro-regime puppets if they want to get a fuller understanding of the political dynamics within the electoral authoritarian regimes.

"Unremarkable" Election?

On November 1, 2015 Azerbaijan held its fifth round of parliamentary elections for the 125-seat unicameral legislature Milli Məclis. The Azerbaijani parliament has been traditionally dominated by an alliance of the president's "party of power" and pro-government loyalists. Parliament has held only a marginal position vis-à-vis the omnipotent chief executive. All Azerbaijani policymaking is concentrated in the presidential apparatus, and there are no other veto players within or outside the executive branch that have the capacity to block a piece of legislation or an important policy decision. To use Tsebelis' classification, Azerbaijan is a single-veto player system. Moreover, following the constitutional amendments in 2002, Azerbaijan switched from a mixed majority-proportional electoral system, in which 100 seats were elected in single-member constituencies and 25 seats were allocated to deputies elected through the party lists, to a pure majoritarian electoral system. The majoritarian electoral design tends to favor candidates from large parties and non-partisan candidates and disadvantage smaller parties. In the specific Azerbaijani context, the elimination of proportional representation discourages the development of political parties as an important channel of interest aggregation in an already poorly-institutionalized political environment. Individuals and their (often shadowy) networks of friends and connections, instead of political parties and platforms, take the center stage in Azerbaijan's Machiavellian politics.

Even more than in previous elections, the outcome of this race was a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, this election cycle had the following four peculiar features. First, it was the first time that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) canceled its

monitoring mission, citing the lack of an enabling environment for effective election observation, though the Council of Europe sent its observers. Second, it was the first time most traditional opposition parties boycotted the legislative vote (previous boycotts were used only in presidential contests like the one in 2008). Third, never before there has been so little public interest in the elections, and it was the first time no public debates were held on television as the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of Azerbaijan refused candidates the right to free air time on the public TV channel. Fourth, it was the first time the parliamentary elections were not followed by any opposition protests to dispute the election outcome, as was the case in 2005 and more modestly in 2010.

The ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) continues to maintain the majority of seats (57 percent of all seats) with a handful of YAP candidates re-elected for the fifth time while the rest of the seats went to independents loyal to the government and to a pocket of smaller pro-government party representatives. In 2010, the traditional opposition parties ran, but received no seats. This year, most of them decided to abstain from running candidates. About 75 to 80 percent of all outgoing deputies were re-elected and several experts were able to predict the results with more than 90 percent precision even before the elections took place.

Race Without Competition

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the elections in Azerbaijan have transformed from the semi-competitive contests that they were in the 1990s and early 2000s to a non-competitive arena that forbids multi-party pluralism and genuine contestation. Elections now serve merely as a mechanism for the incum-

bent establishment to place its loyal candidates in the parliament to make sure the executive can pass its bills without any criticism or deliberation. This year's elections fixed the role of elections as merely a democratic ritual without democratic substance. More important, this perception of elections as "not changing anything" has come to be "normalized" or "taken for granted" among the populace. No one, not even the established opposition parties, however marginalized they have become, had the willingness or the stamina to dispute the fairness of the vote. The electoral process as a genuine contest for power has become so irrelevant that most voters did not follow the pre-electoral candidate campaigning and according to official figures, only about half of the voters, 55.7 percent (a suspiciously exaggerated turnout figure) went to the polling stations on election day. Dubbed an "imitation" of elections, the November poll was a ritual to demonstrate the government's *pro forma* adherence to democracy.

Why Run in a Non-Competitive Election?

There is some evidence that elections in nondemocratic systems are typically aimed at claiming democratic legitimacy, signaling incumbency strength, making policy concessions to powerful groups or distributing patronage. They are anything but genuine contests over which candidate will represent this or that constituency.

Officially, about 767 candidates ran for parliament. Having estimated their chances, opposition parties realized the futility of running: the opposition Musavat party first nominated, but later withdrew its 24 registered candidates citing the reason that "for the first time the authorities provided no free air time for campaigning before the elections". Some independents also calculated the chances. For example, the outspoken lawyer Aslan Ismayilov who was registered as an independent dropped out of race 10 days before the election also in connection with the authorities' refusal to allocate free air time on public TV. A plausible reason for this decision, however, seems to be that the candidates who are not backed up by the ruling elites, use the elections for purposes other than getting a seat. Some of them use the election as an opportunity to push for the solution of issues related to bureaucratic neglect and lawlessness (*"bespredel"*) or to increase their public visibility.

There are many reasons why individuals might want to run in elections they have no chances of winning. A pessimist conspiracy theory has it that some or even a majority of independents are "fake" in the sense that, by having unofficially accepted financial assistance from the authorities, they participate to make the elections look competitive. A softer version of the conspiracy theory argues that these candidates are funded through

government friendly businesses. There is no way we can verify these claims.

Independents

One of the interesting features of the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan is the large number of nominally independent or non-partisan (in Azeri: "bitərəf") contestants among registered candidates, most of whom, when elected, turn out to be pro-government deputies. Independents got 46 (of 125) seats both in 2005 and 2010 and 42 seats in the newly elected parliament, representing respectively 36.8 percent of seats in 2005 and 2010 and 33.6 percent in 2015, a substantial proportion of deputies (see Table 1 on p. 5).

I argue here that while elections in Azerbaijan are clientelistic contests—in which a parliamentary seat and its material and nonmaterial affordances, to borrow Katy Pearce's term, is a reward one gets from the chief executive for his or her political loyalty—they also allow within certain permitted limits expression of public concerns. Because traditional opposition parties are often ostracized for being "radical", "predatory" and "unpatriotic", this puts them to the sidelines of the electoral play and opens the space for a large group of non-affiliated and self-nominated candidates who do not question the legitimacy of the ruling regime to fill in the vacuum. While most independents serve to demonstrate the democratic trappings of the regime, some of them, irrespective of whether being elected or not, do use the electoral cycle to voice community-level concerns, to deliberate on pressing issues and even advocate policy solutions.

Within this large and varied group of independents, three sub-categories can be identified: "public figure" independents, "fake" independents, and independents seeking public visibility. The borders between these categories are not necessarily clear-cut, but rather drawn for analytical purposes. Some independents are public figures. An example is lawyer Aslan Ismayilov who certainly is aiming at a more independent stance, from both the ruling party and opposition groups. On his Facebook page (<<https://www.facebook.com/Aslan.Z.Ismayilov>>), which has more than 131,000 followers, he was seeking popular support for a social media campaign advocating free public access to the seaside coast of the Absheron Peninsula. The beach was removed from free public access after the installation of restaurants, paid beaches and villas of the rich. Aslanov's video campaign against the "fencing of the Caspian sea coast" ("Xəzər sahillərinin hasarlanması") went viral and got more than 15,000 likes on Facebook and was shared by 21,600 users (Video available on Youtube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e54AezWISZ8>>).

Other independents are loyalists of the authorities supported by the establishment and slated to win. In fact, these are disguised YAP supporters. For example, deputies Elkhan Suleymanov (elected in 2010, re-elected in 2015, both times as an independent) and Zeynab Khanlarova, a popular Soviet-era singer who was previously nominated by YAP, but re-elected in 2015 as independent, both are ardent government supporters.

Finally, a third, and possibly larger, group is more ambiguous, having no realistic chances to win a seat, such independents vie for political visibility and career advancement. They publicize their profile to get noticed for potential gains in the future. For instance, political expert and now politician Rasim Musabekov, who first ran unsuccessfully as part of the opposition bloc in 2005, was elected in 2010 and re-elected this year as an independent.

Other examples of public visibility seeking independents from the 2015 campaign include Ilhamiyya Rza, Ahmet Shahidov and Eyvaz Gojayev who ran, unsuccessfully, with promises of personally fixing household and community-level problems, without offering any coherent policy alternatives. This group's campaign posters included slogans: "For a new start", "Trust in youth means confidence in the future", "For a more beautiful Qakh!", "I am your voice" (campaign posters are available here: <<https://twitter.com/AzStudies/status/658000394577125376>> and here <<https://twitter.com/AzStudies/status/658000817262346240>>). Shahidov, 33, head of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Human Rights Institute ran an active campaign both at the grassroots in his home Qakh district and online (his Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/shahidovcom>> has more than 107,000 likes) meeting with locals to discuss their social problems.

These "public visibility" candidates, while not questioning the government's overall performance, do express certain popular grievances. These candidates seem to run in the hope of gaining the attention of the

authorities who might even help them land a public sector job. This in a way plays a role of upward mobility in a system with restricted political recruitment and where loyalty trumps competence. As election contestants who can be easily identified by face from their campaign posters, they at least get the chance, however small, to win a public job or launch a political career.

Conclusion

While elections in this kind of restricted political environment are anything but contests for seats, they still give a certain opportunity for some candidates to gain political capital or to build a political career. As the nature of the regime limits political opportunities during normal times, election cycles turn out to be the only time when politically ambitious individuals can legitimately campaign, distribute their posters and run Facebook campaigns to get noticed. When political recruitment is so restricted, for some people this is the only opportunity to land a government job or possibly build the career of a politician.

A broader implication of this analysis is that while the literature on electoral authoritarianism has emphasized the battle between incumbent autocrats and pro-democratic oppositions, it has largely neglected a sizeable category of independents who can play different, but not negligible, roles in this kind of political regime. It is, by no means, a homogenous group. Some independents are pro-government figures in disguise who, by acting as independents, help the regime maintain the veneer of democratic legitimacy. Other independents are public advocates who voice public grievances without necessarily aiming to reap public office benefits. Finally, the third type of independents are those who invest their resources and energies to raise their public profile and get noticed by the authorities. Closer attention to this varied group of political actors can help improve our understanding of the internal dynamics and possible vulnerabilities of electoral authoritarian regimes.

About the Author

Farid Guliyev, PhD, is an independent researcher and policy expert whose interests include the comparative study of political regimes and political elites, and the management of natural resources.

Table 1: Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Election Results: Number of Seats by Affiliation*

	2005	2010	2015
Ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP)	61	69	71
Nominally independents	46	46	42
Other pro-government parties	11	10	12
Traditional opposition	6	0	0
Total	124**	125	125

Sources: Calculated from the following sources: OSCE Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, 7 November 2010: Final Report, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/75073>>; Afgan Mukhtarli, "Predictable win for ruling party in Azerbaijan, IWPR, November 7, 2015, <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/predictable-win-ruling-party-azerbaijan>>; Azerbaijan, Parliamentary Elections, 6 November 2005: Final Report, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/17946>>; Azerbaijan, Repeat Parliamentary Elections, 13 May 2006: Annex to the Final Report on the 6 November 2005 Parliamentary Elections, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/19596>>

Notes:

* Notation: "Other pro-government" stands for representatives of smaller puppet parties aligned with the ruling party in terms of both ideology and policy. This includes such parties as the Motherland Party, Civic Solidarity Party and other satellite parties. For example, MP Zahid Oruj, known for his indisputably pro-government position on all matters, was elected to parliament from the Motherland Party (2000, 2005, 2010), but was expelled from the party in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2013 for nominating himself as a presidential candidate in violation of the party's decision to support the incumbent president. In 2015, he was reelected to parliament as an independent.

"Traditional opposition" refers to the established opposition parties, chiefly the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) whose platforms are openly critical of the incumbent authorities.

"Independents" are non-partisan, non-affiliated candidates.

** Numbers do not round up to 125 for 2005 as one seat held by an opposition candidate was later annulled by the CEC; also note that the opposition Popular Front Party (APFP) refused to take up their seats in parliament after the 2005 elections, and that there is some confusion as to how many independent candidates were elected in 2005 as, in the words of the OSCE observation mission, although more than half of all candidates declared themselves "independent" "a large number of self-nominated candidates were in fact affiliated with a political party".