

WHY SO MUCH STABILITY? AN OVERVIEW OF THE AZERBAIJANI POLITICAL SYSTEM

Despite recent upheavals in the Middle East and the celebration of what has been called the “fourth wave of democracy,” some countries still couple authoritarian rule with a high degree of stability. In the South Caucasus region, Azerbaijan represents a paradigmatic case. This article identifies and discusses two main reasons that contribute to the surprising stability of Aliyev’s regime: the persistence of strong informal institutions –next to weak democratic ones–, and a widespread political culture that can hardly be considered as conducive to a democratic turn.

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On 5 February 2012, at the Security Conference in Munich, President Ilham Aliyev was asked by a participant whether the political situation in Azerbaijan could be somehow compared to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, where upheavals took place. Aliyev answered: “If anyone wants to see Egypt-like developments in Baku, I can assure you that, regardless of your wishes, you will not see that.”¹

Today’s Azerbaijani ruling elite reflects a strong level of self-confidence. Still, echoes of the Arab Spring have already been heard along the shores of the Caspian Sea. Almost one year before the Munich conference, young activists and opposition leaders organized demonstrations in Baku, demanding far-reaching democratic reforms with hopes that the Arab Spring domino effect would hit their country as well. However, despite their expectations, “no more than 1,500 people went out into the streets of Baku in March-April 2011,”² and some hundreds of arrests which followed, extinguished all hope for forthcoming democratic development in the country.³

In the absence of exceptional changes, every indicator suggests that Azerbaijan will remain on its path characterized by a surprising continuity, despite controversy over its political regime. This is particularly the case given the 2009 constitutional referendum in which the presidential term limit was abolished, laying the basis for Ilham Aliyev’s third mandate after the 2013 presidential elections.

In order to understand the reasons for the stability of Aliyev’s regime, it is necessary to go beyond Azerbaijan’s relatively short republican experience and include its pre-1991 political system in the analysis. The present article identifies two main arguments. Firstly, the presence of solid informal institutions which are much stronger than the current democratic ones, plays a key role in the constancy of Aliyev’s regime. Secondly, the existence of a widespread political culture that is hardly conducive to a democratic turn, and that constitutes a confirmation of

1 “Aliyev says Arab Spring not in store for Azerbaijan,” *Azernews*, 6 February 2012, www.azernews.az/azerbaijan/41046.html

2 Shahin Abbasov, “Azerbaijan: Achievements and Missed Opportunities,” in *South Caucasus – 20 Years of Independence* (Berlin-Tbilisi: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011), p. 120.

3 On 12 March 2011, *the New York Times* wrote that “several hundred protesters gathered Saturday for a rally organized by an opposition party,” in “Police in Azerbaijan Arrest Anti-Government Protesters,” (www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/asia/13azerbaijan.html?_r=0). About a month later, *the Los Angeles Times* has written that “roughly 1,000 people convened at Fountains Square Saturday morning,” in “Azerbaijan: More than 200 Anti-Government Protesters Arrested,” (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/04/azerbaijan-more-than-200-anti-government-protesters-arrested.html>). The data was confirmed by *the Georgian Daily*, which wrote: “Estimates of its size range from 350 to less than 1,000, according to the interior ministry and the OSCE’s Baku office, respectively,” (www.georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21336&Itemid=132).

the so-called “congruence thesis”, (according to which, a government tends to be stable if its authority pattern is congruent with the other authority patterns of the society) is another major factor in understanding Azerbaijani political trends.⁴ In order to discuss the latter point, the article will rely on the empirical evidences extracted from the Caucasus Barometer 2011. However, it is first necessary to clarify the main characteristics of Azerbaijani authoritarianism with reference to existing literature. Alternative explanations, such as those resting on the so-called “resource curse”, are also relevant but will not be elaborated on in this article.

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Azerbaijan: A Hegemonic Authoritarian Regime?

According to formal standards, Azerbaijan belongs to the category of presidential republics. Current state institutions and the presence of “recurrent elections” for the presidency and for the parliament (both elected for a five-year term), indicate a democracy in the formal sense. However, few authors or international observers would consider it a democracy, despite many claims of the ruling elite indicating otherwise. For example, Freedom House classifies the country in the non-free category because of its poor performances in civil liberties and political rights.⁵ Despite the fact that formal institutions of democracy that never ceased to function throughout its 20 years of experience as a republic, Azerbaijan clearly displays many characteristics that belong to the classical definition of authoritarianism. The seminal contribution by well-known political scientist Juan Linz on authoritarian regimes and the four main characteristics emerging from his definition are essential for a careful analysis. According to Linz’s definition, authoritarian regimes are “political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism; without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities; without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development; and in which, a leader or occasionally a small group,

⁴ Harry Eckstein, *Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 188.

⁵ “2012 Report on Azerbaijan,” *Freedom House*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/azerbaijan>

exercises power within formally ill-defined, but actually quite predictable limits.”⁶

- *Limited Political Pluralism*: Throughout the republican years, the Azerbaijani public sphere has been characterized by a certain degree of political pluralism and relatively free media (mostly in the realm of the press), although their relevance has progressively declined. Though recognizing such elements, Freedom House mentions the electoral frauds, the restrictions on freedom of speech and of assembly, and the arbitrary arrests and detentions as evidence of the repression of dissent with “formally ill-defined limits.”
- *Distinctive Mentality*: Much of Aliyev’s legitimacy is based on the modernizing mission that marks today’s Azerbaijan. The current elite has set in motion a sort of “permanent transition” with the goal of modernizing the country according to a rigorous reform agenda built on a mixture of neo-liberalism and traditionalism.
- *Neither Extensive, nor Intensive Participation*: Many observers agree upon the widespread political apathy that characterizes today’s Azerbaijan. This dimension will be taken into account in detail within the next section.
- *Leadership*: The omnipresence of the leader is the most visible feature of the Azerbaijani political situation. Ilham Aliyev (as his father Heydar Aliyev before him) plays the role of a leader who “interacts with every member of the coalition; i) acting as an arbiter or as a mediator among different interests, ii) favoring more or less consciously some interests over others, iii) subordinating the different interests to his power.”⁷ Similarly Abbasov writes that “in exchange for loyalty, people from his *entourage* have a right to be undivided rulers in realms entrusted to them. (...) Periodically frictions arise between them. (...) However, the mechanism of arbitration by the supreme leader snaps into action.”⁸

Hence, when the co-presence of democratic institutions and authoritarian tendencies are considered, Azerbaijan can be easily classified in the broad category of “hybrid regimes”. For a more precise definition, it is possible to refer to Larry

6 Juan J. Linz, “An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain,” in Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen (eds.), *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party System* (Helsinki: Westermarck Society, 1964), p. 255.

7 Leonardo Morlino, *Democrazie e democratizzazioni*, [Democracies and democratizations] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), pp. 51-52.

8 Abbasov (2011), p. 113.

Diamond's distinction between "competitive authoritarian regimes" and "hegemonic authoritarianisms", in order to emphasize the dissimilar "degrees of authoritarian competitiveness" among different countries. If then one defining feature of competitive authoritarian regimes is a significant parliamentary opposition, a rapid overview of the composition of Azerbaijani parliaments is enough to classify the regime as hegemonic and authoritarian.⁹

The New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) has indeed constantly kept a large majority in the parliament, where the only alternative group is still nowadays composed by the so-called "independent" MPs elected in many "single-member districts," who are aligned with the ruling party.¹⁰ After the 2010 elections, these two groups retained 120 seats out of the 125 seats of the unicameral parliament. Even more illuminating is the tendency in presidential elections, where both father and son (Heydar Aliyev and, after 2003, Ilham Aliyev) have been repeatedly elected with large majorities, produced by the singular mixture of widespread popular support and "steered" elections. In 2008, Ilham Aliyev was re-elected by 87.3 percent of the vote.¹¹ This excessive power has permitted the YAP to rule the country without the necessity of a dialogue with the opposition, thus strengthening Azerbaijan's "unipolar political system."¹²

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Moreover, it is often argued that traditional opposition parties have not participated in the YAP dominated electoral commissions since 2005, and "public assembly, rallies, or meetings during the non-election period are restricted."¹³ This

9 Larry Diamond, "Elections Without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2 (April 2002), pp. 21-35.

10 The Azerbaijani president is directly elected every five years. Also the legislatures have a five-year term: the 125 seats of the unicameral parliament (*Milli Meclis*) are assigned by plurality vote in single-member constituencies.

11 The presidential elections are the most important ones, since the constitution provides the president with great powers: he can "appoint and discharge members of the government, as well as nominate candidates for the post of prime minister to be approved by the parliament (...); appoint the head of government even without parliament's agreement if the *Milli Meclis* turns him down three times (...); propose candidates for the general prosecutor's post, as well as judges of the constitutional and supreme courts (...); appoint and discharge high-ranking commanding officers of the military forces." Abbasov (2011), p. 110.

12 Nazim Muzaffarli, "Azerbaijan Republic," *Central Asia and the Caucasus 2006, Analytical Annual* (Lulea: CA&CC Press, 2006), p. 79.

13 "Nations in Transit – 2012," *Freedom House*, www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/azerbaijan

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is far from the necessary presence of a neutral authority, as suggested by Larry Diamond.

What then are the reasons that contribute to the persistence of the current regime, despite the “wind of change” blowing around the world? Or, why so much stability? Many answers can be given, depending on the adopted perspective. The following sections will discuss two of them.

Informal Institutions in Azerbaijan: The Clan Networks

As suggested by the two scholars Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, good institutional analysis requires attention to both formal and informal rules, despite the general tendency to forget about the latter and to put an excessive confidence in the former.¹⁴ A rigorous analysis of informal institutions can explain the persistence of non-democratic tendencies in many countries, beyond their formal transition to democratic rule. To this end, Azerbaijan presents a paradigmatic case and, for a full comprehension of its characteristics, it is necessary to take into account the political inheritance left by the Soviet Union. An interesting contribution is offered by Vladimir Shkolnikov, the senior human rights advisor for the South Caucasus in Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who stresses the fact that “traditional institutions and practices, rather than communism, have turned out to be the most powerful factors in political lives of Caspian states.”¹⁵ This can be considered a direct result of the so-called “*korenizatsiya*” (nativization) policy implemented by Moscow, through which the Soviet Union tried to incorporate different minorities by promoting representatives of national minorities on lower levels of the administrative subdivision of the state. For this reason, “kinship and clan networks were recomposed on the basis of the territorial and administrative structures put in place by the Soviets.”¹⁶

14 Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, “Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol.2, No.4 (2004), pp. 725–40.

15 Vladimir Shkolnikov, “Recommendations for Democratization Assistance in Caspian Region,” *Caspian Studies Program Policy Brief*, No.7 (2002).

16 Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2000), p. 85.

A turning-point for Azerbaijani history dates back to 1969, when Moscow appointed Heydar Aliyev as secretary general of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, in order to defeat the clientelistic network developed by his predecessors in the public administration. With the support of his KGB colleagues, Aliyev succeeded in replacing the previous patronage system –by “removing approximately 80 percent of the administrative and party apparatus”– with a new one.¹⁷ In short, he was able to fill positions of authority with people whose loyalty he absolutely trusted, mainly relying on networks from his home regions of Nakhchivan and Armenia, where his parents resided.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the Nakhchivan and Yeraz –which stands for Yerevan Azerbaijanis– clans still dominate the political life of the country and the governing YAP itself can be considered as representative of political and economic interests of the Nakhchivan and Yeraz clans.¹⁹ The system of loyalties based on clan membership has turned out to be the basis for the stability of Aliyev’s regime, and this has been confirmed once again by the YAP’s support to Ilham Aliyev’s nomination after his father Heydar Aliyev’s retirement for health reasons. Thus, rather than a personalistic system of power, Baku can be viewed as a regime that owes its stability to the informal structure based on strong clientelist networks, developed since the Soviet era.

Political Culture

The second decisive factor taken into account by this article is the role of political culture, which is actually debated by current literature on the topic. Although no widespread consensus has been reached on the role that “ordinary people” can play in the democratization process, as most of the literature tends to pay more attention to the role of elites, many steps forward have been taken thanks to some empirically based analysis throughout the decades.²⁰ In order to avoid any excessive determinism and cultural stereotypes, it is necessary to rely on rigorous empirical data collected by the Caucasus Barometer, a survey conducted on a regular annual basis in South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, a program of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.²¹ Four main dimensions can be identified

17 Hannes Meissner, “Informal Politics in Azerbaijan: Corruption and Rent-Seeking Patterns,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No.24 (February 2011), p. 6, www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CAD-24-6-9.pdf

18 Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan since Independence* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 82.

19 Farid Guliyev, “Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semi-Authoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol.13, No.3 (Summer 2005), pp. 393-435.

20 After the pathbreaking contribution by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in 1963 (*The Civic Culture*), Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel have recently developed the research on the distinctive traits of a democratic political culture, putting emphasis on the so-called “emancipative values” (*Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*, 2005).

21 All statistical data in the text are taken from “Caucasus Barometer 2011” and are available at <http://crrc.ge/oda/>

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in order to assess the diffusion of beliefs and attitudes that are conducive to democracy; the level of democratic legitimacy within the population, the level of participation, the degree of institutionalization of democratic rules and the widespread disposition towards authority.

- *Democratic legitimacy:* Intuitively, democracy will most likely prosper in countries where ordinary people prefer it to any alternative form of government. Azerbaijan’s case study displays both encouraging and discouraging attitudes.

The data collected in Caucasus Barometer 2011 shows that democracy is considered more preferable to any other regime type by the majority of the population, although the percentage (52 percent) is significantly low in comparison with other countries,²² and significant portions of the population (14 percent) hold other forms of government as preferable in some circumstances, or have no opinion (13 percent), or do not care about this issue (18 percent). Furthermore, the influential political scientists Inglehart and Welzel warn against the “instrumental preferences” for democracy, which reflect preferences led by different interpretations of the meaning of democracy. Therefore this has to be considered as a weak indicator for civic culture.²³

- *Level of participation:* Electoral participation is a classic indicator of a country’s political culture, since it reflects the ordinary people’s confidence in their capability to influence the political situation. Positive results emerge in this regard, since 62 percent of Azerbaijanis declared to have voted at the most recent elections and around 75 percent would most probably participate in a forthcoming presidential election. Nevertheless, this picture changes when non-institutional factors beyond the traditional form of participation are taken into account.²⁴ According to the survey, only 28

22 Mattes and Bratton describe the support for democracy revealed by regional Barometers in terms of an average of 80 % in Western Europe, 70 % in 12 relatively democratic African countries, 59 % in Latin America, and 56 % in East Asia. Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, “Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.51, No.1 (January 2007), pp. 192-217.

23 Democracy is often interpreted as a synonymous for “good government” or “economic development”, rather than as a system characterized by political freedoms.

24 According to Almond and Verba, a “participant political culture” is applicable to individuals who are “oriented toward an activist role of the self in the polity,” which goes beyond the mere electoral participation.

percent approves “participating in protests,” while 48 percent does not agree with it. This can explain the lack of success of the 2011 protests in Baku.

- *Institutionalization of democratic rules:* The introduction of democratic structures does not necessarily imply their institutionalization. They can only be considered institutionalized when they “will be able to guarantee an effective control and order capability and when they will produce a significant symbolic-integrative impact.”²⁵ When the level of trust in democratic institutions are observed, the most visible feature is constituted by the low level of trust enjoyed by institutions such as the parliament (42 percent), executive branch (45 percent) and the justice system (24 percent); in comparison with the army (76 percent) and the president (78 percent).²⁶ In this regard, Inglehart and Welzel clearly show how strong support for a leader is negatively correlated with effective democracy and aspirations for liberty.²⁷
- *Disposition toward authority:* This last indicator is an important part of what Inglehart and Welzel have described as “emancipative values”, which turn out to be the most robust factor correlated to the democratization of a country.²⁸ It is indeed argued that these values, while emerging, tend to undermine the popular legitimacy of authoritarian rule: democracy “encompasses flexibility, trust, efficacy, openness to new ideas and experiences, tolerance of differences, acceptance of others, and an attitude toward authority that is neither blindly submissive, nor in hostile rejection.”²⁹

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25 Wolfgang Merkel, “Theorien der Transformation post-autoritärer Gesellschaften,” [Transformation Theories in post-authoritarian Societies.] Klaus von Beyme and Claus Offe (eds.), *Politische Theorien in der Ära der Transformation, Sonderheft der Politischen Vierteljahresschrift* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2006), p. 51.

26 The percentages are made up by those who have judged “four” or “five”, on a one-to-five scale, their level of trust toward the various institutions.

27 Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 250.

28 Emancipative values give priority to gender equality over patriarchy, tolerance over conformity, autonomy over authority and participation over security. Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart, “Political Culture, Mass Beliefs, and Values Change,” in Bernhage et al. (eds.), *Democratization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 129.

29 Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 167.

Interesting elements emerge from the survey in the case of Azerbaijan: the percentage of people who consider supporting the government in every occasion as an important feature for good citizenship is considerably higher (46 percent) than the percentage of those who praise critical stances (13 percent). Even more meaningful is the fact that 75 percent of the population considers the government as a parent, while only 16 percent think about it as an employee. This attitude reflects the above-mentioned distrust toward the protests.

Conclusion

Though it is often assumed that economic development is conducive to democracy, Azerbaijani economy has recently grown at record-high growth rates without producing meaningful effects with regards to the democratization process of the country, while other countries with lower growth rates have made more progress in their democratic transitions.

Probably the strongest factor in sustaining the current system in Azerbaijan is the so-called “resource curse”, which holds that oil revenues are more likely to be considered as supportive of authoritarian rule. Another possible factor is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its negative effects on the process of democratization. Although it is not possible to ignore the “rally around the flag” effect that has characterized Azerbaijani politics throughout the last 20 years, comparative studies of other countries show that neither a full resolution of all border disputes nor clear stipulation of who belongs in the polity are preconditions for democratic breakthrough.³⁰

Two reasons emerge as most decisive in characterizing the source of President Aliyev’s stability, despite the contemporaneous revolutions around the world: the persistence of informal institutions with deep roots in Azerbaijani society, and diffused beliefs and attitudes which can be considered as supportive of authoritarian rule.

30 Michael McFaul, “Transitions from Postcommunism,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.16, No.3 (July 2005), pp. 6-19.