

The Price of Tyranny Will Be Paid in Blood in Azerbaijan

By Elmar Chakhtakhtinski

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How shameful then that some oil-soaked, caviar-greased, lobbyist-pedaled politicians, "experts", and pundits in the West lend support and provide justifications for this repressive and utterly corrupt regime. Some simply lie on its behalf, promoting its fake image as a "tolerant, modernizing Western ally". And some bluntly rationalize its despicable rights record and call to ignore its trespasses against the Azerbaijani people for the sake of other, short-sighted interests.

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Unfolding to come

It might come as an escalation of the current military hostilities in Karabakh conflict into a full blown war between the two authoritarian governments in Yerevan and Baku. They constantly play with fire and stir hateful war propaganda for political benefits. Or it can stem from the rise of violent extremist forces. Those tend to emerge as a sole alternative to

unjust and despotic governments that succeed in eliminating all moderate pro-democracy opposition. It may also be an Iranian or Russian sponsored ethnic or religiously-motivated provocation in the border regions. Indeed, with so many infringements on freedoms, rights and livelihoods of ordinary citizens of all backgrounds, the Azerbaijani authorities made the country an easy target for such incitement. Or it might simply start as a violent uprising of the hungry population when a significant decline in energy export revenues inevitably occurs. The corrupt and incompetent regime's entire economy is mostly based on plunder of oil riches and it is bound to eventually hit the wall.

Whatever it might be - it will come. And there will be blood, violence and an irreparable blow to both Azerbaijan's own future as well as to all those US and EU interests in whose name this despicable regime is being supported, justified and tolerated by its Western allies.

We see similar scenarios unfolding in many other countries. There, seemingly strong and stable dictatorships, some allies of the West and some not, unfold quickly into the deadly chaos of uprisings and civil wars. The question should not be whether such a tragic turn of events is possible in Azerbaijan but, rather, whether it can even be averted in Azerbaijan anymore. What is happening now portends the things to come.

Civil society being destroyed

Recently arrested: Azerbaijan's top right defender Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif Yunus (on the right) and young rights activist Rasul Jafarov (on the left)

The channels for civilized discourse are quickly narrowing. The remaining civil society institutions capable of leading and controlling any possible popular discontent are being methodically destroyed. The economic and social injustice, coupled with the routine trampling of people's rights and freedoms, has turned Azerbaijan from an aspiring, transitional post-Soviet society into one of the solidified corrupt dictatorships typical of Middle East, Central Asia and African continent. And the ever-tightening political conditions ensure the closing of the very few avenues that remain for a peaceful transition into a more open and liberal society. The only way out then would be a violent explosion of the long-suppressed but slowly growing, seething grievances.

The recent arrests of Leyla Yunus and Rasul Jafarov come as the continuation of a long-running and intensifying onslaught on dissent and free thought in Azerbaijan. All major international rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, rate Azerbaijan's as one of the worst in the world on democracy and human rights. So do the foreign governments in their assessments, such as the US State Department's annual human rights report. Ranked at the bottom of the world's corruption index by the Transparency International, Azerbaijan has its President Ilham Aliyev recognized as the world's most corrupt person by the international watchdog OCCRP. His style of governing was also compared in the US diplomatic correspondence cables leaked by Wikileaks to the head of Corleone mafia family from the famous "God Father" movie trilogy.

Misused carrots and no sticks

Yet, the growth of totalitarianism in Azerbaijani takes place under the tacit support, silent neglect or merely symbolic criticism by the US and Europe. Human rights seem sidelined by the energy and security interests of great powers and Azerbaijan's own growing lobbying efforts in Western capitals.

It reached a sad point when those in other countries use Azerbaijan as a poster-boy for West's sell out of its democratic ideals. Thus, a leading rights activist in Belarus, Ales Bialatski, recently said that we must not allow "the situation in Belarus to get Azerbaijanized". Pointing to Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Council of Europe, he emphasized that "a country full of political prisoners, in which human rights are violated, presides over a European institution, created specifically for protection of human rights";.

The real problem is not in the lack of international criticism of Azerbaijan's deteriorating democracy record. The issue lies in every verbal rebuke being inevitably watered down by highlights of the "positives" in energy and security cooperation and the pledges of friendship "in hopes for improvement" on democracy. Those "hopes" never materialize, of course. But regardless how much the official Baku ignores the international concerns, no sanctions and no significant dent in relations ever follows.

In other words, the US and EU policies in support for democratic reforms in Azerbaijan carry no sticks and the carrots are all tied to other areas. Even the critical talk alone is largely offset by other statements and gestures designed to soften the tone. And that is exactly what the Aliyev regime and its lobbyists abroad want to see. It serves to them as an implicit green light for their continuing persecution of dissidents within the country.

Lobbying money talks

For example, at the height of worsening attacks against the civil society, the US officials had been gladly attending the Aliyev regime's lavish "US-Azerbaijan" PR conventions in DC and Baku. The ethnic non-profit networks listed as organizers of these events and their financial sponsorship have already raised questions in the US media. US Senator from New York, Charles Schumer, was quoted calling the corrupt Aliyev dictatorship a "great democracy". US Congressman from Texas, Ted Poe, who praised Azerbaijan as a "shining light of democracy", was one of several whose participation in the convention became a subject of the Houston Chronicle investigation of possible ethics rules breaches.

US House Speaker Boehner posing with the corrupt Azerbaijani minister-oligarch Ziya Mammadov's son, Anar Mammadov, at a party hosted by his lobbyist outfit in DC

Others, like the US House Speaker John Boehner, became highlights of lavish galas hosted by the Azerbaijan America Alliance (AAA) - an organization that, according to FARA records, is bankrolled by the shadowy "ZQAN Holding" enterprise of Azerbaijan's corrupt transport minister Ziya Mammadov. His dirty business empire was subject of international journalistic investigation reports and also cited in Wikileaks cables as the third largest corrupt family business syndicate in Azerbaijan. His DC lobbying outfit is led by his playboy son Anar Mammadov who, before posing on pictures with the US Speaker Boehner, was known from Azerbaijani media stories about him getting drunk and paying million dollars to grill and eat a bear from the local zoo. Mammadov's fortunes and his multi-million dollar excursion into the DC lobbying scene was covered in Foreign Policy magazine's article on the Aliyev dynasty's mafia regime called "Corleones of the Caucasus".

One can dismiss these incidents by saying that the US Congress members are known for saying and doing stupid things, especially when they are prompted by special interest lobbyists. However, the guest lists of those events included not only US Senators and Representatives, but also current and former officials from the Obama administration, including the State Department and Pentagon.

Aliyev dictatorship's lobbying outreach, dubbed "Caviar Diplomacy", also reached European parliamentarians. Some of them were implicated in a bribery probe focusing on the favors they might have received from Azerbaijani contacts. Europe's top human rights body, Council of Europe (CE), could have kicked out Azerbaijan from its membership for violating its most fundamental tenets. But instead, Azerbaijan is currently holding the CE chairmanship which allows President Aliyev to boldly lie from its podium that there are no political prisoners in his country.

The same lie was told by Mr. Aliyev in his meeting with the EU president Barroso – a meeting that should have never happened, in the first place, with Azerbaijan being in severe breach of its basic international obligations. To give due credit, President Obama has not endorsed the corrupt Azerbaijani petro-dictator Aliyev's repressions by inviting him to the White House. Let's hope it is kept that way and that President Obama does not meet with Mr. Aliyev in DC or elsewhere. If that happens - that would drive the last nail in the coffin of any pretense for the US support for democracy in Azerbaijan.

Criticism wrapped in chocolate

Even when the intended focus is on human rights and democracy, often an overly “diplomatic” caution not to offend the sensibilities of Azerbaijani authorities ends up defeating the purpose.

For example, the US Helsinki Commission, the American government's premier agency dealing with human rights around the world, has been consistently vocal in its criticism of Azerbaijan. Its co-chair, Senator Cardin, has been very unequivocal in raising concerns with the actions of the Aliyev regime. However, for a briefing held before the last year's presidential elections in Azerbaijan, the Commission invited two representatives of the Azerbaijani government. That allowed the head of Baku's Council Europe delegation, Samed Seidov, to repeat from the halls of the US Congress the same lie his president told during the meeting with the EU head Barosso: that there are no political prisoners in Azerbaijan. And for its most recent hearing on Azerbaijan, the US Helsinki Commission invited a US analyst Brenda Shaffer, who is well-known as a long-time apologist for President Ilham Aliyev.

It might be tempting to justify inviting these regime mouthpieces by a desire to have a “balanced discussion”. However, they are well known for not particularly caring for democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan, which happens to be the very subject topic of those hearings and briefings. Thus, the only contribution they can be expected to make at those forums would consist of misinformation, omissions, and rationalization designed to whitewash the Azerbaijani government's miserable record on the subject in focus. And so they have done, diluting the basic purpose and strength of the public message sent to the Aliyev regime about the unacceptability of its behavior.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, whose corrupt and repressive style is often compared to mafia, enjoys friendly relations with the US and EU.

Another unfortunate example of dampening the principled criticism was observed after the October 2013 elections in Azerbaijan. The OSCE observer mission, the US State Department and the US Helsinki Commission - all rightfully condemned the unfair and unfree conduct of President Aliyev's sham third-term "re-election". However, that did not stop some members of the US Congress and Governors of some States from sending letters congratulating Mr. Aliyev with successfully defrauding his own people of their right to elect their government. Again, one can attribute those statements from US Congress members to their ignorance and infamous willingness to say any nonsense in order to placate lobbyists. But President Obama too sent a post-election letter to Ilham Aliyev. While he did not use the word "congratulation" and included his concerns with the lack of democracy, he still wished success to Mr. Aliyev on "assuming the third term" and pledged friendship and cooperation.

Making it worse, the letter came after the series of heated exchanges between the official Baku and Washington. After all the lobbying money spent in DC and all the praises for being a "model American ally", the Aliyev regime got visibly upset with the honest assessment of its electoral fraud by the US. So, the chief of Presidential Administration accused the US ambassador in Baku in advising the Azerbaijanis to fake voting results to a "reasonable" number. That was backed by a dose of usual anti-Western diatribe that gets spewed out from such regimes in response to criticism. So, to the American diplomatic circles President Obama's letter might have seemed like a carefully worded diplomatic masterpiece aimed at cooling off the tensions. But the Azerbaijani regime was quick to parade it as election victory congratulation and a sign of the world's strongest democracy blinking first in a verbal standoff with a small corrupt and authoritarian petro-state.

No wonder that with such schizophrenic, spineless support for Azerbaijani democracy coming from the Western power centers, the corrupt Azerbaijani dictator Ilham Aliyev feels emboldened to ignore all international concerns and pleas and finish off the last remnants of freedom and human rights in his country.