

Corrupt Dictator Is Challenged by a Scholar in Azerbaijan's Presidential Elections

By Elmar Chakhtakhtinski

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History scholar vs. mafia president

Opposition candidate Jamil Hasanli leads an uneven battle in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has one of the world's worst records on human rights, media freedoms and democratic development. There, the united opposition candidate Jamil Hasanli, an internationally renowned history scholar and former parliament member, leads an uneven battle against the corrupt dictatorship of President Ilham Aliyev. He is campaigning for the upcoming October 9 presidential elections under extremely repressive conditions.

Being the only real opposition candidate, Dr. Hasanli is allotted meager 6 minutes on each televised debate. President Aliyev never participates in the debates himself. Instead, the authorities registered a host of pro-government fake "candidates" whose main function consists of attacking and insulting the opposition candidate Hasanli and praising President Aliyev. One of them, a well-known attack dog of the regime, Hafiz Hajiyev, launched a water bottle at Hasanli and issued death threats against him (click here for video). His previous claim to fame was offering a ten thousand dollars reward for cutting the ears of a prominent writer that fell out of favor with authorities. Now this shameful and savage character, along with other pro-regime "candidates" and the ruling YAP party officials, acts as one of President Aliyev's campaigners on presidential debates.

A few days after the start of the debates, the regime effectively took hostage the twenty one years old son of Hasanli's ally, one of the main opposition leaders Ali Karimli, by arresting him on trumped up charges. Then, the sixteen years old son of Hasanli's campaign spokesperson, Ali Gulaliyev, was severely beaten and stabbed with a knife.

Such was the regime's response to Jamil Hasanli's continuous challenge to the incumbent President Ilham Aliyev to explain the documented media reports of high-level corruption within the first family. Dr. Hasanli accused Ilham Aliyev of running the country as his personal holding company.

In Wikileaks diplomatic cables, Ilham Aliyev's style of running government was compared to that of a mafia boss from Hollywood's famous "God Father" series. The international watchdog OCCRP has recognized Ilham Aliyev as the most corrupt person in the world. Reports keep appearing in international media with evidence of Aliyev family's enormous fortunes stolen from the Azerbaijani people. Washington Post reported on a forty million dollars luxury Dubai mansion possessed by Aliyev's 11-years old son. Investigative journalists discovered gold mines, banks and telephone companies owned by his daughters, as well as billions of dollars in offshore bank accounts in British Virgin Island tied to the Aliev family. MSNBC featured the corrupt wealth accumulated by Aliyevs in its documentary titled "Filthy Rich".

With dirty money on "buy America" spree

The mafia-style regime, responsible for these and many other heinous acts, has been enjoying warm relations with successive US administrations.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev was named as the World's Most Corrupt Person and compared to a mafia boss

Millions of Azerbaijan's lobbying dollars are poured into DC. Baku provides all-paid luxury trips to the US policymakers and establishment figures. The recent grandiose PR forum held in Azerbaijan, the "US-Azerbaijan Convention" sponsored by Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR, was attended by over three hundred current and former American officials and participants from influential US foreign policy circles. The money coming from an Azerbaijani minister oligarch Ziya Mammadov's corrupt business enterprise bankrolls "Azerbaijan America Alliance" in Washington, DC. The Alliance hired high profile lobbying firms to establish contacts with the US government officials and Congress members. It also became known for hosting lavish gala dinners, where the House Speaker John Boehner and other American politicians hang out.

Ilham Aliyev's apologists among the US policy "experts" and think-tank "analysts" write positive reviews and sympathetic articles about his regime. One such pundit that often authors pro-Aliyev pieces in the US press, Rob Sobhani, has even tried to run for a US Senate seat from Maryland as an "independent, self-financed candidate". It would have been bizarre and troubling for the America's own democracy to see a champion for a foreign dictator sitting in the US Capitol. Luckily, the good people of Maryland made a wise choice and spared themselves from such representation.

Decades of tyranny and corruption

But the Azerbaijani people are much less fortunate. They have been deprived of a right to choose their own government for over twenty years. President Aliyev inherited his post in falsified "elections" in 2003 from his late Soviet KGB general father who came to power in a military coup in 1993. Under the rule of Aliyev dynasty, all elections fell well short of minimal standards for free and fair polls, according to international observers. Hidden cam videos posted online a year ago by a former regime insider revealed how seats in Azerbaijan's national parliament were distributed and sold for million dollar bribes in a fraudulent "elections" scheme led by President Aliyev and his top officials.

And the government seems bent on ensuring the same conduct for this year's presidential polls.

In an election year, major opposition figures, critical journalists, prominent lawyers, youth leaders, and civic activists are thrown behind bars. The grandfather of Rashadat Akhundov, from NIDA youth movement, committed suicide when he learned about a lengthy prison term his grandson is facing. Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist for the US Congress funded Radio Liberty, was blackmailed by a sex video-tape and photos which the government agents apparently took with a secret camera installed in her bedroom. This was the government's answer to the investigative reports about corruption within the ruling family that Ms. Ismayilova authored. Other critical journalists and dissidents have been beaten, jailed, exiled and murdered.

Free speech and other basic rights and freedoms are violated in Azerbaijan

All public demonstrations in the central parts of capital Baku's and other cities are brutally dispersed by the police and civilian clothed regime agents. The access to authorized rallies on the city's outskirts is restricted and citizens face humiliating police checkpoints on their way. Opposition meetings with voters in the provincial regions are attacked by police-led mobs. There are no independent TV or radio stations. Independent press is constantly intimidated, suppressed and persecuted.

Still, the opposition managed to join forces within the newly created National Council and rally behind a single candidate, Jamil Hasanli. His open and resilient criticism of the Aliyev government on nationally televised debates represents a breath of fresh air into an otherwise stale political landscape in Azerbaijan. All this got the ruling regime worried, as can be witnessed by the increased level of pre-election crackdown against opposition and civil society.

A friend not to be proud of

To be sure, Hasanli and his supporters face a steep, uphill battle for freedom against an entrenched dictatorship strengthened by billions of dollars in oil revenues. The Aliyev dynasty is one of the most repressive and corrupt regimes, with neo-feudal mode of operation and tactics resembling those of criminal syndicates. But it maintains close relations with the US and Europe by capitalizing on the country's perceived energy and security importance and on huge flow of lobbying money it pours into DC and European capitals.

Recently, the Aliyev regime refused to accept an official pre-election visit by a US delegation led by the State Department's top Democracy and Human Rights official, DAS Thomas Melia. The visit was cancelled because Baku demanded a change in the composition of the American delegation. Although the US Embassy in Baku and the State Department expressed regrets, no sharp reaction seriously questioning Azerbaijan's status as a US ally followed. And so far, the authorities in Baku seem only to grow in confidence that they can safely disregard any democracy concerns raised by their Western partners.

A Wilson Center scholar whose history books are included in Harvard University Book Series on Cold War, Dr. Jamil Hasanli knows what he is talking about when he says that never in its history was Azerbaijan ruled by such intellectually and morally deficient group of people as it is now. And, perhaps, America too rarely had such utterly corrupt and morally repulsive allies as Ilham Aliyev and his associates.