

## Pressure on Aliyev Works

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Ogtay Asadov, speaker of the Azerbaijani parliament, announced that the Azerbaijani government was already preparing to amnesty a number of prisoners. This statement came directly after the announcement of the bill proposal by Christopher Smith. It is widely expected that in the coming weeks numerous civil society activists will be released in reaction to the tough talk from Washington. Azeri Report further maintains that such form of discourse would have been productive from the very beginning when Ilham Aliyev first launched his campaign against what he termed as the "fifth column". Had Washington sternly conveyed to Ilham Aliyev that his friendship with the West was contingent on his treatment of the civil society, lives could have been saved, individuals such as Khadija Ismayilova would not have to spend a day in prison, and RFE/RL would likely have a burgeoning operation in Baku. Instead, Washington's continuous placation and incomprehensible refusal to deal with Aliyev in a more effective language, led to an entirely avoidable tragedy that has now unfolded before our eyes in Azerbaijan.

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Let's first begin with the question whether US has leverage over Ilham Aliyev. One can hardly think of a country that has more leverage over Ilham Aliyev than the United States. Aliyev's Azerbaijan is not North Korea or Iran — a self-sustaining island of tyranny disconnected from the rest of the world. Aliyev's tyranny is completely funded by the petro-dollars that flow from the Western oil companies and deeply interconnected with Western financial institutions. The money does not come from Russia or Iran. Without the so-called "contract of the century" that brought in BP, Statoil and other major Western companies, Azerbaijan's economy would be similar to that of Yemen, and most definitely, Ilham Aliyev would have a fraction of the resources he now commands which he uses to systematically suppress dissent.

Geopolitically, Aliyev's Azerbaijan has simply no choice but to align itself with the West. Wedged between Iran and Russia — two nations which have been Azerbaijan's colonial masters until recently — and Armenia which now occupies twenty percent of the country, Ilham Aliyev has managed to convince some policymakers in Washington that, if pressed, he could go the other way. First of all, Aliyev has as warm relations with Russia and Iran as any Azerbaijani ruler could ever have. Anything beyond would spell the end of independent Azerbaijan, and certainly the end Aliyev's ability to enrich himself and his family at the expense of this newly independent country's natural resources. The Aliyev enterprise could have only been possible under the financial and political protection of the

West. Does anyone seriously believe that Aliyev could entrust his financial fortunes with Vladimir Putin or the ayatollahs in Tehran? For those who do, there is a bridge in Brooklyn at a discount price.

Aliyev's Azerbaijan has no industry and no agriculture that can sustain the population. Thanks to draconian measures and total financial control, there is no free enterprise in the country. Azerbaijan's entire budget emanates from oil production. This parasitic existence has allowed Aliyev to exclude people from decision making process, while using the oil wealth to reward his supporters and punish detractors. But this very mode of existence makes him far more vulnerable to Western pressure than, say, North Korea. Kim Jong Un does not sustain his dictatorship with petrodollars flowing in from Western capitals. Aliyev does.

Speaking of North Korea. Pyongyang's official newspapers have nothing on the Azerbaijani state press when it comes to anti-Western invective. The "Azerbaijan" newspaper editorials read more like issues of "Pravda" from the worst periods of Stalinist terror. The US and Europe, according to articles in state-owned Azeri press, are facing imminent demise due to corruption, filth, and immorality. Not a day goes by without the evening news program on Azerbaijan State TV showing deplorable conditions in which average Americans, Germans or Swedes subsist. The writings of Ramiz Mehdiyev, the chief of the presidential administration and the architect of the Aliyev regime, make Alexander Dugin, the spiritual mentor of Putin's Russia, look like a libertarian zealot. According to the co-founder of the Aliyev regime, there is no greater threat to world peace than the United States and its European allies. Not to mention that Azerbaijan holds more political prisoners than Russia and Belarus combined. Nearly all of these prisoners are unabashedly pro-Western in their views and activities. Aliyev has shut down every US-funded organization in the country, including even the Peace Corps. All this taking place in a small country almost wholly funded by Western money.

The question should not be whether Washington has leverage over Azerbaijan, but rather why, for so long, has Washington sought to mollify this rabidly anti-Western regime and coddle it as a "strategic partner" as if Azerbaijan was a democratic powerhouse such as UK, France or Japan. Sadly, the answer is once again - the oil money. Lots of it. Since seizing power in 2003 upon brutal crackdown on democratic opposition, Ilham Aliyev has spent millions of dollars in Western capitals buying up influential voices which have consistently peddled a false narrative of "strategic partnership". Among the recipients of this blood-stained money are the influential lobbyist groups such as the Podesta Group, Fabiano & Company and many others who have taken advantage of the lack of awareness in the American public about a small country where human rights are horribly violated, democracy loving individuals' lives destroyed.

Azerbaijan's relative insignificance and the dearth of experts specializing in the region has helped Aliyev to accumulate this atrocious record under radar. Due to widespread ignorance, the lobbyists have been largely successful in misleading uninformed public about the true state of affairs in Azerbaijan. Until recently, one of them, a former SOCAR employee Brenda Schaeffer masqueraded as an independent expert writing op-eds for New York Times, touting Azerbaijan as a secular bulwark against Islamist Iran. Left unsaid was the fact that the Azeris pour into Iran in thousands each week to seek medical care due to the poor treatment options inside their own supposedly progressive country. There is not a single European, American or even a Turkish bank anywhere in Azerbaijan. But right there in downtown Baku is the National Bank of Iran which provides lucrative money-laundering opportunities for generals of the Revolutionary Guard. No American or a European citizen can visit Azerbaijan without having to undergo a cumbersome and expensive visa issuance process. And even if they do succeed in visiting Azerbaijan, it is more than likely that they will be video-recorded in their private moments at the hotel for the purpose of blackmail. Years after Azerbaijan has denied its public airwaves to Western broadcasters such as RFE/RL, VOA and BBC, Azerbaijani officials seek ways to cooperate with Iranian broadcasting institutions. As oppressive as the Khomeinist Iran is, there are very few ordinary Iranians who look up to Aliyev's corrupt and tyrannical Azerbaijan as a model to emulate. In Aliyev's Azerbaijan, they see their past, not future.

While the introduction of the Azerbaijan Democracy Act is a positive first step, it is imperative that US policymakers keep up the pressure on Ilham Aliyev. As the release of Leyla and Arif Yunus and the statement by the Azerbaijani parliament's speaker demonstrates, Aliyev appears willing to release some of the political prisoners. If and when that happens, this act on his part will serve two purposes. One will be to forestall whatever strong action may be contemplated against his regime and gain some reprieve. The second will be to provide ammunition to its paid lobbyists and apologists in Washington to tout Aliyev's humanitarian gesture and praise him for releasing those whom he should not have imprisoned in the first place. A refusal to follow through would be a serious mistake and lead to further unnecessary suffering among Azerbaijan's pro-Western liberals. Washington has more than enough leverage to ensure that no political prisoner would languish in the prison of a tin pot dictator. Now is the time to make it happen. (Azeri Report Editorial)