

Azerbaijan Undermines Its International Image: Does it matter for Aliyev Government?

By Alakbar Raufoglu, Foreign Policy Journal

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For years, the oil-rich Caspian country has been trying to spruce up its image by hosting international events such as Eurovision, Global Internet Forum, OSCE Parliament Assembly summit, as well as the first European Games, due this summer. Aliyev and his team have also been spending a sufficient amount of money for lobby efforts in the U.S. and European capitals.

However, recent moves by the government of Azerbaijan to crack down on western and local organizations as well as restrict the media have caused a very negative effect on the country's international image and, according to some analysts, also on perceptions of the business climate in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijan government's crackdown against independent journalists and has exposed its authoritarian nature to a broader western audience

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Azeri officials: "Why us?"

"Why are we being targeted by the western media? Is that because we want to be the U.S. ally?" Azeri government emissaries, key members of the Parliamentary International Relations committee Samad Seyidov and Asim Mollazade asked an audience in Washington D.C. early last month.

Speaking at Capitol Hill Club, Seyidov said the relations between the two countries sometimes are affected by the "less significant problems related to human rights in Azerbaijan", and this negatively affects the country's attempts to create closer relations with Europe and the U.S.

America, added Asim Mollazade, should "protect freedom in my country";

Unlike Azeri officials, many in the West though see human rights, freedom of expression, freedom of the media to investigate and report on the facts as essential factors for democracy, and their lack as a lead to corruption and authoritarianism.

Azerbaijan once opened its doors to westerners. Slapped by Soviet Moscow, Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB officer and communist-era leader, had returned to his native Azerbaijan to head the country and oversee the unprecedented opening and rapid expansion of Azeri oil-gas industry, after taking over the governance at home in 1993. He invited leading western business and civil society groups to Baku, urged them to hire local employees, and lifted censorship from the media.

But things have changed in Azerbaijan under his son Ilham Aliyev, who has succeeded in bringing the pro-western Azeri civil society and media to heel.

Aliyev senior once called the media "a mirror of the society." Today, under his son's leadership, that mirror has been taken away from Azeris. Their media is nothing if not entertaining, with a daily diet of outrageous shows, news, and movies. Rather than using state media to mobilize his supporters — like his father had — Ilham Aliyev sees it as means to placate and distract the population.

Crackdown

Current arrests of journalists and rights defenders in Azerbaijan are part of a broader crackdown.

It initially started as a response to western criticism to October 2013 presidential election.

Once the election was over, Aliyev, who announced his victory for the third period, wasted no time in launching a broad crackdown on civil society, particularly those who were involved in the election monitoring process.

Although many observers and political leaders in the West have expressed grave concerns about the deteriorating situation in Azerbaijan, the arrest of Anar Mammadli, head of Azerbaijan's most respected election monitoring group, as well as accusations against western institutions in Baku, didn't immediately have an effect on Aliyev government's international reputation.

Aliyev had succeeded in blunting international and domestic criticism through his considerable lobby policy by pointing to his and his father's significant political achievements. The repression largely escaped international attention until last summer, when Aliyev overplayed his hand.

Dozens of rights defenders, critical activists, scores of journalists were rounded up for allegedly undermining stability in the country; private media companies and NGOs came under intensive political pressure, and most were subjected to punitive tax penalties; and critical commentators—investigative journalists such as Khadija Ismayilova and others—were publicly excoriated by the high-level officials.

The arrests of journalists Rauf Mirgadirov, Seymur Hazi, Khadija Ismayilova and many others vastly increased the level of international attention on the press freedom and situation of the civil society in Azerbaijan.

However, prior to Ismayilova's arrests, it was easier for the Aliyev government to cast the crackdown against the media as part of its anti-Armenian propaganda. But after Khadija's arrest even many in the country began sounding an alarm.

Unquestionably the government also took advantage of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and informational war environment to recast his crackdown on critical dissent not as "censorship" but as a legitimate response

to a mounting threat to national security. The strategy resonated because Azerbaijan does face threats from variety of actors in the region.

In late December 2014, the authorities raided the local Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) office, Azadliq Radiosu, taking all the staff for questioning, seizing computers, and sealing the offices. The staff was later questioned again, without legal representation, some in the middle of the night in their pajamas.

The crackdown against independent journalists, activists had given a golden opportunity to disrupt Azeri government's narrative of progress. It exposed the authoritarian nature of the government to broader western audience and simultaneously made the government even more authoritarian. -0-