

• Please Give Us More Time to Imprison and Kill Our Political Opponents!

By Ganimat Zahid*

BAKU. March 27, 2015: Life is not easy for the people of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's prisons are full of political prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of people are practically expelled out of their country. The remaining people have removed themselves from the political life in the country fearing death, prison, or exile.

Another dimension of the problem is that there is an ongoing debate on how to treat the governments which are engaged in massive human rights violations. Some would consider a more cautious approach to avoid isolating such countries with sanctions, fearing that isolation would only harden those regimes and that the only available avenue to improve the situation is to somehow engage the predatory governments of these countries and hope that political reforms carried out by these governments would somehow ease the grips of their authoritarian rule.

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The passage above is a basic-plan propaganda argument of an average lobbyist for the Aliyev regime in the US or any Western European country. Another "argument" is added for the behind-the-closed-doors meetings with the western government officials. That the Azerbaijani government is not homogenous, that there is an ongoing struggle between the pro-Russian and pro-Western factions within the Azerbaijani government and that any human rights criticisms from the West undermines the positions of the so-called pro-Western faction of the Azerbaijani government and strengthens the dreaded "pro-Russian" faction.

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BAKU. March 27, 2015: Life is not easy for the people of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's prisons are full of political prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of people are practically expelled out of their country. The remaining people have removed themselves from the political life in the country fearing death, prison, or exile. Terrible things keep happening to the opponents of the existing regime in Azerbaijan. We can call it administrative terrorism to characterize the systematic usage of the administrative resources by the Azerbaijani government against large groups of its own citizens.

Presently, the US and Europe try to distance themselves from the governments engaged in persecution of its own people. Even the Western European countries refrain from maintaining stably good relations with openly autocratic regimes.

Putin's Russia and Aliyev's Azerbaijan...

Two years ago it seemed Russia's authoritarian ways would not undermine its cooperation with the West because of its vast energy resources. However, the Ukrainian invasion, the following political developments in Russia showed that Russia could not be trusted as a stable partner of the West. With the increasing political crackdowns on the civil society in Russia, increasing authoritarianism of Russia, one could still expect the eventual boycotting of this country by the West. The Ukrainian invasion merely speeded up the process.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijan, as a buffer country in Russia's vicinity, gets a different treatment. The simple truth is that the Azerbaijani government, too, is engaged in the persecution of its own citizens, terrorizing them through a Russia-like system of political persecutions. The vast resources of the government administration is used in this country to suppress freedom of speech, all political freedoms and even the economic freedoms and for this reason many Azeris leave their countries in large numbers.

Dealing With Dictatorships: Lobbyists' Arguments

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The Azerbaijani government's lobbyists actually use this line of reasoning in order to defend the Aliyev regime. The Aliyev lobbyists' narrative looks like the following: "We are a newly independent country. Our internal government institutions are not strong enough to handle the political freedoms of a democratic political system. Additionally, there are serious foreign threats. Azerbaijan's neighbors Russia and Iran are constantly undermining Azerbaijan's independence. And therefore (and here is the conclusion towards which this line of reasoning is brought up to) the West should not overburden the Azerbaijani government by heightened expectations of respect for the human rights and rule of law in Azerbaijan."

Terrible Pro-Russian and Fragile Pro-Western Factions of the Aliyev Government

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In order to play into this narrative, the Azerbaijani government allows the chief of the presidential administration Ramiz Mehdiyev to pen a few sharply worded anti-Western articles from time to time, and the game is complete with the appearance of a clear picture of the "bad cop" in this good cop-bad cop game of the Aliyev regime against the Western countries.

Naïve Western politicians seriously buy into these arguments and avoid confronting the Aliyev regime for its human rights violations, fearing to disturb the "delicate stability." And the more experienced and corrupt politicians from the West support this line of narrative under the influence of the "caviar diplomacy" pretending to have accepted the Aliyev lobbyists' arguments at their face value.

In the end, any support for a dictatorship erodes the foundations of the diplomacy of the value-based Western democracies. There is no Ramiz Mehdiyev faction and the opposing "pro-Western" faction in the Azerbaijani government. The existence of such factions would militate against the very logic of an authoritarian regime in the country.

As I am writing this article, I am sure that in the nearest week another government delegation from Azerbaijan would visit another Western country singing the same propaganda song, the essence of which would be "just give us more time to imprison and kill our political opponents, drive them out of the country because our democracy is still fragile" and we are sandwiched between Iran and Russia."

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