

**In the Shadow of Revolution:
A Decade of Authoritarian Hardening in Azerbaijan***

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Over the last ten years, Azerbaijan's ranking on the "democracy index" of the U.S.-based nongovernmental organization Freedom House has reflected the country's slide from a "semi-consolidated" authoritarian regime to a "consolidated" authoritarian one.¹ This change in regime type has not come suddenly. It has been the result of a gradual hardening of authoritarian governance since 2003, the year Ilham Aliyev became president.

It might be difficult at first to grasp the significance of this shift in classification. Azerbaijan was hardly democratic under President Aliyev's father, Heydar Aliyev, from 1993 to 2003. During the senior Aliyev's rule, however, the regime allowed at least some freedom to civil society and media. Since then, the regime has become increasingly authoritarian across all indicators, but the collapse of space for nongovernmental forces to engage freely in the public sphere has been especially pronounced.

Azerbaijan's slide into consolidated authoritarianism has coincided with a decade of regime change from below in Azerbaijan's two neighborhoods of post-Soviet Eurasia and the Middle East. From the color revolutions of 2003-2005 to the Arab Spring of 2010-2011 and Ukraine's EuroMaidan of 2013-2014, the Azerbaijani government repeatedly has witnessed the fall of less consolidated authoritarian governments all around it.

While it is difficult to determine precisely how much the power of these examples has contributed to Azerbaijan's authoritarian hardening, a few connections are clear. First, they have exerted at least an indirect diffusion effect. The Azerbaijani government has contended with an

¹ Freedom House scores post-Communist states on an index of "democratic progress" that ranges between 1 (most democratic) and 7 (least democratic). States that receive a "Democracy Score" between 5 and 6 are considered "semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes," while states that score between 6 and 7 are considered "consolidated authoritarian regimes." Azerbaijan's Democracy Score has gone from a 5.46 in 2003 to a 6.68 in 2014. Annual scores reflect the state of affairs at the start of the year (Freedom House 2014).

opposition that has consciously sought to emulate cases of regime change elsewhere in post-Soviet Eurasia and the Arab world. Opponents to the Azerbaijani regime have devised new strategies and tested the boundaries of state consent in ways they might not have in their absence. The government has consistently introduced countermeasures against such new bouts of protest.

Second, authoritarian hardening has developed in cycles that do not neatly line up with the two main waves of regime change. The reality, in fact, has been on the contrary. After the color revolutions, the government deployed a mix of semi-democratic and repressive elements to undermine attempts at a similar uprising in Azerbaijan. After the Arab Spring, it combined straightforward repression with at least some semblance of addressing protestors' demands. The most intensive bursts of authoritarian hardening have come a few years after each major wave of regime change elsewhere – in 2008-2010 and 2013-2014. These are periods when, if anything, the regime should have been more secure, occurring as they did mostly after presidential elections.

Finally, the Azerbaijani government has perceived, or at least depicted, the two waves of regime change in post-Soviet Eurasia and the Middle East as related episodes of a unified phenomenon of *organized* revolution, by which activists (and external supporters) seek to whip up and exploit social discontent, rather than as spontaneous outbreaks of mass mobilization that give rise to new political leadership. Over the last decade, the government has sought to limit linkages between such activists and the mass public by targeting for arrest and/or discreditation anyone seeking to broadly disseminate an alternative antigovernment narrative. Their efforts have focused on the mainstream political opposition but also the media, NGOs, youth movements, and, increasingly, social media activists. Over the last decade, strategies of

repression have been focused on keeping such “agents of change” isolated from mainstream Azerbaijani society and politics.

This chapter examines the strategies of authoritarian hardening that the Azerbaijani regime has employed since 2003. It first discusses Azerbaijan’s authoritarian context prior to the onset of the “color revolutions,” including the orchestrated rise of Ilham Aliyev to the presidency in 2003. It then examines how authoritarian strategies have evolved or changed during three distinct periods: the “post-color revolutionary” period of 2005-2008, a “consolidated authoritarian” period of 2008-2010, and the “post-Arab Spring” period of 2011-2014. It argues that Azerbaijan’s political trajectory has been one of steadily hardening authoritarianism, punctuated by more nuanced sets of state strategies in the immediate aftermath of the color revolutions and the Arab Spring.

Azerbaijan’s Authoritarian Baseline: From Heydar to Ilham Aliyev

Given Azerbaijan’s legacy of authoritarian rule, political economy, and neighborhood, its authoritarian nature is not surprising. Its previous leader, Heydar Aliyev, served as president from 1993 until a few months before his death in 2003. Aliyev was a career Soviet KGB officer before becoming first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party for thirteen years and a member of the Soviet Politburo for another five. Following his forced retirement in the late Soviet period, Aliyev returned to power in 1993 as chairman of parliament after the collapse of Azerbaijan’s first postcommunist government, led by President Abulfaz Elchibey of the Azerbaijani Popular Front. He ran for president practically uncontested, officially winning with 99 percent of the vote.² In 1998, he won reelection with a more modest 78 percent.³

² Goltz (1998, 366–421) provides a rich account of Aliyev’s 1993 return to power.

³ His leading competitor, Etibar Mammedov of the Azerbaijan National Independence Party, got 12 percent.

Parliamentary elections consistently returned legislatures that were wholly subservient to the executive. In 1995 and 2000, antigovernment parties won no more than 10 of 125 seats, as parliament was dominated by the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), independent but largely progovernment deputies, and members of the “loyal opposition” (i.e., pro-government parties). In the last years of his life, Aliyev groomed his son Ilham to succeed him (Cornell 2001; Valiyev 2006).

Azerbaijan’s oil and gas economy has also contributed to Azerbaijan’s authoritarian rule. From 2000 to 2009, oil and gas exports led to ten straight years of over 9 percent annual growth, including three jaw-dropping years of over 25 percent growth from 2007-2009. The country’s growth has been considerably more modest since 2010 but has provided Azerbaijani elites with rents to exploit throughout. In 2013, revenues from the oil sector contributed 72 percent of the Azerbaijani state budget and 44 percent of its GDP (CESD 2014, 1). Energy rents have given the political elite a considerable material interest in staying in power; the resources to do so; and, due to years of corruption and repression, a reasonable fear of retribution if they were to step down.⁴

Finally, Azerbaijani authorities have a ready justification for prioritizing authoritarian “stability” over democracy.⁵ Azerbaijan has suffered from the occupation and ethnic cleansing of nearly 15 percent of its territory by neighboring Armenia, with whom it has been locked in a cold war for twenty years (de Waal 2004, 286). The Azerbaijani government also fears encroachment from two other neighbors, Iran to the south and Russia to the north, as well as the influence of

⁴ For analyses of the relationship between energy wealth and authoritarian durability in Azerbaijan, see Kendall-Taylor (2012), Radnitz (2012), and Guliyev (2013).

⁵ See Cornell (2001, 120-121) and Bedford (2014, 6–8) for discussion of the perceived tension between stability and democracy in Azerbaijan.

radical Islam from both directions, Shiite fundamentalism from Iran and Salafism from Russia's North Caucasus.

Still, while Azerbaijan's decade of authoritarian hardening has not been much of a surprise, it also was not inevitable. The country has a modest history of popular mobilization and electoral politics dating from 1988-1992 (Altstadt 1992, 200–226; Goltz 1998). The regime might have been expected to use its ample resources to maintain political dominance, even while tolerating a basic level of electoral competition, protest, and dissent. In such a manner, Azerbaijan, like other mid-range energy producers in difficult neighborhoods, could have indefinitely remained a "semi-consolidated" authoritarian state or, in Guliyev's formulation (2005), a "sultanistic semiauthoritarian" state.⁶

Coincidentally enough, the first major step toward a harder form of authoritarianism in Azerbaijan occurred immediately prior to the onset of "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space (Radnitz 2012, 60, 68). A month before Georgia's Rose Revolution, Azerbaijan's October 2003 presidential election transferred power from Heydar Aliyev, who was on his deathbed in a hospital in Chicago, to his son Ilham Aliyev, former head of the state oil company SOCAR, who had hastily been promoted to prime minister two months before the election.⁷ In the election, Ilham Aliyev faced only one serious contender, former parliamentary speaker and (briefly) acting president Isa Gambar, leader of the Musavat Party that was part of the post-independence Popular Front government. Officially, Aliyev won in a landslide: 77 to 14 percent.

In advance of the elections, the Azerbaijan government employed a variety of tools to control the outcome. Rules of composition for the Central Election Committee guaranteed a two-thirds government majority on the committee. The CEC arbitrarily rejected the candidacies of

⁶ Radnitz (2012, 63) makes a similar argument.

⁷ Conveying some confusion as to the fate of the senior Aliyev, both father and son remained on the ballot until less than two weeks before the election, when President Aliyev finally withdrew in favor of his son (EurasiaNet 2003).

several potential contenders; failed to reform voter lists; and imposed restrictions on foreign-funded election monitors. Local administrations frequently refused to allow Gambar supporters to hold demonstrations or offered insufficient facilities; in Baku, rules mandating demonstrations be held further than 300 meters from all government buildings meant a ban in practice against demonstrations in “most of downtown Baku.” During the campaign, the OSCE reported what they called “pattern[s] of low-level violence...and grave intimidation” (OSCE 2003, 5, 10, 11). Participants in opposition meetings were beaten and/or detained; journalists were harassed and intimidated; and state employees and teachers reported threats of dismissal against themselves or their family members if they voted for the opposition (Human Rights Watch 2003).

Strategies of authoritarian control extended to election day. The OSCE observer mission reported “serious irregularities and efforts to cheat through ballot-box stuffing, pre-marked ballots, ballots without serial numbers, ballot issuance to voters not on the lists and multiple voting” (OSCE 2003, 17–18). They also cited the presence of unauthorized officials; intimidation of candidate representatives; and artificially inflated voter rolls. Observers recorded “many” or “a few” significant problems in 55 percent of precinct vote counts and 51 percent of vote tabulations in “constituency” (i.e., district) election commissions, including the eviction of opposition observers and commission members. In over a third of the observed vote counts, not all precinct commission members signed the protocols, and two-thirds of the precincts observed did not immediately display the results as required. A large number of protocols were dispatched from the precinct commissions incomplete or even blank (OSCE 2003, 19, 22–23).

After elections, the government continued to use a variety of instruments to suppress and preempt popular protest. Police and other security forces used force, first on election night against a peaceful demonstration of several hundred Gambar supporters and then again brutally

the next day against a demonstration of thousands that had itself begun to turn violent (thanks, the opposition said, to provocateurs). A number of bystanders and journalists got caught up in the violence. In addition to detaining several hundred protestors, authorities rounded up opposition activists and supporters nationwide, accusing them of instigating violence. Many of the detained reported beatings, threats of rape, and other tortures (Human Rights Watch 2004a).

Such repression served not only to punish the opposition but to help deter broader public mobilization. Detainees reported demands to publicly recant violence and denounce the opposition. Dozens of election officials were detained until they agreed to certify the election results. Opposition supporters and relatives lost their jobs. Over a hundred opposition members were convicted; of these, over 30, including seven opposition leaders, received prison sentences of between two and six years (Human Rights Watch 2004a, 2004b).

In addition to delegitimizing the opposition, the government sought to legitimize elections by superficially feigning an interest in electoral integrity. Five days after the election, the CEC announced that it had uncovered serious discrepancies in the protocols of nearly 700 precincts, over 13 percent of the total (OSCE 2003, 25). Without explaining what these flaws were or how they were identified, the CEC did not bother to redress them but just threw out the results, amounting to over 20 percent of votes cast. As a result, Aliyev's margin of victory was reduced by some 5 percent. More cynically, the move might have been a crude way to dismiss a larger number of votes cast for Gambar.

Authoritarianism in the Wake of Color Revolutions, 2004-2008

Azerbaijan faced a new election cycle after the color revolutions in Georgia (November 2003), Ukraine (December 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (March 2005). In the run-up to the November

2005 parliamentary elections, opposition supporters, especially youth activists, consciously sought to emulate the successful bouts of popular mobilization of the previous two years.⁸ Despite greater opposition organization and a degree of popular mobilization, however, the ruling party and its proxies were as successful as before. While the ruling party won just 49 percent of seats (61 of 125) in the majoritarian-based assembly (less than they had in 2000), pro-government independents won another 34 percent (43 seats), making their combined total roughly the same as it was in 2000. Eight small political parties that were either openly pro-government or at least “loyal” opposition won another 11 seats (9 percent). Azadliq, the main opposition alliance of Musavat, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (APFP), and the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, won just 6 seats (5 percent). Two other large opposition movements, the Yeni Sisayet (YeS, or New Politics) bloc and the Liberal Party, and one minor opposition party received another 4 seats (3 percent) (OSCE 2006a, 30; OSCE 2006b, 12). The opposition had once again been trounced.

During this time, the main indications that the government shifted its strategies of authoritarian repression in the wake of color revolutions were some cosmetic changes in electoral practice and, more significantly, a widening net of repression beyond the customary political opposition. Seeking to stave off a color revolution in Azerbaijan, the government made some minor efforts to cosmetically liberalize the political environment while retaining authoritarian control over the outcome. It also cast a net of repression against not only political opposition but actors that had played a role in “fomenting” color revolutions elsewhere, including youth organizations, media, and government elites.

⁸ For detailed analyses of the 2005 parliamentary elections, see Valiyev (2006), Alieva (2006), and Bunce and Wolchik (2013). On the role of youth movements in particular, see Bunce and Wolchik (2011, 246–50) and Diuk (2012, 84–87).

Creatively Engineering Elections

The 2005 parliamentary elections were plagued by many of the same authoritarian tendencies as before. The composition of the CEC continued to provide for a pro-government majority. Broadcast media continued to be heavily biased toward the government. While local authorities allowed opposition parties to hold a number of sanctioned rallies, they continued to ban them from holding rallies in downtown Baku and other city and town centers and created difficult conditions even for many sanctioned demonstrations. In particular, police violently suppressed participants seeking to participate in five unsanctioned opposition protests in May, September, and October. On election day, OSCE observers deemed the vote count and tabulation to be “bad” or “very bad” in 41 percent of precincts and 34 percent of districts, while 55 percent of precincts observed did not immediately display election results (OSCE 2006a, 13, 22, 23). One opposition protest held nearly three weeks after the election was forcibly dispersed without warning upon expiration of the two-hour window it had been granted; over 400 were reported injured and at least 30 detained (OSCE Office in Baku 2005).

At the same time, the government introduced several innovations that were intended to give elections a democratic veneer. One striking step was the president’s formal endorsement of a relative liberalization in the election environment. In March 2005, Aliyev issued a decree pardoning 114 prisoners, including the party leaders (and others) that had been sentenced for their alleged role in the 2003 protests just five months before (Human Rights House Azerbaijan 2005). In May, President Aliyev issued an executive order to support the holding of democratic elections, calling for, among other things, enforcement of the law against officials who “illegally interfere in the election process” or pursue postelection political retribution; assurance of equal

media coverage for candidates; exit polls and parallel vote tabulations; and freedom of assembly (President of Azerbaijan 2005a). In October, twelve days before the election, the president issued a second order that lauded improvements in candidate registration and media coverage but acknowledged ongoing concerns. The order specifically proposed (albeit late in the day) to remove the existing ban against foreign-funded election observers; implement an ink-marking system for voters; punish pre-election violations; uphold legal rights of freedom of assembly of campaign demonstrations; and investigate election day complaints and punish violations (President of Azerbaijan 2005b).

In the end, the campaign environment was relatively more open and competitive than before. In the 2000 elections, exactly half the candidates in majoritarian races (408 out of 817) were denied registration (OSCE 2001, 7). Eight of 13 parties/blocs were also initially denied registration (for what was then still a proportional slate) and reinstated only upon presidential “request” one month before the election. In 2005, by contrast, virtually all candidates were registered. Three opposition blocs or parties – Azadliq, YeS, and the Liberal Party – managed to field candidates in 60 or more of the 125 constituencies (OSCE 2006a, 9). This number was significant, as it was the minimum number required for free media coverage, which the OSCE observers acknowledged had been provided. While most of the political prisoners amnestied in March remained ineligible by law to register as candidates due to their criminal record, the top seven leaders had their records expunged, allowing them to participate (Human Rights Watch 2005, 7).

The government also sought to bolster the democratic credentials of the voting process. The government allowed the United States Agency for International Development to fund an exit poll managed by a U.S.-based nonprofit, PA Consulting, while also stealthily commissioning two

polls of its own. The USAID-funded exit poll supported official results in 83 percent of the 65 districts (out of 125) that it surveyed, including six victories for the opposition.⁹ And while the OSCE assessments of the vote count and tabulation were still very negative, they were nonetheless not as bad as they had been in 2003.

The government also took a more refined approach to dealing with alleged election violations. As in 2003, they annulled the results of a substantial number of precincts (625, or 12 percent of the total) across 88 districts (OSCE 2006a, 23–24). Instead of simply throwing the votes out, however, the government followed a practice it had established in the 2000 parliamentary elections – mandating a revote for districts where violations were deemed especially widespread. In this way, the government annulled the results of ten districts and scheduled revotes. More innovatively, the government identified election officials it claimed were guilty of violations; two district election committee chairs and three local officials were arrested, while six district election commissions and 108 precinct commissions were dismissed (OSCE 2006a, 24).

These moves, however, were more democratic “decorations,” to borrow from Koesel and Bunce (2013, 761), than they were substantive reforms. With 2063 candidates, each race had an average of 16-17 candidates, including several pro-government candidates in each. This suggested an interest more in making the elections appear democratic – or simply to confuse voters – than in offering the latter a clear choice between the government and the opposition (Alieva 2006, 151).

Second, while the exit polls reinforced the government’s victory, they also suggested a considerably higher vote for the opposition than official results had revealed. The USAID-funded poll suggested that opposition members won at least another 9 seats – fully 75 percent

⁹ Authors’ calculations, based on data provided by PA Consulting in December 2005 and Azer-Press 2005b.

more than their official performance (authors' calculations). That was before considering districts that the exit poll did not cover.

Finally, the steps the government took to invalidate election victories and punish electoral officials were only partially a response to fraud. Four districts not covered by the exit poll had their results in favor of ruling party candidates annulled and their election commissions sacked. Six subsequent annulments, however, appeared driven more by a desire to demonstrate evenhandedness in treatment than to address fraud. Annulments in two districts went against pro-government candidates (including one whose victory the exit poll had cast under doubt). Another two were against pro-government or loyal opposition parties. Two, however, were in districts that opposition members had officially won and who now saw their victories overturned (Ismayilov 2005c). In general, as Alieva (2006, 156) argues, "the authorities appeared to [target] 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."

While opposition members could compete for seats in repeat elections in these ten districts, the government diminished the prospects that these would be competitive by rescheduling them six months later, once domestic and international attention had dissipated. Ultimately, the opposition split on the issue of whether to run in the repeat elections. While Musavat was one of the parties that ended up contesting the vote, it failed to win a single seat; five seats went to the ruling party, three to independent candidates, and two seats to moderate opposition parties.

Three years later, the October 2008 presidential election was a nonevent. Azerbaijan was enjoying sky-high economic growth, and all mainstream opposition parties chose to boycott the race. Between these two factors, there was little need for the government to deflect an attempt at popular mobilization against the election results. President Aliyev handily won re-election with 87 percent of the vote.

Preempting Color Revolutionaries

Youth

Several youth organizations sprouted in 2004-2005 to promote democratic elections, combat fraud, and protest corruption (Ismayilova and Abbasov 2005). The founder of one organization, Yokh (No), that modeled itself after youth movements in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, was detained for five days in advance of an unsanctioned opposition rally in May 2005; activists reported being interrogated and beaten for handing out recruitment flyers the week after the demonstration (Agence France Presse 2005a, 2005b). Activists of another organization, Magam (the linguistic equivalent of Georgia's Kmara and Ukraine's Pora, "It's Time"), reported having their documents checked and being shadowed by plainclothes officials before the rally, while its head was threatened with detention by plainclothes officers a few days after (Turan Information Agency 2005c, 2005d). Activists from a third organization Dalga (Wave) also reported being detained (Turan Information Agency 2005d).

The government singled out for greatest punishment a fourth organization, Yeni Fikir (New Thought), which was said to be closely associated with the opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan party (APFP). Yeni Fikir had drawn the attention of authorities in March, when activists shouted pro-democracy slogans at gatherings commemorating the unsolved shooting

death that month of independent investigative journalist Elmar Huseynov; Yeni Fikir's leader, Ruslan Bashirli, was called in to the local police station for questioning (Turan Information Agency 2005a). At a rally for Huseynov the next month, Bashirli and several activists were detained and reportedly beaten for distributing leaflets that said "Georgia, Ukraine...now Azerbaijan's turn. Its better one day [to] live free, than forty years in slavery;" Bashirli was detained again on the eve of the May rally (Turan Information Agency 2005b). During a sanctioned rally in June, Yeni Fikir activists were noteworthy in their orange shirts and headbands, emulating the bright-colored imagery of Ukraine's Orange Revolution (Agence France Presse 2005c). By August, the use of colored garments in protest got the authorities' attention; Azerbaijani news agency Turan reported that unknown individuals confiscated and destroyed all orange-colored clothing and fabric from Baku's main indoor markets (Turan Information Agency 2005e).

Yeni Fikir's end came quickly. At the start of August, the twenty-something Bashirli was arrested on charges of conspiring to violently overthrow the government after he was secretly filmed in a night of heavy drinking with Georgian and Armenian youths at a private residence in Tbilisi, where he was attending a conference. The video allegedly showed the young men discussing the organization of mass protests and the provision of \$2,000 in support of Yeni Fikir, with a promise of \$20,000 more; authorities alleged that at least one of the men was working for Armenian intelligence. Two other leaders of the organization were arrested the next month on similar charges, and the government tried to implicate both the Embassy of Norway and the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) in the case (Rahder 2006). All three were found guilty in July 2006. Bashirli was sentenced to seven years in prison and an associate, Ramin Tagiyev, to three (a third received a suspended 5-year sentence due to health reasons). Tagiyev was released

in March 2008, eighteen months after his arrest, while Bashirli stayed in prison for over six-and-a-half years, released only in a March 2012 amnesty.

Media

The color revolutions also appeared to have an impact on state policy toward independent media. Journalists writing for the nonstate media had regularly been a target of harassment, violent attacks, libel suits, and criminal conviction prior to the color revolutions, and this pattern continued afterwards (although in the lead-up to the 2005 elections the OSCE reported that “physical attacks on journalists were fewer than during previous elections”) (OSCE 2006a, 16). Huseynov’s slaying, widely presumed to be linked to his stories on corruption in the security structures, was a rare incident of lethal reprisal.¹⁰

At the same time, the post-color revolution period did see a rise in the imprisonment of opposition journalists. After recording no imprisonment of journalists from 2000 to 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists cited a total of 12 imprisoned editors and journalists between 2003 and 2008.¹¹ In the immediate pre-color revolutionary period, just one journalist was imprisoned during postelection protests in October 2003 and convicted the following year – Rauf Arifoglu, who was also a leader of the opposition Musavat Party (he was released before the 2005 elections). No journalists were convicted in the election year of 2005, but afterwards the numbers rose to new heights: three convictions in 2006 and seven in 2007. Most of these appeared to serve as much a deterrent function as a punitive one; six of the 10 were pardoned in a December 2007 amnesty well before the end of their terms. In 2008, the year of the presidential

¹⁰ CPJ records only three other killings of Azerbaijani journalists, two in the early 1990s and one in 2011 (Rafiq Taqi, presumably by a nonstate actor in retaliation for his criticism of Islam), as well as the death of one journalist in prison.

¹¹ Data compiled from the Committee to Protect Journalists’ prison census for 2003-2008, available at cpj.org/imprisoned/2013.php.

election, one more journalist was imprisoned, which brought the total number in prison to five. While Elmar Huseynov was the sole murdered journalist after the color revolutions, this was arguably not for lack of trying; in 2008, CPJ reported “at least eight serious attacks against journalists since 2005,” including some intended to maim and, possibly, kill (CPJ 2009).

The government also took measures to rein in nongovernmental and foreign broadcast media, albeit at first only tentatively. At the end of 2006, the government moved to shut down for a variety of alleged violations the independent ANS television and radio; it relented, however, whether as a result of widespread criticism or because it intended the threat of closure to only be a deterrent. Whatever the case, the incident served to rein in the independent station, which reportedly established an in-house censor for its news broadcasts and reduced its political coverage (Ismayilov 2006b, 2007).

Foreign broadcasts were also targeted. Prior to the aborted ANS closure, in October 2006 the government banned domestic television and radio stations from rebroadcasting foreign programming, something that threatened to limit the broadcasting of shows produced by the U.S.-funded Voice of America and Radio Liberty, as well as the BBC. The government insisted the decision was evenhanded, as it also removed whole Russian channels from the domestic airwaves (Ismayilov 2006a; Muradova 2007). However, the law did not in fact forbid domestic stations from just rebroadcasting foreign content, such as the Western shows that ANS television and radio (and other radio stations) broadcast (Muradova and Bakinsky 2006). Through the 2008 presidential election, however, the government allowed the stations to broadcast on their own dedicated radio frequencies.

Elites

Before the 2005 elections, the government also moved against a number of government officials and individuals linked to them, most notably Minister of Economic Development Farhad Aliyev and Minister of Health Ali Insanov. The initial accusations against Aliyev, his brother Rafiq Aliyev (head of Azpetrol, the country's main gasoline company), Insanov, and other current and former officials included conspiring to organize a coup and public disorder. Specifically, they were accused of assisting in such plans Democratic Party of Azerbaijan leader Rasul Guliyev, a former parliamentary chairman who had fled to the United States in 1996 and was subsequently charged with embezzlement. Guliyev had sought to return to Baku to campaign for his party three weeks before the election. While the government allowed Guliyev to register, it also invoked a standing arrest warrant despite candidate immunity from prosecution and succeeded in having Guliyev temporarily detained en route to Baku in Ukraine while scores of his supporters were detained as they went to the airport to meet him (Human Rights Watch 2005, 25–28; Valiyev 2006, 26). The government alleged that his arrival was to be the start of the coup attempt.

The government's claim of having averted a coup was rather fantastic. The arrests targeted two totally different government "clans": one led by the old-guard Insanov (made up mainly of "Yerevan Azerbaijanis," or Yeraz, Azerbaijanis with origins in Armenia) and one by Farhad Aliyev, President Aliyev's generational peer (Ismayilov 2005b). While both were oligarchic leaders, the first had a reputation as deeply retrograde and corrupt, while the other was at least a vocal supporter of economic reform (if possibly also a beneficiary of corruption). It is unlikely they were working together. Moreover, both were themselves vying for power *within* the ruling elite, not separate from it. The suggestion that Insanov might have thought he could gain from a democratic change in regime was especially ludicrous, but there is no evidence to

suggest that Aliyev did either. For what it's worth, Guliyev insisted that he did not even know Farhad Aliyev, while a leader of the APFP rejected the notion of cooperation with him, noting that "he did nothing to really change the situation in the economy" (BBC Monitoring 2005; Ismayilov 2005a).

That said, we should not dismiss the possibility that the purge of these two clans was part of a broader effort to inoculate the regime from a color revolution-like event. First, the narrative surrounding the arrests explicitly sought to undermine the notion of a democratic revolution – associating a victory of the opposition with a coup attempt and violent disorder instigated by corrupt and power-hungry oligarchs, contrasted to the government's own efforts (particularly against Insanov) in tackling corruption.¹² Farhad Aliyev himself claimed that he was "ordered to admit that...an 'orange revolution' had to be carried out using these funds and U.S., German, British officials and these countries' ambassadors in Azerbaijan encouraged me" (Turan Information Agency 2007c). The fact that Aliyev was a relatively vocal supporter of modernization, anti-monopoly practices, and economic orientation toward the West lent some credibility to the claim – as if he were an Azerbaijan Saakashvili-in-waiting. After the arrests, *Real Azerbaijan* – an independent newspaper but one rumored to be under the control of Farhad Aliyev's rival Kamaladdin Heydarov (see below) – speculated that ANS television owner Vahid Mustafayev supported Aliyev and that ANS could have been preparing to play a support role for revolution, like the Georgian television channel Rustavi-2 during the Rose Revolution (Turan Information Agency 2006a).

¹² In a government meeting, President Aliyev expounded on this theory: "As you know, Farhad Aliyev, Ali Insanov and other high ranked persons spent money earned due to corruption and bribery for assistance to the opposition in organization of riots. And now let us imagine, what could occur. Corrupted officials Ali Insanov, Farhad Aliyev and others on the one side and Mafioso Rasul Guliyev, intending return home from abroad, on the other hand and our old naphthalene opposition led by such persons as Isa Gambarov and Ali Kerimli on the third hand. What could occur here if their plans had been realized? Civil war could begin again in Azerbaijan" (Azer-Press 2005a).

Second, from the government's perspective, both men could at least have been potential inside supporters of a change in government. Valiyev (2006, 26) argues that Insanov and some other targeted officials had begun to "openly challenge" the head of the presidential administration and key powerbroker Ramiz Mehdiyev, and Insanov had been rumored to have been increasingly sidelined by the new president. Farhad Aliyev, meanwhile, was in open competition with another oligarch, customs head Kamaladdin Heydarov, practically up to the time of his arrest; his calls for demonopolization and easing of customs duties were directed specifically at Heydarov. The government's decision to remove privatization and certain regulatory responsibilities from the Ministry of Economy's control were signals that Farhad Aliyev was losing this confrontation.

Third, both men headed their own networks of clients and were carrying out their own internal electoral competition within the ranks of the ruling party and independent candidates. An exodus of a few hundred candidates said to be part of their circles followed their arrests (Ismayilov 2005a, 2005b).

The purge of these two clans avoided the risk of a longer-term fragmentation from within the ruling party, while sending the signal that internal dissent would be punished. Whether President Aliyev would have implemented such purges in the absence of the color revolutionary context, as Radnitz (2012, 72) suggests, is difficult to determine. However, that context did make it more important for the regime to make clear to potential within-regime dissenters that taking advantage of popular mobilization to achieve political gain was a risky dead-end strategy (Valiyev 2006, 27; Alieva 2006, 153).

Demonstrating the artificiality of the initial accusations, the former officials never stood trial for the main charges of coup plotting and fomenting disorder. The courts quietly dropped

these charges, instead prosecuting officials on corruption-related charges. A year and a half after his arrest, Insanov was sentenced in April 2007 to 11 years in prison for embezzlement, abuse of power, and other economic crimes, while seven of his subordinates received sentences of varying length (and another three received suspended sentences). Five months later, Farhad Aliyev was sentenced to 10 years in prison for embezzlement and abuse of power, as well as a raft of other economic crimes; his brother was sentenced to nine years. Another four defendants also received jail terms, while 13 received suspended sentences (Turan Information Agency 2007a, 2007b).

The Rhetoric of Counterrevolution

In the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Azerbaijani government clearly had color revolution on its mind. The main message the government sought to convey was that the conditions that led to regime change in other countries did not apply to Azerbaijan. President Aliyev frequently explained that the preconditions for color revolution did not exist: the state-society relationship in Azerbaijan was characterized by “unity and trust;” the opposition was weak; and the president was “support[ed]” and “love[d]” by the people, who were satisfied with their “socioeconomic situation” (Azad Azarbaycan TV 2005; Turan Information Agency 2005f; Xalq Qazeti 2005). In interviews and speeches, he mocked the opposition for their “orange ties” and “orange T-shirts,” thinking that “by putting [them] on...they become great revolutionaries” (Channel One TV 2005; Holley 2005). Head of the presidential administration Mehdiyev noted after the election that efforts at fomenting color revolution failed, in particular, because the government itself was effectively combatting corruption, which had been a key grievance in Ukraine and Georgia. As evidence, he cited the arrests of Insanov and Farhad Aliyev (Turan Information Agency 2006b).

More subtly, the government also sought to delegitimize the notion of color revolution by casting it in a more traditional coup frame. Speaking of the alleged plot by Insanov and Aliyev, President Aliyev said that these officials were planning to mobilize “fifty or one hundred thousand people” to occupy strategic facilities including the presidential administration, a plot, he said, that “would have had catastrophic consequences” (NTV Mir 2005). Mehdiyev insisted that the opposition planned to use mass demonstrations to “seize power” in Azerbaijan, claiming that one opposition party leader, Fuad Mustafayev, had said that all they needed to force the government’s resignation was 100,000-150,000 people on the streets (Turan Information Agency 2006b).

As parliamentary elections receded, such rhetoric faded, although it emerged again in minor fashion prior to the 2008 presidential election. In May 2008, Mehdiyev suggested that “some forces might have plans to stage revolution,” but he again underlined that this was a futile endeavor as “Azerbaijan is a strong country and nobody could prevent our development” (Trend News Agency 2008). In June, in a lengthy article on Azerbaijani political and economic “modernization,” Mehdiyev referred to the failed efforts in 2005 to foment “velvet revolution,” noting how youth organizations elsewhere had inspired local copycats “whose task it was to express and exclusively fulfill the will of foreign advisers and sponsors” (Day.az 2008). However, he said, such importations could not succeed mechanically across different societies. A few months later, President Aliyev reminded the population of “the fate of those who wanted to stage an ‘orange revolution’ here in 2005” (BBC Monitoring 2008).

Consolidated Authoritarianism, 2008-2010

Three and a half years after the March 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, President Aliyev's re-election in October 2008 marked the end of the "post-color revolution" period in Azerbaijan. After the election, the regime shifted to a straightforward system of authoritarian control, punctuated by a handful of hardening measures and culminating in a virtually uncompetitive parliamentary election in November 2010.¹³

Specific measures of authoritarian consolidation occurred within the first year of Aliyev's re-election. Just two weeks after the election, the government announced a full ban against foreign broadcasts, relegating the BBC, Radio Liberty, and the Voice of America to web, satellite, and shortwave broadcasts (Human Rights Watch 2010, 50–51). Less than a half year later, in March 2009, the government conducted a referendum on constitutional changes, chief among them being the removal of presidential term limits. Four months later, the government made clear its attitude toward the emerging phenomenon of internet activism, arresting on trumped-up charges two young activists, Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade, who had posted a satirical amateur video on YouTube that implied that donkeys received better treatment than people in Azerbaijan (Human Rights Watch 2010, 25–27). They received, respectively, two and two-and-a-half year prison sentences (though they were released early, after parliamentary elections the following year).

The government also moved after the presidential election to tighten the reins on nongovernmental organizations but, for the time being, relented. In June 2009, a set of draft amendments to the 2000 Law on Nongovernmental Organizations proposed to ban NGOs that received more than half their funding from foreign sources; only allow NGOs to operate throughout the country if they established a presence in one-third of all districts; and levy stiff fines against NGOs that did not officially register. After protests by the local NGO community

¹³ For a detailed analysis of this period, see ICG (2010).

and Western states, the parliament amended the law without introducing such restrictive innovations – contenting itself with requiring international NGOs to establish and register local branches only after concluding an agreement with the government (Geybullayeva 2009).

During this period, the regime was relatively complacent toward the neutered print media. In 2009, just two journalists were imprisoned while another, the minority Talysh newspaper editor Novruzali Mamedov, died (officially after suffering a stroke) two-and-a-half years into a 10-year prison sentence for treason and incitement to ethnic hatred. In 2010, for the first time since 2002, no journalists were newly imprisoned; by the end of the year, only one – Eynulla Fatullayev of *Real Azerbaijan* – was still in prison, where he had been since 2007 (Fatullayev was eventually pardoned in May 2011).

Azerbaijan's next parliamentary elections were in November 2010, a month before the act of self-immolation in Tunisia that sparked that country's Jasmine Revolution and the broader Arab Spring. In contrast to the 2005 parliamentary elections, these elections were held in the absence of any whiff of revolution. The two main opposition parties, Musavat and the APFP, participated in the elections again as a bloc but with nowhere near the level of enthusiasm and engagement that characterized their united campaign under the Azadliq banner in 2005. Another two opposition blocs – Karabakh and For Humanity¹⁴ – ran separately, as did an array of other minor parties. The results were an even greater rout for pro-government candidates than in 2005: opposition parties won just one seat (from the Karabakh bloc). Not a single seat went to Musavat or the APFP. The YAP won 55 percent of seats (69, eight more than in 2005) while independents won another 37 percent (46 seats). The remaining seven percent (nine seats) went to three pro-government or "loyal" opposition blocs and parties (OSCE 2011, 28). Official turnout was just

¹⁴ The Karabakh bloc included the Democratic Party (part of Azadliq in 2005), Umid (which had one MP), and the new Aydinlar. For Humanity included the Liberal Party (whose single MP boycotted parliament in 2005) and the Citizen and Development Party.

50 percent. The OSCE-led international observation mission summed up the election by stating simply that the “conditions necessary for a meaningful and competitive election were lacking” (OSCE 2011, 1)

Still, the election campaign differed from that of the 2005 elections in several respects. The government reverted to restrictive registration practices more reminiscent of elections a decade earlier. The CEC accepted over 70 percent of the 1,043 candidates that entered the registration process, but the rates of registration were nowhere near proportional. Ninety-seven percent of all potential candidates from YAP were registered, while just 43 percent of potential APFP-Musavat candidates, 36 percent of Karabakh candidates, and 27 percent of For Humanity candidates were registered (as well as 64 percent of independent candidates) (Trend News Agency 2010; OSCE 2011, 28).¹⁵ Many districts simply had no opposition candidate running. Also, since the last election, the campaign period had been winnowed down from 60 days to 22 days. With no opposition party ending up with more than 60 candidates – the required minimum for free media coverage – campaigns were limited; as a courtesy, the CEC ruled that each candidate be allotted four minutes of airtime on public television. Local authorities granted parties small and out-of-the-way venues for campaign meetings. The lack of competition did lead to a relatively improved vote count: international observers deemed the vote count negatively in 32 percent of precincts (a 9 percent improvement over 2005), as well as in 20 percent of vote tabulations (a 14 percent improvement). After the elections, the CEC received just 120 complaints (as opposed to over 1,000 in 2005) and acted on 20 of them, annulling results in only

¹⁵ This is not a fully accurate representation of rejection rates, as it includes all prospective candidates and not just those who ultimately registered. Out of 1,412 prospective candidates, 369 candidates did not register. Lower rates of registration include these dropouts but do not change the overall picture: all YAP candidates that registered were accepted, while candidates from all other parties had relatively low acceptance rates.

a handful of precincts (43, or less than 1 percent) and re-running no races (OSCE 2011, 19, 20, 22).

Taking No Chances: Authoritarian Hardening after the Arab Spring

By 2011, Azerbaijan had arguably been a consolidated authoritarian state for several years, according to Freedom House since the start of 2007. Still, in the years after the Arab Spring, the level of repression against civil society and dissent reached even greater heights, in particular adapting to the new “threat” of social media activism (Pearce and Kendzior 2012; Pearce 2014; Pearce and Hajizada 2014). This new level of repression scaled up gradually, however, with its harshest stage hitting in 2013-14, more than two years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

In 2011, a new wave of youth activism emerged that claimed inspiration from movements in the Arab world and relied heavily on social media. No less than three new youth groups – Positive Change, Free Youth, and N!DA (“exclamation point”) – were formed at the start of the year (Sultanova 2014, 29–30). Such groups had not been seen since the crackdown against them during the 2005 election campaign. Youth activists used social media, Facebook in particular, to call for protests like those in the Arab world (Ismayilova 2011a; Pearce 2014). One sign of their potential attraction occurred when youth activists invited some 25,000 Facebook users to a “Great People’s Day” rally on March 11. Over 4,000 users – a not insignificant number in the face of government repression – publicly responded that they would attend.¹⁶

The government wasted no time cracking down on this new form of mobilization. Activists were arrested solely for calling for protest. Twenty-year-old Jabbar Savalan was

¹⁶ The Facebook page announcing the rally is still available at <https://www.facebook.com/events/192209267477787/>, accessed June 18, 2014.

arrested in February the day after calling on Facebook for a “day of rage”; he was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison on drug charges (though he was released in December). Another young activist, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, was arrested in March after promoting the “Great People’s Day” rally on Facebook and sentenced to two years in prison for draft dodging (he was released after 15 months).¹⁷

On top of this, the government’s usual response to illegal protests – detaining organizers in advance and rapidly arresting participants – was in effect. A handful of other activists were detained in advance of the March 11 protest, and dozens of the several hundred that gathered either that day or for a Musavat-led protest the next were rounded up (Kazimova and Sindelar 2011). Follow-up protests were held in April: an opposition rally on April 2 and a smaller Facebook-advertised “Great Unity Day” later that month.¹⁸ Again, organizers and participants were detained; in the case of the April 2 rally, 13 went to court later in the year and were sentenced to one-and-a-half to three years in prison (most were amnestied in June 2012). While only one journalist was arrested in 2011, at least two other opposition-affiliated journalists were assaulted around the time of the April 2 protest.

Around this time, the government took active measures to isolate these new activists from potential new sympathizers. Two days before the protest, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a statement that positioned these new protests within the regime’s standard model of externally-inspired illegitimate dissent. The ministry claimed “radical opposition forces” were trying to “create color revolutions in Azerbaijan....Adventurers are trying to take advantage of the developments in North Africa, and are using as their tools a group of youths and some NGOs

¹⁷ Hajiyev, already on the government’s watch list, had run unsuccessfully for parliament the year before and posted evidence of election shenanigans online; already in November, he had been barred from leaving the country.

¹⁸ The April 17 Facebook page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/events/214059225270895/>, accessed June 18, 2014.

that are directly dependent on foreign donations” (Kazimova and Sindelar 2011). Some have argued that the involvement of mass publics in the Arab Spring directly encouraged the government to send this message to a broad audience; Pearce and Kendzior note that state-controlled media had been almost entirely silent about the 2009 imprisonment of Milli and Hajizade but widely discussed the cases of those they imprisoned in 2011 (Pearce and Kendzior 2012, 294).

In addition to preemption of youth protest, the Arab Spring plausibly bolstered the government’s conviction that it needed to crackdown on NGOs. The 2009 law required international NGOs to conclude an agreement with the government in order to register, but it had not elaborated on the conditions and procedure for doing so. Days after the 2010 election (and before the start of protests in Tunisia), the government had already signaled its intention to develop the rules for registration. It was only five days after the March 11 protest, however, that it issued the decree which spelled out bureaucratic procedures for registration and specified that international NGOs could operate in Azerbaijan only if, among other restrictions, they respected “the Azerbaijani people’s national-moral values” – a requirement that was open wide to interpretation (Venice Commission 2011).¹⁹

Prior to issuing the decree, the government began to crack down on foreign NGOs. In January, police investigated the facilities of the local chapter of the Norway-based Human Rights House Network (HRHN) after the speaker of parliament had “called for ‘steps to be taken’ against human rights NGOs that criticize the government in international inter-governmental institutions” (in January, HRH Azerbaijan had co-organized an event in Strasbourg coinciding with a Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly). A day before the March 11 protest, authorities unexpectedly ordered the NGO to cease its activities on the grounds that it had not

¹⁹ The original decree, in Azerbaijani, is available at <http://www.cabmin.gov.az/?/az/pressreliz/view/469/>.

concluded an agreement with the government (though it had registered according to the law then in force) (Human Rights House Azerbaijan 2011). A few days before that, it sent a similar warning to the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute and ordered it to cease operations pending conclusion of its registration by the new rules (NDI had unsuccessfully attempted to register in the past) (Ismayilova 2011b). NDI was formally registered only the following year.

Another potential knock-on effect of the Arab Spring was the government's crackdown on the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, an unregistered Islamist party that the government had long insisted sought to undermine Azerbaijan's secular government with the assistance of Iran. The government in the past come into conflict with the IPA, as well as religious communities in Baku and, especially, Nardaran, a largely "self-governed" small village near Baku dominated by Islamists (ICG 2008; Ravich 2011). But the last significant crackdown of the IPA was nine years before, after violent protests in Nardaran that led to the arrest in June 2002 of its leader Alikram Aliyev, who was sentenced to nine years in prison (another three participants were sentenced to five to eight years while 11 received suspended sentences). However, President Aliyev significantly shortened Alikram Aliyev's sentence, having him released in November 2003, just a few weeks after he became president (Turan Information Agency 2003). Over seven years later, the IPA's newest leader, Movsum Samadov, and five other party members were arrested at the start of January 2011. Samadov had given a speech heavily criticizing the government and calling on the population "to rise up and put an end to this merciless regime" (Abbasov 2011). The party members were found guilty of plotting a terrorist act and the illegal seizure of power and received 10-12 year prison sentences.

In 2012, government repression in Azerbaijan appeared to settle into a new equilibrium. The country was in the international spotlight for the first half of the year, as host of the annual

Eurovision song contest in May. Repression did not ease, but nor did it proceed at an unusual scale or pace. The government dispersed protests held in advance of the Eurovision contest, as well as a handful of protests in the fall. In the months following Eurovision, authorities arrested a handful of youth and civil society activists for their involvement in the Eurovision protests or other endeavors (at least three of them received prison sentences of one-and-a-half to two years). One exception to this was a massive new wave of imprisoned journalists – nine by the end of the year, the largest number in five years (CPJ 2012). The government also began to more actively use public shaming techniques and illegal surveillance to silence dissent and expose; to take one prominent example, RFE/RL journalist Khadija Ismayilova, known for her investigations into corruption of the ruling family and other members of the elite, refused to be blackmailed by individuals who subsequently released videos of her engaged in sexual activity (RFE/RL 2012). The year ended with the passage, in November, of legislation dramatically hiking the penalties for participation in unsanctioned demonstrations: fines of up to \$1,400 for participants, higher for organizers (by comparison, an average monthly wage at the time was around \$500).

The year 2012 was also marked by what many observers interpreted as a kind of test case for the government in dealing with an Arab Spring-like scenario. In a rare episode of antigovernment mobilization outside Baku, residents of the northern tourist town of Guba in March set on fire the house of unpopular governor Rauf Habibov, after word spread that he had insulted the local population in a speech that was posted online. Thousands of protesters gathered to call for his resignation and block roads into town. The government's reaction was unprecedented: the protesters were not dispersed by force and Habibov himself was fired. The highly unusual nature of the event and the government's reaction led some to speculate that it was not spontaneous but instead engineered from above – though, if so, the purpose remained

opaque (Gurbanov 2012). Whatever their cause, the Guba events were not left without a repressive response. A total of 26 protestors went on trial, of which eight received prison sentences of one-and-a-half to five years. Two local government officials received similar sentences, allegedly for their involvement in posting the video. Two local journalists also sat in jail for a year on charges of inciting mass disorder for allegedly posting the video; they were released with suspended sentences in March 2013 (Azer-Press 2012; Turan Information Agency 2012, 2013b).

The first half of 2013 – again an election year as Aliyev ran for his third term – was characterized by an accelerated and expanding cycle of repression. Two years after the start of the Arab Spring, intensified local protest and a rapid rise in social media, especially Facebook, activism led the government to escalate its own countermeasures. In January, a youth-organized demonstration of at least hundreds of participants (and some 20,000 online supporters), held to protest the death of a conscript in military hazing, was allowed to proceed though several participants were arrested (Bigg and Kazimova 2013). Another two protests that month, however, were forcibly dispersed from the outset – one of shopkeepers who blocked a highway in protest against increased rents and fees and another youth-organized protest in solidarity with protesters from Ismayilli (see below) (Human Rights Watch 2013a). Another protest (again against military hazing) was violently broken up in March.

Occurring in between the Baku protests in January was a second major bout of violent provincial protest, in Ismayilli, a northern town near Guba. The government reaction was similar to that the year before. Crowds torched a hotel and vehicles in protest against what they considered to be the impudence and corruption of two young elites, the sons of the local governor, Nizami Alakbarov, and his brother, the Minister of Labor and Social Protection Fizuli

Alakbarov. Early reports indicated that the labor minister's son, Vugar Alakbarov, owned the hotel and had crashed his car into a taxi, getting into a violent argument with its driver (Turan Information Agency 2013a). Protestors gathered the next day to call for the local governor's resignation and were forcibly dispersed. While the labor minister's son did appear to own (or at least rent) the hotel, the official story claimed he was not in the town and instead attributed the accident to a drunk-driving hotel employee (Azer-Press 2013, 2014; Human Rights Watch 2013a).

Nonetheless, the government sought to demonstrate a willingness to be responsive to the protests, prosecuting a handful of government scapegoats. As in Guba, the local governor of Ismayilli was dismissed from his post, while the alleged drunk driver and an acquaintance were both arrested and by the end of the year sentenced, respectively, to 9.5 and 3 years. Around the same time, in an unrelated development, the government took moves to respond to hard evidence of corruption in parliament – a September 2012 video posted by a former member of the Azerbaijani elite that showed a ruling party deputy soliciting a million-dollar bribe for a parliamentary seat back in 2005. The deputy, Gular Ahmadova, was arrested in February and sentenced to three years in prison in December (though she was released five months later) (Kazimova and Sindelar 2013).

The Ismayilli protests also met with repression, of course. Eight protestors received sentences of two-and-a-half to eight years (another eight received suspended sentences). As in Guba, the government also found “external” scapegoats, journalist and Musavat member Tofiq Yaqublu and prospective presidential candidate Ilgar Mammadov of the new REAL (or “Republican Alternative”) movement, which catered to Azerbaijan's emerging middle class and sought to establish itself as a more effective force than the traditional opposition. Both had gone

to Ismayilli the day after the outbreak of protests to investigate the situation but ended up being accused of inciting protest themselves (Sultanova 2013, 2014, 31–33).

As for the protests in Baku, authorities vigorously applied the new protest laws against participants – and then made them even more restrictive. Dozens of participants received fines of \$400-500 on average; some organizers were slapped with fines of over \$2,500 each. Ten of the youth protestors received prison sentences of six to fifteen days, while ten shopkeepers were initially sentenced to two months in pretrial detention.²⁰ In May, the government then extended the maximum administrative detention for participation in illegal protests from 15 to 60 days, and also extended the maximum sentence for failure to obey police.

Authorities further expanded its net of repression against freedom of expression and social activism at this time. At least 10 youth and social media activists were arrested from March to July, including seven members of the NIDA movement and three others (another three served two-week administrative sentences); another was arrested just before the October election. Authorities also shut down the “Free Thought University,” a successful alternative education project run by youth activists since 2010. One religious activist and a former professor/Musavat activist from southern Azerbaijan were also arrested, as was one more journalist. Another journalist was arrested in September, bringing the total of imprisoned journalists by the end of the year to eight (four were released during the year). In May, alongside a tightening of protest laws, authorities explicitly criminalized internet-based “slander” and “insult” –questionable criminal categories that had been vigorously applied previously only to conventional media. A few months earlier, the government further tightened NGO regulations,

²⁰ The protests also reinforced the persisting utility of Facebook as organizing tool: not only were protests organized via Facebook, some participants launched an online donation campaign to pay their fines. Called “5 cents,” the campaign reportedly raised some \$16,000 to pay several protestors’ fines (and donated excess funds to one hazing victim’s family) (Freedom House 2013). The campaign’s Facebook page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/events/121545031348573/>, accessed on June 20, 2014.

increasing or introducing fines in the thousands of dollars for unregistered activities, late or incomplete submission of official paperwork, and the acceptance of cash donations of over 250 dollars. Individual NGO employees could now be made liable for such oversights, and those offering cash donations to NGOs would also receive steep fines (Human Rights Watch 2013b; Amnesty International 2014).

Held in this tense climate, the October presidential election was largely uneventful. Nearly 130 opposition leaders and representatives – including from the mainstream opposition, some parties thought to be part of the “loyal” opposition, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, and imprisoned activists – united as the National Council of Democratic Forces to nominate as their presidential candidate a political outsider, well-known Russian-Azerbaijani screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov (of the Oscar-winning “Burnt by the Sun”) (National Council of Democratic Forces 2013). The choice may have been well-intended, as the first step toward a political platform of constitutional reform and a shift to parliamentary governance, but it was tactically unsound. Ibragimbekov was legally barred from running due to citizenship and residency requirements. Largely resident in Moscow and California, and forbidden to run as a dual citizen, Ibragimbekov requested the removal of his Russian citizenship after he announced his candidacy, but the Russian government never got around to fulfilling his request. A backup candidate, scholar and former parliamentarian Jamil Hasanli, registered in August and ran a modest but valiant campaign against Aliyev and eight minor contenders, taking advantage of the limited opportunities for campaign rallies that the government allowed him. President Aliyev officially won re-election with 84.5 percent of the vote to Hasanli’s 5.5 percent (Bedford 2014, 11–12).

Hasanli's late arrival to the presidential contest was not the only reason for his crushing defeat. At a postelection press conference, the head of the OSCE long-term observer mission reported that the election had been "seriously flawed" (OSCE 2013a). Not only was one promising presidential candidate (Ilgar Mammadov) in prison, the government had already launched a full-fledged assault against youth activists who would likely have formed a core element of the campaign effort. This was aside from the usual grievances against the campaign process. On election day, the OSCE-led international monitoring mission reserved its greatest criticism for the vote count and tabulation, which it deemed "overwhelmingly negative" – with observers offering "bad or very bad" assessments in 58 percent of all observed counts, as well as 24 percent of all observed tabulations (OSCE 2013b, 22).

Following the election, there was a brief window of hope that this new cycle of repression now had crested. Authorities permitted the opposition to peacefully hold two post-election rallies (though at least four participants were placed in administrative detention). Also, in a mass amnesty just five days after the election, Aliyev at last pardoned former economy minister Farhad Aliyev and his brother after eight years in prison. Finally, the new cabinet that was announced the following week was characterized by two glaring absences: the longstanding Ministers of Defense and Labor and Social Protection that had been at the center of attention in recent protests, respectively, against military hazing and in Ismayilli.

As in 2008, however, Aliyev's victory did not provide an excuse to ease up on repression but to deepen it. This period coincided with the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine, as well as ongoing ferment in neighboring Turkey that began with the May 2013 Gezi Park protests. Whether these developments prompted a harsher crackdown than the government had anticipated is difficult to say. However, a new round of repression immediately began. The Election

Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDSC), the country's main election monitoring organization and a close partner of the U.S. National Democratic Institute, came under investigation by the end of October, presumably on the grounds that it was in violation of existing NGO laws (it had lost its registration prior to the 2008 presidential election). By the end of the year its head, Anar Mammadli, had been arrested and two colleagues were also brought under investigation. From November to May, another three youth activists and three civil society representatives were arrested, and two more were barred from leaving the country. An expatriate journalist was arrested in April after being deported from Turkey, where he and his family had lived for the last three years (Amnesty International 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014). The government also continued breaking up small demonstrations – at least two, in December and May.

In 2014, the courts began their sentencing. The spate of rapid sentences and their length, coupled with the rash of arrests from the start of 2013, suggested a full-scale war on civil activism. Southern Azerbaijani professor Yadigar Sadiqov was sentenced to six years in prison in January 2014. Political activists Mammadov and Yaqublou, arrested after visiting Ismayilli, were sentenced to seven and five years, respectively, in March. One youth activist, 20-year-old Elsever Mursalli, was sentenced to five years in April. In May, sentencing reached an impressive new pace. The seven NIDA activists and one Free Youth activist were sentenced to six to eight years. Journalist Parviz Hashimli and an associate received eight and eight-and-half year sentences. Social media activist Abdul Abilov received a five-and-a-half year sentence, as did election monitor Mammadli. The latter's colleague Bashir Suleymanli got just three-and-a-half years.

As the government focused on staving off the more forward-looking activism of youth protest, social media, and advocacy, it also had to contend with a different phenomenon, tragically reminiscent of the Arab Spring. The May 2014 protest occurred in a familiar context – the sentencing of the NIDA activists. The December 2013 protest, however, was for something new – solidarity with a 42-year-old disabled war veteran and father of five, who died from an act of self-immolation after a futile years-long property rights battle with the Confederation of Trade Unions, run by a member of the Azerbaijani political elite. The government scrambled to respond, expressing regret for the incident and offering financial compensation to the victim and his family prior to his death three days after the incident. By mid-February, four more Azerbaijanis had set themselves on fire. Three survived; the only woman among them perished (Fatali 2013; RFE/RL 2014a).

Conclusion

The consolidation of authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan has coincided with a decade of unexpected popular revolutions in post-Soviet Eurasia and the Arab world. Certainly, Azerbaijan was an authoritarian state prior to the onset of the “color revolutions” in 2003. Since that time, however, the regime has steadily squeezed out virtually all forms of political protest, dissent, and competition, particularly that of a new generation of budding activists.

This authoritarian hardening is, in part, a consequence of regime change elsewhere. That consequence has been at least indirect, as the regime has been compelled to respond to new waves of activists inspired by those movements. If anything, the regime’s proximate response to the color revolutions and the Arab Spring was to deploy a mix of authoritarian strategies against potential new threats with less repressive measures that provided for a semblance of democracy.

But the regime's consistent response to the threat of regime change has been a steady authoritarian hardening designed to undermine, in the end, virtually any political, media, or civil society activity that threatens to connect small groups of activists to large audiences.

Given plentiful resources, this might be a sustainable strategy for years to come. After reduced growth rates of less than one percent in 2011 and just over two percent in 2012, Azerbaijan's GDP has been estimated to grow by a robust six to seven percent in 2013 and 2014. Authoritarian regimes elsewhere have been able to stave off dissent for decades. Through a steady commitment to repression, the government can weed out most of the relatively few activists who have stubbornly sought to take on the regime, isolating them within the country or encouraging their immigration.

While the government has managed to limit the quantity of public activists, however, there is no denying that the frequency and scope of dissent has expanded in recent years. The pool of prospective youth activists, in particular, is large and might very well continue to generate new groups of activists at current levels and possibly even radicalize some. Furthermore, if the government does not address basic issues of governance and corruption, it risks further spontaneous outbreaks of protest, as in Guba and Ismayilli, or the desperate acts of self-immolation seen in the winter of 2013-14. After ten years of authoritarian hardening, it cannot be said that the Azerbaijani government has "solved" the problem of dissent. As the regime itself might admit, popular mobilization for regime change can arise anytime, even when one least expects it.

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