INTERVIEWS 09.02.2024

‘Azerbaijan is following an increasingly dark path’

President Aliyev has been re-elected. Bahruz Samadov from Baku on the repression of the opposition and the country’s turn away from the West

On 7 February, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev won the snap presidential elections he had called exactly two months earlier. What motivated the current president to take this hasty step?

It’s difficult to say what actually motivated Aliyev. For me, it is noteworthy that the president called snap elections immediately after the visit to Baku of US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O’Brien. The meeting took place against the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction in the West towards Azerbaijan in connection with the latest operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Criticism is growing and economic sanctions are possible — Aliyev weighed the risks and decided not to wait until the end of the year but to hold elections as soon as possible, while his legitimacy and popularity were at their best.

Aliyev has been in power for 20 years. How has the country changed during his rule?

Economically, Azerbaijan is developing, mainly thanks to oil and gas. When petrodollars began to flow into the country in large quantities, the appearance of Azerbaijan changed. Baku came to resemble, as many say, cheap Dubai, and consumerism began to prevail in society. There was a turn towards depoliticisation, together with an upsurge in banal nationalism. There are more opportunities, goods and imports, though I cannot say that people have started to live better.

As for democracy and human rights, over the past 20 years, everything has become much worse in Azerbaijan, and today, the situation is catastrophic. Under Aliyev, arrests have become the norm in the country’s political life; the number of political prisoners has remained constantly above a hundred. Opposition parties have been totally

demotivated and crushed, and many journalists and activists have left the country, especially after the collapse of civil society in 2013-2014, when its leading representatives, including activists from youth organisations, were arrested. In this regard, things got very bad.

How would you characterise this election campaign?

There was nothing that could be called an election campaign. I am now in Baku and have not noticed any campaign at all. There were separate meetings with candidates, but we saw how people were forced to attend without even knowing whom the meeting was with. For example, at a meeting with one of the candidates, Razi Nurullayev, journalists asked people why they came to the meeting. They could not answer. This is theatricality. Everyone understands that the opponents do not lay claim to power, they do not raise issues that could undermine Aliyev's legitimacy and do not criticise him personally. The debates shown on television are shamefully ridiculous.

What moods prevail in society?

People recognise this rule as something that cannot be changed, and the opposition has neither the resources nor the possibility to provide any alternative. It simply boycotts the elections, refusing to participate in any kind of competition. I think this is a wrong approach, but Aliyev's competitors understand the level of his popularity. One senses the passive acceptance of his rule; it is taken for granted.

What can you say about the voting itself and its results?

For the most part, people were apathetic towards the elections, but it cannot be said that the turnout was low — above 60 per cent. A lot of violations were recorded: 'carousels' where the same people vote at different polling stations, as well as aggression towards independent observers. No one doubted that Aliyev would win even without such fraud, but it was necessary to show a record turnout. According to preliminary data from the Central Election Commission, the current president received over 92 per cent of the votes.

Recently, pressure on opposition politicians and journalists has increased. How do you explain this?

Indeed, a lot of journalists and politicians are now under arrest. I think this reflects the growing tension in relations with the West. People collaborating with Western 'donors', who could really create obstacles for the authorities, have been arrested. And when there is a risk of economic sanctions, the authorities remove all obstacles.

The West needs democracy in Azerbaijan, but it seems Aliyev has other plans. How will relations with Europe and the US develop?

I think that Aliyev will increasingly move away from the West. After criticism from PACE, and facing the risk of expulsion, Azerbaijan left this body. In the future, Azerbaijan may withdraw from the Council of Europe, repeating the fate of Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. Most likely, Baku will freeze the era of a 'balanced foreign policy'. There are, first of all, Turkey, Israel and Great Britain as allies, and there will be closer cooperation with Putin's Russia. Aliyev's recent statement about 'new directions of national ideology' should be viewed in this context. This is leading Azerbaijan down an increasingly dark path.

Are there prospects for signing a peace treaty with Armenia? Or will there be a further offensive?

A peace treaty can be signed only if Armenia agrees to all of Azerbaijan's conditions. It's hard for me to say anything definite about the risk of war now. In the Azerbaijani media, the discourse is that France, by arming Armenia, is preparing certain provocations. This discourse is quite aggressive, it worries people, but there are no threats that we will launch an offensive today or tomorrow. I think that Azerbaijan wants to keep Yerevan under pressure so that Armenia, for example, makes changes to the constitution in the direction of not declaring territorial claims. And the issue of the Zangezur corridor remains relevant, of course.

In November, Azerbaijan will host the next UN climate summit. How are the preparations going?

The climate situation in Azerbaijan has never been good; the country's economy is completely dependent on oil and gas. Now, some steps are being taken to extract clean energy, but this looks more like a PR activity ahead of the conference. As for organisational issues, I know that there has been criticism in the Western media about the gender imbalance in the composition of the organising committee.

This interview was conducted by Olga Vasyltsova



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