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# AZERBAIJAN'S ALIYEV DYNASTY

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Azerbaijan has been captured by the Aliyev family, which has turned the nation into its personal fiefdom since consolidating power in 1994. Current president Ilham Aliyev operates virtually unconstrained by any form of opposition: in addition to overseeing his father's cult of personality, he has also pocketed hundreds of millions in state funds and changed the constitution to allow himself to stay on as president for life. How has Azerbaijan, a nation with a proud heritage as the first Muslim democracy, fallen into the grip of such a retrograde regime? This paper argues that the Aliyevs have successfully used a cocktail of oil wealth, nationalism and repression to keep themselves in power. But regime tactics are only part of the story: a key factor in Azerbaijan's failure to democratize has been the astounding lack of external pressure and the international community's problematic willingness to accept Aliyev regime narratives. Until this changes, the Azerbaijani people will likely continue to languish in the shadow of Heydar Aliyev and his enormously corrupt son.

In most cities and towns in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the main streets are named for Heydar Aliyev, former president and father of the current leader.<sup>1</sup> His image is everywhere in this nation of 9.5 million, “[glowering] from posters at traffic intersections” and “[staring] from the wall in every office across the country.”<sup>2,3</sup> The National Academy of Sciences even includes a discipline called “Aliyevshunasliq,” or AlievScience, which is dedicated to studying the deceased president’s life and works.<sup>4</sup> According to the department’s director, Adalet Qasimov, “There is nothing you could criticize him for. During our investigations we came across nothing of the sort.”<sup>5</sup>

Azerbaijan has been captured by the Aliyev family, which has turned the nation into a personal fiefdom since consolidating power in 1994. Current president Ilham Aliyev operates virtually unconstrained by any form of opposition: in addition to overseeing his father’s cult of personality, he has also pocketed hundreds of millions in state funds and changed the constitution to allow himself to stay on as president for life.<sup>6</sup> Yet according to Caucasus expert Thomas de Waal, “this building of an even more authoritarian state in Azerbaijan [has] proceeded with public support or at least acquiescence.”<sup>7</sup> Why do Azerbaijanis tolerate this degree of excess? What are the sources of their remarkable patience with the Aliyev regime?

An analysis of the Aliyevs and their tactics reveal three key answers. First, they have benefitted from Azerbaijan’s enormous oil boom, which began in 1994 and has continued essentially unabated since. Second, they have used Azerbaijani nationalism to unite the population, portraying opposition as unpatriotic and even dangerous. Finally, they have strategically targeted independent media and opposition parties, successfully silencing the small subset of society that remains critical of the regime.

But regime tactics are only part of the story: a key factor in Azerbaijan’s failure to democratize has been the astounding lack of external pressure and the international community’s problematic willingness to accept Aliyev regime narratives. Until this changes, the Azerbaijani people will likely continue to languish in the shadow of Heydar Aliyev and his enormously corrupt son.

### **Brief Biographical Overview**

Born in 1923, Heydar Aliyev grew up in Nakhichevan, an exclave of Soviet Azerbaijan surrounded by Armenia, Turkey and Iran. Though his family was relatively poor, he succeeded at school, and joined the KGB during World War II. He rose rapidly through the ranks, and was named head of the Azerbaijani KGB in 1967. Two years later, he was appointed head of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, and quickly consolidated personal control over the Soviet republic’s affairs, replacing most state officials with personal acquaintances from

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Nakhichevan and the KGB. Known as a staunch supporter of the Brezhnev regime, he was rewarded with a post on the Politburo in 1982, where he served until 1987. After a fall from grace during

Gorbachev-era reforms, he retreated to Nakhichevan, where he bided his time as newly independent Azerbaijan descended into chaos. In 1994, with the nation on the brink of civil war and losing to Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, he returned to Baku, portraying himself as an elder statesman, a scolding father above the fray of the country's squabbling politicians. He was named acting president in August, and in October "won" 99.8% of the vote in a national referendum on his rule.<sup>8</sup>

With Azerbaijan exhausted by war and civil strife, Aliyev had a clear opening to clear aside competitors, and he did so "gradually and ruthlessly" clamping down on the media and opposition.<sup>9</sup> Helped along by oil revenues, he was able to rule-



Ilham Aliyev with his wife Mehriban Aliyeva, who heads a powerful philanthropic organization and is often identified as her husband's likely successor. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

without meaningful opposition for the remainder of his life. With his health failing in 2003, his son Ilham stood for election instead, winning the presidency in a race that was severely marred by intimidation and fraud.<sup>10</sup>

Ilham Aliyev entered office lacking experience and known for his "extravagant lifestyle and apparent lack of ambition."<sup>11</sup> However, he "gradually established himself," cracking down on media and opposition more harshly than his father had; Azerbaijan's Freedom House ranking declined from

"Partly Free" in 2003 to "Not Free" in 2004.<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Aliyev arrested the ministers of health and economic development, and presided over another round of rigged parliamentary elections. Early predictions that he would pursue a reformist path, or that he would prove an easy target for more experienced politicians, proved completely wrong.

By the 2008 elections, which were boycotted by several opposition groups, Aliyev's position had grown significantly stronger.<sup>13</sup> He won with 89% of the vote, and in 2009 he felt secure enough to push through a constitutional amendment eliminating presidential term limits. He was re-elected in 2013, and he continues to rule the country today.

## How the Aliyevs Stay in Power

### *Reason One: Oil Wealth*

Since the 19th century, Azerbaijan's Caspian coast has been one of the world's key oil-producing regions, and according to Svante Cornell, "oil has been the driving force of post-Soviet Azerbaijan's economic development, as well as its foreign policy."<sup>14</sup> This growth has "enabled Azerbaijan to experience what could be the fastest government revenue growth cycle in recent times."<sup>15</sup> From 1996 to 2014, government expenditures rose almost 23-fold, increasing from \$360 million to \$8.18 billion.<sup>16</sup> The state's sovereign wealth fund, established in 1999, now stands at \$34 billion.<sup>17</sup> This context of rapid expansion is a central reason for the Aliyevs' secure hold on power, and their regime cannot be analyzed independently from it.

In 1994, Heydar Aliyev negotiated the "Contract of the Century," a 30-year production agreement with ten of the world's largest energy companies. The deal, which ensured the development of oil reserves discovered in the 1970s and 80s, "greased Azerbaijan's path out of weakness and

fragility.”<sup>18</sup> Rising prosperity has created a high level of popular tolerance for the regime; according to de Waal, it is the primary reason why the Aliyevs have stayed in power. <sup>19</sup>Some have gone so far as to contend that Azerbaijan has become a “rentier state,” in which resource wealth makes the government independent of public pressures. As an ex-

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ample of this independence, Alper Almaz points out that oil revenues are responsible for five times more government income than taxation. Accordingly, the tax system—which is in many countries a vital source of popular leverage—is in Azerbaijan “not of importance to maintenance of current authority and its economy.” <sup>20</sup>Because they are not saddled with a large tax burden, citizens have less motivation to agitate for democracy or accountability.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, those who do seek change have less legitimacy vis-à-vis the system.

In addition to undergirding the Aliyevs’ popular legitimacy, the influx of wealth has helped them cement their elite support. Leila Alieva writes that “multinational oil companies...act the same way in Baku as they do in the capital of a Middle Eastern petrostate: Their investments empower the families of key officials, who in turn vie to see who among them can display the largest portrait of the president in his office.”<sup>22</sup> Scott Radnitz agrees, arguing that since the early years of Heydar’s rule, money from oil rents has allowed “Aliyev loyalists [to obtain] control of privatized assets, ensuring that possession of economic resources would buttress

political domination.”<sup>23</sup> The 1990s were an especially opportune time for this process to begin; because post-Soviet privatization put many industries “up for grabs,” even a modest sum of money often yielded tremendous returns. As a result, Alieva estimates that by 2000, “the Aliyev regime was running virtually the whole economy.”<sup>24</sup>

This combination of economic and political power has had a chilling effect on democracy. Unlike in Ukraine and Georgia, where the business community helped fund popular opposition movements, Azerbaijan’s private sector is not independent enough to launch a challenge to the regime. Though private businesses exist, “the ruling clique keeps them dependent in ways that stop them from backing opposition movements.” <sup>25</sup>For the past decade and a half, firms hoping to make money in Azerbaijan have had to turn to the state, which controls “access to resources” and “functions as a network for the informal distribution of income.”<sup>26</sup> In short, economic realities mean that it is directly contrary to self-interest for either businesses or individuals to oppose the government.

### *Reason Two: Azerbaijani Nationalism*

The Azeris are a Turkic people from the Caucasus region, who speak Turkish but follow Shia Islam, the religion of neighboring Iran. Their national identity developed relatively late; according to Svante Cornell, Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism predominated over local nationalism throughout the 19th century.<sup>27</sup> It was not until 1891 that the concept of a “distinct Azerbaijani identity” was defined, and even then, “intellectuals were...undecided whether to build a separate Azerbaijani nationalism.”<sup>28</sup>

The early Soviet years saw efforts by the Communist Party to undermine the efforts that had been made to define a distinct Azerbaijani identity; according to Cornell, Stalin sought to “sever Azerbaijan...from its own history.”<sup>29</sup> This policy was reversed under Khrushchev, but it was not until the late 1980s that Azerbaijani nationalism began to take meaningful shape. For the first time in history, members of the general public began to conceive of themselves as specifically “Azerbaijani.”



Thirteen years after his death, Heydar Aliyev still looms large over his son's regime. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Cornell argues that this change was “very much...a response to the threat of Armenian expansionism,” which centered on the province of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>30</sup> The majority-Armenian region had been assigned to Azerbaijan under Stalin, but Gorbachev-era glasnost allowed its residents to agitate for reunion with their ethnic compatriots. Azerbaijanis responded to this movement with forceful opposition, forging a “strong sense of national belonging” over the threat to their borders.<sup>31</sup> The nation's new identity combined “anti-Armenian feelings” with “anger toward the Soviet authorities,” linking the independence movement with enmity toward Armenia.<sup>32</sup> From 1990 to 1994, Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a bloody war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which killed approximately 25,000 and created over a million refugees.<sup>33</sup> The

majority of the dead and displaced were Azeri, and Armenia ended the war in control of 14% of Azerbaijan's internationally-recognized territory.<sup>34</sup> This defeat has ensured that national identity in modern Azerbaijan has remained fundamentally defined by opposition to Armenia—a fact that is crucial to understanding the Aliyev phenomenon.<sup>35</sup>

Azerbaijan's national humiliation has proved to be particularly useful for Ilham Aliyev, who, according to *The Economist*, “uses Karabakh to drum up nationalist sentiment and divert attention away from corruption at home.”<sup>36</sup> De Waal agrees: “the Karabakh dispute,” he writes, is a useful political instrument for rallying the population around the flag by mobilizing support against an external enemy.”<sup>37</sup> He notes that in almost every domestic address, Ilham Aliyev has taken to denigrating Armenia, making use of “dubious historical assertions” that challenge Armenia's right to exist.<sup>38</sup> An August 2014 tirade on Twitter exemplified this tactic. His dozens of provocative messages called Armenians “barbarians and vandals,” promising that “the war is not over. Only the first stage of it is. But the second stage may start too.”<sup>39</sup>

Other examples of Aliyev's appeals to nationalism are even more unsettling. In 2012, he oversaw the lionization Ramil Safarov, an Azerbaijani lieutenant who had beheaded an Armenian officer while attending a NATO training program in Hungary. Sentenced to life in prison, Safarov was only transferred back to Azerbaijan on the condition that he remain incarcerated. However, Aliyev defied international expectations by pardoning him at the airport; the convicted killer was also presented with flowers, promoted to the rank of major, and offered an apartment in Baku.<sup>40</sup>

Aliyev's provocative stance clearly strikes a reso-

nant chord in Azerbaijan. Safarov was greeted by cheering crowds upon his return to the country, and the Twitter rant came at a time when many Azerbaijanis were “[calling] for blood.”<sup>41</sup> The Karabakh issue’s intense public significance makes it Aliyev’s “ace in the hole,” a valuable tool to use when faced with other difficulties. Linking opposition activists to Armenia, for example, is a convenient way to undermine their moral standing in the eyes of the public. Regime critic Rauf Mirkadirov was destroyed in this way in 2014, when he was arrested for supposedly passing military information to Armenia.<sup>42</sup>

Writing in 2012, de Waal warned that, if faced with a crisis, Aliyev might “play the ‘Karabakh card’ as a diversionary maneuver to mobilize popular support.”<sup>43</sup> It appears that this is exactly the course he took in April 2016, when the heaviest fighting since 1994 broke out along the “line of contact.” Faced with plummeting oil prices and significant domestic protests in January of the year, Aliyev likely decided that a re-escalation of the Karabakh conflict was in his interests.<sup>44</sup> He seems to have calculated correctly, as reports from Baku indicate that patriotic sentiment is on the rise. According to one Azerbaijani, the country has seen “real solidarity... maybe this kind of solidarity can only be compared with 1990s, when the first Karabakh war started.”<sup>45</sup>

#### *Reason Three: Use of Force and Repression*

Despite their efforts to win support through the use of nationalism and oil wealth, the Aliyevs have still faced instances of popular opposition. However, the regime has fended these challenges off with great effectiveness. For the past 22 years, the state has gradually asphyxiated independent journalism and political activity.

According to Radnitz, Heydar Aliyev learned

how to “selectively but effectively use repression against his opponents” while working for the KGB.<sup>46</sup> During the early years of his regime, he concentrated his efforts on gathering *kompromat*, or compromising material, on other prominent officials. Because he made no secret of his use of this tactic, “the threat of arrest and expropriation was a strong deterrent to disloyalty or insubordination, and helped ensure the compliance of subordinates.”<sup>47</sup> On the occasions when he became aware of a direct challenge, Aliyev made sure to strike first. In 1995, 1996 and 1998, he used a spe-

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cial battalion of troops from Nakhichevan—which Radnitz calls a “form of a praetorian guard”—to crush potential coups.<sup>48</sup>

Before Azerbaijan’s oil revolution came to full fruition, the nation remained weak and reliant on Western aid. This meant that Heydar Aliyev was “forced to abide, at least superficially, by the international norms of democracy that were now hegemonic globally.”<sup>49</sup> Combined with “residual pluralism” from the 1991-1994 period, this international pressure forced Aliyev to allow for some activity by independent media, NGOs, and opposition parties.<sup>50</sup> From 1997-2003, Azerbaijan was ranked as “Partly Free” by Freedom House.

It was during the 2003 handover of power to Ilham Aliyev that Azerbaijan descended into true autocracy. Ilham’s relative lack of popularity and the opposition’s unity made that fall’s election

a challenging one for the regime, which ultimately had to resort to all-out repression to ensure its desired outcome. Though there were instances of police violence against opposition activists before the vote, the key turning point came on the night of the election itself, when the regime took a two-pronged approach to secure victory. First, it engaged in “massive fraud”; the OSCE’s Election Observation Mission reported “significant problems” at 55% of polling stations.<sup>51</sup> Second, the regime diverted attention from these irregularities by provoking post-election violence. The police and army used brutal force to break up opposition rallies, arresting 625 demonstrators, injuring over 300 and killing five. Isa Gambar, the main opposition candidate, was placed under house arrest for 25 days.<sup>52</sup> According to Sabine Frasier, these measures “succeeded in turning international and Azeri attention away from purely election-related developments... to the need for stability.”<sup>53</sup> This meant that the election itself largely escaped scrutiny. This “was a bitter disappoint-

“Democratic opposition was, for all intents and purposes, futile.”

ment to...hopes for democracy in Azerbaijan,” demonstrating the regime’s vast power and the effectiveness with which it could defend itself.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the 2003 disappointment, opposition activists tried again in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2005. However, Aliyev cracked down even more concertedly, harassing and detaining more opposition politicians and journalists than ever before. On March 2, regime critic Elmar Huseynov was murdered in Baku; the assassin was never found or prosecuted. In October, the min-

isters of health and economic development, both of whom had been openly critical of Aliyev, were arrested and jailed for allegedly plotting a coup attempt. The November ballot itself was severely marred by irregularities, prompting enough criticism that Aliyev admitted to some problems and promised to punish the offending parties. He eventually invalidated the results in four constituencies and fired several election officials. As Alieva reports, however, the authorities appeared to be targeting for cancellation the results in districts where opposition candidates had been the actual winners, while punishing only officials who had “messed up” by failing to secure victory for the regime-favored candidate altogether, or else by securing victory but doing so in a manner that attracted unwanted attention to the regime’s chicanery.<sup>55</sup>

Taken in combination with the 2003 election aftermath, 2005 sent a clear message that the regime would not peacefully relinquish control. Democratic opposition was, for all intents and purposes, futile.

Azerbaijan’s next election, the 2008 presidential contest, was boycotted by most major opposition parties, and the 2010 parliamentary elections saw low turnout and further allegations of fraud. By 2013—when Aliyev abolished term limits in order to run for a third time—elections had become so meaningless that the state accidentally released results a day early.<sup>56</sup> Yet the situation has continued to worsen. Since the Arab Spring, and especially since oil prices collapsed in 2014, the regime has significantly increased pressure on independent media and opposition activists. According to a report from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Azerbaijani civil society has been “decimated” over the past two years: “a wave of arrests has targeted opposition bloggers, human rights defenders, and journalists.”<sup>57</sup> The list of those in prison has included Ilgar

Mammedov, leader of the Republican Alternative opposition movement, Anar Mammadli, head of Azerbaijan's foremost election monitoring agency, and Khadija Ismayilova, an internationally recognized journalist. All told, hundreds of individuals have been arrested or jailed during the crackdown,

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for what Freedom House calls “transparently political reasons.”<sup>58</sup> The problem goes beyond mere imprisonment: according to Human Rights Watch, there have been hundreds of allegations of torture—not a single one of which has been prosecuted.<sup>59</sup> Taken together, these factors mean that in 2016 Azerbaijan’s “political rights” ranking reached Freedom House’s worst possible score, a 7. Its overall “freedom” ranking—6.5—was the 13th from the bottom globally.<sup>60</sup>

The story of government repression in Azerbaijan is one of gradual but steady escalation. Though Heydar Aliyev was never a democrat, his son has all but done away with elections and is able to jail opponents with impunity. Twenty-two years into its rule, the ruling party has created a “New Azerbaijan” where political pluralism and freedom of speech do not exist.

For a nation where opposition is crushed and democracy remains a distant dream, Azerbaijan enjoys surprisingly close relationships with Europe and the United States. There are several reasons for this. First, Heydar Aliyev assiduously cultivated partnerships with the West, cooperating on “areas such as security, counterterrorism, and energy.”<sup>61</sup> His willingness to send oil through Turkey and into Europe, as well as to offer Azerbaijan as a staging ground for American operations in the Middle East, helped him craft an image as a pragmatic moderate. As a result, during the 2003 succession process, “Western policymakers felt little desire to see power change hands in Baku”; instead, they praised Ilham Aliyev as “young and well educated” and expressed no more than vague hopes for democracy.<sup>62</sup>

Yet strategic confluence is not the only reason for Western support of the Aliyev regime. As the case of Putin’s Russia demonstrates, merely providing energy is not enough to spare a regime from criticism.<sup>63</sup> Given that Azerbaijan provides Europe with less than one tenth as much energy as Russia, Gerald Knaus argues that additional factors—beyond resource dependence—are aiding Aliyev’s Azerbaijan.

One of these factors is Ilham’s personality; in the words of the New York Times editorial board, “Mr. Aliyev . . . is suave, well dressed and well spoken in English; he is ready to send his country’s ample supplies of oil and gas to Europe and to Israel; his Islam is moderate and modern; and he hosts lavish international events like the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012.”<sup>64</sup> As a result, Knaus observes, while “other dictators have to lie to their people about the respect that they enjoy abroad,” Ilham Aliyev “can tell the truth.”<sup>65</sup>

**The Role of the West**

The key factor underwriting Azerbaijan’s suc-

cess with the West, however, is the phenomenon of “caviar diplomacy”—a type of “wining and dining” of foreign officials that comes perilously close to outright bribery.<sup>66</sup> According to an Azerbaijani source quoted by Knaus,

Similar trends have emerged in Azerbaijan. Many deputies [on the Council of Europe] are regularly invited to Azerbaijan and generously paid. In a normal year, at least 30 to 40 would be invited, some of them repeatedly. People are invited to conferences, events, sometimes for summer vacations. These are real vacations and there are many expensive gifts. Gifts are mostly expensive silk carpets, gold and silver items, drinks, caviar and money.<sup>67</sup>

jan’s dealings with U.S. lawmakers. A 2015 report from the Office of Congressional Ethics found that 10 members of Congress and 32 staff members embarked on an all-expenses-paid trip to Baku in 2013, receiving thousands of dollars worth of scarves, rugs and china.<sup>68</sup> The Azerbaijani government attempted to hide its involvement in the trip by masking itself under a group of NGOs—a trend of secrecy that has become increasingly common in the Aliyev regime’s lobbying activities.<sup>69</sup> However, mandatory filings reveal that in 2014, Azerbaijan spent at least \$4 million promoting its agenda in the United States alone.<sup>70</sup>

These trips, as well as related public-relations efforts, have had a noticeable effect. In the United States, the Aliyev regime is routinely backed by groups of loyal lawmakers. In 2015, for example, Foreign Policy reports that,

“Rep. Gene Green (D-Texas) praised Azerbaijan for its “close and important relationship” with the United States, and described it as a “beacon of democracy”; Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Mont.) said that Azerbaijan and the United States “share the same commitment to freedom and liberty,” Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) lauded Azer-

baijan’s “commitment to the ideals of democracy.”

On the other side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s lobbying efforts won it the chairmanship of the Council of Europe, a human rights organization based in Strasbourg. As Aliyev was beginning his recent crackdown, his nation managed to represent itself internationally as a defender of democracy and human rights.

Western support for the Aliyev regime has had concrete consequences within Azerbaijan. First, in contrast to other Eastern European nations, there has been next to no international support

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for Azerbaijani civil society, leaving pro-democracy NGOs at the mercy of the regime.<sup>72</sup> Second, the government proudly repeats the praise heaped on it by foreign politicians. According to Emin Milli, an opposition activist who spent 17 months in jail, “the effect [of this praise] is devastating, because you have democratically-elected representatives confirming the legitimacy of a mafia. The legitimacy of thugs. The legitimacy of a group of people who kill, torture, and put people in jail just for expressing their opinion.”<sup>73</sup> According to Milli, “If one congressman writes a letter or says something positive about Aliyev or his regime, they show it on TV 20 times a day.”<sup>74</sup> In essence, the Azerbaijani people have been abandoned by their would-be foreign advocates. Beguiled by “caviar diplomacy,” Western leaders have slammed yet another door on



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Azerbaijan's stillborn democracy.

Despite the overwhelming confluence of factors working against freedom in Azerbaijan, there are a few hopeful signs for opponents of the Aliyev regime. First, the precipitous drop in oil prices has thrown the dictatorship off balance, forcing it to burn through billions of dollars in reserves, devalue its currency, and slash spending by 15%. Second, the nation's oil reserves have already begun to run out, and the energy boom will likely have run its course by the late 2020s. Stripped of the lifeblood that has sustained it for 22 years, the Aliyev regime will have to contend with expanding popular pressure and attempt to find new incentives to encourage elite support. Given that repression is already employed with abandon and that nationalism is already kept at a fever pitch, further "tightening of the screws" or "rallying around the flag" is unlikely to prove fruitful. Unless the regime can rewrite its playbook and discover new ways to stay in power, its days may be numbered.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Shahnaz Beylargizi, “Имени Гейдара Алиева,” Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 11 October 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Julie Hill, *The Silk Road Revisited: Markets, Merchants and Minarets* (Bloomington Indiana: Author-House, 2006), 220.

<sup>3</sup>Lutz Kleverman, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia* 1st ed, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>4</sup>Shahla Sultanova and Charles Recknagel, “Inside the Department of AlievScience,” Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 24 February 2013.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) the Aliyevs have “systematically [grabbed]...secret ownership stakes in the country’s largest businesses, including banks, construction companies, gold mines and phone companies.” In 2012, the OCCRP, which specializes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, selected Aliyev as “Corruption’s Person of the Year,” beating out competitors like Vladimir Putin and Islam Karimov. Though the Azerbaijani regime has attempted to keep its excesses secret, some revealing anecdotes have come to light. In 2010, for example, reporters discovered that Ilham’s 11-year old son had been listed as the owner of nine luxury mansions in Dubai, worth a total of \$44 million. In 2015, Transparency International listed Azerbaijan 119th out of 168 countries on its annual “corruption perceptions index”—a figure that was actually an improvement on 2012, when it ranked 139th.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. 10th-year Anniversary Ed., (New York ; London: New York University Press, 2013), 291

<sup>8</sup>According to de Waal, “the price to be paid” for Aliyev’s ascendancy was the Nagorno-Karabakh war effort, which the acting leader “ignored in favor of the domestic political fight.” During the four-month period before his official election, Aliyev disbanded 33 “Popular Front” battalions, which were critical to the war but posed a threat to his continued rule. Largely as a result, Azerbaijan lost five entire regions from June to October, and over 350,000 people were displaced. These losses added to the sense of chaos, strengthening Aliyev’s case as a political savior. Following his official election, Aliyev did attempt to reverse these defeats, but a spring 1994 offensive led to the deaths of thousands of Azerbaijani soldiers without managing to recapture any territory. He negotiated a ceasefire in May, leaving the Armenians in control of vast swaths of captured land. (See *Black Garden*, p. 176)

<sup>9</sup>De Waal, “Heidar Aliev: A Political Colossus.”

<sup>10</sup>De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 291.

<sup>11</sup>“Freedom in the World 2004: Azerbaijan,” and “Freedom in the World 2005: Azerbaijan,” Freedom House

<sup>12</sup>De Waal, p. 291

<sup>13</sup>Svante E Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 199

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>The World Bank, “Azerbaijan general government final consumption expenditure.”

<sup>16</sup>Alexander Winning, “Azerbaijan’s anti-crisis defenses larger than dwindling reserves imply,” <sup>17</sup>Reuters, January 26 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Scott Radnitz, “Oil in the family: managing presidential succession in Azerbaijan,” *Democratization* 19, no. 1 (2012): 64.

<sup>19</sup>De Waal, p.291.

<sup>20</sup>Alper Almaz, “Testing the Rentier State Theory: The Case of Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Global Analysis* 5, no. 1-2 (2015): 65

<sup>21</sup>Official tax rates are low, and they are poorly enforced and often dodged (see Almaz, p. 65). But taxation is not the only way the regime remains independent of popular pressures. According to Radnitz, “the oil sector [has] provided the putative middle class and ambitious young people with lucrative employment opportunities and a stake in preserving the system,” which “[reduces] the incentive to engage in pro-democracy activism.”

<sup>22</sup>Leila Alieva. ‘Azerbaijan’s Frustrating Elections’. *Journal of Democracy* 17 (2006)

<sup>23</sup>Radnitz, p. 64

<sup>24</sup>Alieva, p, 148

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 144

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Svante E Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence*, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 13

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 16

<sup>29</sup>Cornell, 39.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 46

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 50

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. 10th-year Anniversary Ed., (New York ; London: New York University Press, 2013), 326-27

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 4

<sup>35</sup>Joshua Kucera, “Travels in the Former Soviet Union,” *Slate*, May 20, 2008

<sup>36</sup>“Aliyev’s party,” *The Economist*, May 2, 2015.

<sup>37</sup>De Waal, p. 313

It is worth noting that de Waal—arguably the most impartial journalist working in the region—feels compelled to mention that “Azerbaijan’s leadership maintains an unhealthy obsession with Armenia and brands their country as an anti-Armenia.”

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>See @presidentaz on Twitter.com

<sup>40</sup>De Waal, p. 304

<sup>41</sup>“Aliyev’s party”

<sup>42</sup>“Azerbaijan accuses journalist of spying for Armenia,” Eurasianet, April 21, 2014.

<sup>43</sup>De Waal, p. 304

<sup>44</sup>“Scores detained in Azerbaijan amid countrywide protests,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 14, 2016.

<sup>45</sup>Durna Safarova, “Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict: patriotism prevails on both sides,” The Guardian, April 7, 2016.

<sup>46</sup>Radnitz, p. 63

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Sabine Frasier, “Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan,” Open Democracy, December 5 2003. According to Radnitz, “a coalition of local NGOs conducted a parallel vote count with a limited budget, but it was sufficient to cover 60% of precincts. Its tabulations contradicted the official announcement, coming out instead in favor of opposition candidate Isa Gambar” (66-67).

<sup>52</sup>Ibid

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Leila Alieva. ‘Azerbaijan’s Frustrating Elections’. Journal of Democracy 17 (2006)

<sup>56</sup>Max Fisher, “Oops: Azerbaijan released election results before voting had even started,” The Washington Post, October 9, 2013.

<sup>57</sup>Charles Recknagel, “Never Been Worse: Opposition, Election Monitors Boycott Azerbaijan Election,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 31, 2015.

<sup>58</sup>Azerbaijan: Release of Political Prisoners Should Lead to More Releases,” Freedom House, March 17, 2016

The regime does not limit itself to imprisoning only those with official sentences. Instead, it often uses pretrial detention to harass potential opponents, often holding individuals for months without trial. See “Third party intervention by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights,” Council of Europe, February 19, 2015.

<sup>59</sup>“Azerbaijan: UN Criticizes Torture Record,” Human Rights Watch, December 11, 2015

<sup>60</sup>“2016 Freedom in the world rankings,” Freedom House.

<sup>61</sup>Alieva, p. 152

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Gerald Knaus points out that “in 2012, Europe imported 31 percent of its natural gas from or through Russia; this did not stop the EU from criticizing and even imposing sanctions on Russia in 2014.” See Gerald Knaus, “Europe and Azerbaijan: The End of Shame,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 7

<sup>64</sup>“The two faces of Azerbaijan’s Mr. Aliyev,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2015.

<sup>65</sup>Knaus, p. 7

<sup>66</sup>This term is used even by Azerbaijan’s own officials.

<sup>67</sup>Knaus, p. 11

<sup>68</sup>Scott Higham, Stevn Rich and Alice Crites, “10 members of Congress took trip secretly funded by foreign government,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2015.

<sup>69</sup>This trend of concealed state sponsorship emerges again and again in Azerbaijan’s lobbying activities. One of the more recent occasions is highlighted in *Foreign Policy* magazine. See Bethanie Allen-Ebrahimian, “How I accidentally became a lobbyist for Azerbaijan,” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2016.

<sup>70</sup>Ilya Lozovsky, “How Azerbaijan and its lobbyists spin Congress,” *Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2015.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.* These are just three of the 60 legislators in House Azerbaijan Caucus, and Lozovsky reports that their off-the-record meetings include even more sycophantic praise for the Aliyev regime.

<sup>72</sup>See Alieva, “Azerbaijan’s Disappointing Elections.”

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*