

# CHALLENGING THE ALIYEV REGIME: POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN AZERBAIJAN

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**Abstract:** The opposition in Azerbaijan has long been considered a dysfunctional political group that does not threaten the ruling regime. Large swathes of the Azerbaijani public see opposition forces as badly organized, poorly funded, and vulnerable, allowing the Aliyev regime to stand largely unchallenged in the political arena. The traditional opposition's image of failure drove newly emerging groups to develop a different format, which focuses more on education and less on politics. This article examines the development and transformation of the political opposition in Azerbaijan since independence in 1991, teasing out the significant distinction between the old and new oppositions in challenging the ruling regime. Based on analyses of media reporting and scholarly works, as well as numerous interviews with opposition members, I argue that both branches of the opposition in Azerbaijan have so far failed to test the regime mainly because of the oppressive tactics employed against them, but also as a result of their failure to establish a new form of party politics.

## The Emergence of Opposition in Azerbaijan

Despite its current image of failure, examining the evolution of Azerbaijan's political opposition reveals that, in its early stages, it was a successful organization. During the 70 years of Soviet rule, Azerbaijan had a single political party: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Until Gorbachov's glasnost policy gave the Soviet people

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an opportunity to question their government, this party went unchallenged. However, in the lead up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the media began to attack the key institutions of the regime, including the party, the military and even Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev himself. Some media outlets began courting dissidents, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of 1988-1989, politics moved increasingly from government offices into the streets, and, as this transition took place, issues of nationalism, once effectively marginalized, began to resonate across the political sphere.<sup>2</sup> Massive mobilization encompassed multiple national groups simultaneously, as successful challenges by individual groups led to further challenges by others.<sup>3</sup> Dozens of newly formed organizations promoted these issues and their actions received extensive media coverage.<sup>4</sup> Like most mobilized national communities in the Soviet Union,<sup>5</sup> Azerbaijanis were also demanding freedom of movement, increased autonomy and the ability to engage in greater cultural expression. Ultimately, though, nationalism motivated the majority of politically mobilized groups. Azeri nationalism was initially directed against the Soviet Union, and took the form of demands for greater autonomy. During this period, while individual citizens could not organize formal political parties, they could act as movements.<sup>6</sup>

Among the newly established nationalist groups, the Popular Front (APF) movement, which brought together academics, university students, and dissidents, was the most popular. The group was soon recognized and gained support from members of the dissatisfied national public who sought challengers to the Soviet regime. Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh territorial conflict with Armenia and the Black January events, when Soviet troops entered Baku on the night of January 19, 1990, and killed 133 people while wounding 611,<sup>7</sup> was a turning point that greatly increased recognition of the Popular Front.

On June 16, 1989, Abulfaz Elchibey, a Soviet dissident and orientalist-historian, was elected chairman of the Popular Front. By the autumn of that year, the movement had already challenged the Communist party. It signed a protocol with Communist Party First Secretary Abdulrahman

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Gibbs. 1999. *Gorbachev's Glasnost: The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Glasnost*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Beissinger. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of Soviet Union*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Beissinger, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Gibbs, p.17.

<sup>5</sup> Beissinger, p.48

<sup>6</sup> Marina Ottaway. 2003. *Democracy Challenged, The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.53-54.

<sup>7</sup> Official website of the embassy of Azerbaijan in China, [http://www.azerbembassy.org.cn/rus/jan20\\_bg.html](http://www.azerbembassy.org.cn/rus/jan20_bg.html)

Vezirov on ten points, including legalizing the Popular Front, lifting the military curfew, and convening a special session of the Azerbaijani Parliament to pass a new sovereignty law. The law, which was largely written to the Popular Front's specifications, asserted Azerbaijan's right to defy federal authority, and even to secede from the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

In 1991 Azerbaijan declared its independence, and Ayaz Mutallibov became its first president, though he preferred to rely on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to run the country. The CIS, led by Russia which was backing Armenia, did not give Azerbaijan support on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which caused considerable anger throughout the country. Mutalibov was forced to resign in 1992.<sup>9</sup>

The APF, re-established as a party the same year, came to power by election. The 1992 presidential elections were the high point for democracy in Azerbaijan, with foreign diplomats and observers concluding that the elections were not manipulated.<sup>10</sup> People enjoyed some democratic freedoms under the Popular Front government; the press had more independence, open political debates were the norm, and criticism of the government was not punished. The APF generally put its liberal and democratic principles into practice: as chaotic as it was, and despite its failures and disappointments, the year the Popular Front was in power was one of political freedoms that Azerbaijan had never previously known. Unfortunately, however, this early promise was something that Azerbaijan's political culture was unable to sustain. Yet it provided an experience that would remain indelibly stamped in public memory.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the APF proved incapable of governing the country. The new pro-Turkish, nationalist government could not meet the challenges facing the nation. This failure led to the end of the democratic interlude in Azerbaijan's transition to independence.<sup>12</sup>

February 1993 marked a turning point for the Popular Front government when it failed to control the use of force, the most basic element of statehood. The slide began physically in Nagorno Karabakh, with the government losing control over its forces on the front.<sup>13</sup> Despite enjoying popular support across the nation, the Popular Front lacked the experience or organizational skills to achieve military success.<sup>14</sup> Azerbaijan lost

<sup>8</sup> Bill Keller. 1989. "Nationalists in Azerbaijan Win Big Concessions From Party Chief." *New York Times*, October 13.

<sup>9</sup> Shale Horowitz. 2004. *Identities Unbound: Escalating Conflict in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, p.59.

<sup>10</sup> Ottaway, p.55-56.

<sup>11</sup> Svante E. Cornell. 2011. *Azerbaijan since Independence*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, p.79-80.

<sup>12</sup> Cornell, p.79.

<sup>13</sup> Cornell, p.72.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Radnitz. 2012. "Oil in the Family: Managing Presidential Succession in Azerbaijan."

Karabakh and the surrounding lands to Armenian control. Elchibey's army fell apart, due to a lack of command structure and disloyalty among the commanders.<sup>15</sup>

The Azerbaijani Popular Front had many supporters, but it was a weak organization.<sup>16</sup> Surat Huseynov, the presidential envoy in Nagorno-Karabakh, soon refused to take orders and was removed from his position. He quickly gathered and armed a "private army," using military hardware left behind by the Russian army. In June 1993, Huseynov ousted the Popular Front, and replaced it with Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB general and the Communist Party's first secretary in Azerbaijan. This event marked the beginning of the Aliyev regime, which still runs the country today. Once again, the Azerbaijan Popular Front became the political opposition, this time under much harsher circumstances.

### **The Marginalization of the Opposition as a Result of Aliyev's Success**

One of the key elements in the success story of Heydar Aliyev, who remains popular today, is that he did not take power by force, even if the previous government was compelled to resign. He was not the main instigator of the transition. He was only invited to save the collapsing nation. There is no evidence to show that Heydar Aliyev had ambitions to become national leader. Thus, his government could easily convince the public that he was the Mustafa Kamal of Azerbaijan.

Aliyev's ability to promote stability, marked by the cease-fire with Armenia, and to increase Azerbaijan's international profile further reduced the credibility of the opposition in the eyes of the nation. Though it had once enjoyed enormous popularity, the AFP became the subject of criticism, questions, and even ridicule.

In 1994, Azerbaijan signed a 30-year production-sharing agreement with ten of the world's major oil companies. The so-called Contract of the Century put Azerbaijan in the international spotlight, finally attracting the attention of the major world powers who had long ignored Azerbaijan, even during the war with Armenia and the loss of parts of its territory. The nation had long been waiting for the world to take it seriously, and this did not happen under the rule of the Popular Front. The same year, the Aliyev government signed a cease-fire agreement with Armenia, ending six years of intensive fighting. Putting a stop to the military and civilian deaths proved to be extremely popular, though sporadic fighting continued afterwards. These two accomplishments were the greatest successes of the

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Democratization 19: 1, p.62

<sup>15</sup> Cornell, p.73.

<sup>16</sup> Ottaway, p. 56.

Aliyev government, ones that the nation could hardly ignore.

Unlike the Popular Front's nationalist, ideological, and pro-Turkish leaders, Aliyev preferred to work with those who had been educated and employed in the same Soviet institutions as he had. They were more pragmatic and competent functionaries who shared a common working language.<sup>17</sup> This characteristic of Heydar Aliyev was greatly appreciated by the Russian-speaking Azerbaijani elites, who felt isolated under the strong nationalist ideology of the previous government. At the time, they were the best educated people in society. Aliyev pursued a set of trans-regional and regional cooperation and transportation projects on the basis of real economic interests. He could bring Western interests to this once little-known country. But while cooperation with the West in the energy and economic sector was strong, collaboration in the political and security fields lagged far behind.<sup>18</sup>

All these achievements by Aliyev were interpreted as failures of the Popular Front. Aliyev himself often criticized the APF in his speeches. His main accusations were that the APF had lost its reputation because it had not been a legitimate government. "Although they were very good at delivering promising speeches in public places, they were not capable of running the country."<sup>19</sup> He also blamed them for ignoring the national interests of Azerbaijan in international decision-making processes,<sup>20</sup> even though they were not actually in government in 1990.

### **Birth of the Original Opposition Parties**

The early 1990s saw the formation of many political organizations, which had their roots in the Soviet glasnost and perestroika policies of the late 1980s. Many of these groups set up political parties, the majority of which either faded away or did not play an active role in the national political life. Among the new parties were several that identified themselves in the opposition, with most of their leaders being founders or members of the Popular Front. Their ideologies tended to be similar to those of the AFP. However, not all of them functioned effectively.

In 1992, Isa Gambar, deputy chairman of the AFP in 1990-1991 and parliamentary speaker during the AFP government, established the Musavat Party. Its ideology was based on Turkism, modernity and

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<sup>17</sup> Radnitz, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Leila Alieva. 2006. "EU and the South Caucasus," Paper presented at the conference "Looking Towards the East. Connecting the German and Finnish EU Presidencies" organized by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Center for Applied Policy Research, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Haydar Aliyev interview to Radio Ekho Moskvi, July 1997. [http://files.preslib.az/projects/toplu/v2/f3\\_7.pdf](http://files.preslib.az/projects/toplu/v2/f3_7.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Haydar Aliyev speech at the first congress of the New Azerbaijan Party. December 29, 1999. [http://files.preslib.az/projects/toplu/v2/f3\\_9.pdf](http://files.preslib.az/projects/toplu/v2/f3_9.pdf)

liberalism. Musavat is the modern successor to the pro-Turkish party of the same name that was established in 1911. Initially, it was called the Muslim Democratic Musavat Party, and supported pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist ideas. Its aim was unity for all Muslims, the restoration of independence to all Muslim nations, and help to all Muslim people. Most of the founders of the short-lived Azerbaijani Democratic Republic in the late 1910s were Musavat Party members. The party functioned underground during Soviet times. Currently, the Musavat Party is believed to be the second largest party after the ruling New Azerbaijan Party. Along with the Popular Front, Musavat became one of the leading opposition parties that continue to pose challenges to the ruling authorities today.

The early-mid 1990s saw the birth of a number of other opposition parties as well. The *Azerbaijan National Independence Party* was established in 1992 by Etibar Mammadov, one of the founders of AFP. Its ideology was based on nationalism and patriotism. The *Azerbaijan Liberal Party* was established by Lale Shovket Hajiyeva in 1995. Having majored in medicine, she served as Secretary of State in the Heydar Aliyev government from 1993 to 1994, when she resigned her position. The party ideology focused on the rule of law and human rights. The *Umid (Hope) Party* was established in 1993 by Abulfat Aliyev, a journalist and writer. It was not popular until 2002 when Iqbal Aghazade was elected as its leader. The ideology of the party highlighted nationalism and democracy. The founder of the *Azerbaijan People's Party*, Penah Huseyn, was one of the founders of the Popular Front and served as Secretary of State for the Popular Front government. Although Huseyn remained an active opposition politician, his party (established in 1995) did not distinguish itself. Focused on nationalistic values, the *Civic Solidarity Party* was established in 1992 by Azerbaijani poet Sabir Rustemkhanli. Although the party gained media attention for its leader's pro-Turkism statements, it was not politically active in addressing the situation in the country.

In the early and mid-2000s, a new range of opposition parties emerged in Azerbaijan. After Abulfaz Elchibey's death in 2000, the *Popular Front* was split into the *Classical Popular Front* led by Mirmahmud Miralioglu, and a reformist faction led by Ali Kerimli. The latter is the heir to Elchibey's party. The *Azerbaijan Democratic Party*, established by Serdar Jalaloghlu in 1991, became more active during this period. Jalaloghlu was a founder and board member of the Nakhchivan branch of the Popular Front from 1988 to 1990. The party's leadership was handed to Rasul Guliyev from 1996 to 2006. Currently, the party is run by Jalaloghlu. Rasul Guliyev, now a dissident, was a parliamentary speaker under Heydar Aliyev from 1993 to 1996. He established the *Open Society Party (Açıq Cəmiyyət Partiyası)* in 2007. Later, party leadership was transferred to Sulheddin Akber, deputy to the Minister of National Security under the Popular Front government.

On one hand, the founding of these various opposition parties could be seen as a good way to foster competition among political opposition groups in Azerbaijan; on the other hand, the establishment of so many parties split the opposition into many unnecessary fragments that prevented the opposition from working effectively. Since most of the opposition groups grew out of the AFP, the rapid growth of the new parties weakened the AFP, which was already fragile under the Aliyev regime, but did not create any new parties that would be competitive. Instead of one strong opposition party, there were almost ten weak ones that separately could not challenge the ruling regime. Among them, only Musavat and AFP could survive the pressure applied by the government.

Today, Azerbaijan has dozens of opposition parties that were established in the early and late 1990s, most of them with a weak or non-existent social base and little activity on the political stage. Their ideologies and political programs, as well as target constituencies, do not significantly differ. Even the mainstream opposition parties have difficulty mobilizing voters. Most Azerbaijani opposition parties are based around a single leader rather than focused on ideological commitments. Parties spend much of their time attacking each other rather than competing for voters. Most of the opposition parties are unknown to the general public. In fact, only the leaders of the APF and Musavat are widely recognized in the country.

In spite of harsh oppression by the government, the main opposition parties have not given up their struggle. Nevertheless, they have been suppressed from the beginning. Lacking funds, in part because the business community was supportive of Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), the opposition was unable to distribute benefits to potential supporters. In the financial sphere, the opposition parties could never compete against the regime.<sup>21</sup>

### **Elections and Beyond: The Opposition Parties' Losing Battle**

Under the Aliyev regime, the Popular Front and Musavat parties were particularly vulnerable to political persecution. The headquarters of the Popular Front in Baku were occupied by the police for several years and a number of its deputies were arrested. Some were accused of possessing weapons and others have been beaten and tortured.

After Ilham Aliyev came to power in 2003, the Baku city mayor turned down almost all opposition requests to hold rallies in the city squares. The opposition rejected violence as a technique of regime change and encouraged peaceful protests. Since the authorities even dispersed rallies that they had previously authorized, the opposition acted carefully

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<sup>21</sup> Radnitz, p.64.

to organize unauthorized demonstrations. Traditionally, the Azerbaijani opposition only had opportunities to act openly and legally during electoral campaigns.<sup>22</sup> They saw election years as a period of opportunity to draw the attention of voters and the international community to the wrongdoings of the Aliyev government. They tried to send as many messages as possible about the mistakes made by the government by taking advantage of the particular opportunities afforded by the pre-election environment. However, a closer look at the events during election years clearly shows that the Aliyev regime harshly challenged the opposition. It was subject to political repression in both the 2003 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections.

Since Aliyev the senior came to power in 1993, Azerbaijan has had four presidential and four parliamentary elections. Parliamentary elections are conducted under a majoritarian system, electing members in 125 single-mandate constituencies for a five-year term. The candidate with the highest number of votes gets the seat. The president is elected for a five-year term. A referendum in 2009 lifted the two-term limit for the president and allowed him to rule indefinitely.

Although some improvements were observed in the elections, the OSCE/ODIHR election observation reports mention failures to meet international norms in many areas, and failures to meet OSCE commitments. The authorities have been successful in manipulating and falsifying election results since 1995 and in preventing the opposition from mounting an effective challenge.<sup>23</sup> Over time, opposition representation in parliament has disappeared.

- In the 1995 parliamentary elections, 4 candidates from National Independence, 4 from the Popular Front, 1 from Civic Solidarity, 2 from the Azerbaijan Democratic Party and 1 from the Musavat Party won seats in parliament. Of 125 total seats, 53 belonged to the ruling New Azerbaijan Party and 55 were independents.
- In the 2000 parliamentary elections, Musavat, the Popular Front, Civic Solidarity and National Independence won 14 seats in total, while the New Azerbaijan Party had 79 seats.
- Five years later, in 2005, the Musavat, the Popular Front, Civic Solidarity and Umid parties had only 9 seats.
- In the most recent parliamentary elections in 2010, Musavat and Popular Front failed to win any seats in parliament.

In accordance with the legal requirements, candidates and parties can appeal to the electorate on state television and radio. Nevertheless, outside

<sup>22</sup> Arif Yunusov. 2011. "The impact of Arab Revolts on Azerbaijan's Political Scene. Eastern Partnership Community. <http://www.easternpartnership.org/publication/politics/2011-04-27/impact-arab-revolts-azerbaijan-s-political-scene>

<sup>23</sup> Radnitz, p. 70.

the limited free airtime during election periods, none of the main opposition figures had access to Azerbaijani television broadcasts, which are the most powerful means of disseminating information to the public. Thus the legally stipulated access during campaigns was seen as a great opportunity for the opposition to convey its political messages to the public.

Almost all national television channels favored the ruling regime by covering the president, the presidential administration, the government and the YAP during political and election prime time news coverage.<sup>24</sup> In some cases, printing houses would turn down orders from opposition parties due to pressure from local executives.<sup>25</sup> Although the opposition could use print media, except state newspapers, to reach their electorate, that type of media could not compete with television.

An atmosphere of fear and intimidation prevailed in all election years. The organization of public rallies and meetings with voters was also restricted by local authorities: opposition organizations were refused permission to gather in the center of Baku; supporters of opposition parties were detained by police during campaigns; and even authorized meetings were dispersed or banned.<sup>26</sup> Voters were pressured to withdraw their names from signature sheets, while candidates and their relatives were reported to have been subjected to intimidation.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the ruling party candidates held many campaign rallies, attended by large numbers of school children and employees of state-related entities.<sup>28</sup>

The 2003 presidential elections were followed by the arrests of many opposition activists who protested against what they deemed as fraudulent election results. The opposition objected to the declaration that Ilham Aliyev, son of late president Haydar Aliyev, had won in the first round. Police attacked peaceful demonstrators in front of the Musavat Party headquarters. Several thousand protestors gathered in Azadlig (Freedom) Square in the center of Baku the next day. Anticipating opposition protests, the government deployed soldiers and riot police to the scene, and demonstrators were violently dispersed;<sup>29</sup> four people were killed and many others were injured, including almost 100 police officers. Six hundred opposition members were detained as a result of the government

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<sup>24</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2005 and 2010 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. February 2006 and January 2011, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2000-2001 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. January 2001, p.10.

<sup>26</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. February 2006.

<sup>27</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2010 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. January 2011.

<sup>28</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 1998 Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan. 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Radnitz, p. 67

crackdown, accused of deliberately planning election day and post-election violence. Among the detainees were the secretary general of the ADP, and the chairpersons of two small parties belonging to the Our Azerbaijan Bloc, which supported Isa Gambar's candidacy.<sup>30</sup> Criminal proceedings were initiated against some 150 participants of the post-election protests.<sup>31</sup>

The authorities continued to make life difficult for the opposition by intimidating critics and spreading propaganda through the state-run media. The government detained many journalists in the aftermath of the 2003 demonstrations and temporarily shut down the popular opposition newspaper *Yeni Musavat* in 2004 and 2005. In February 2005, two journalists for the opposition newspaper *Azadlig* were beaten up.

The opposition used its chance to challenge the Aliyev regime in the 2005 parliamentary elections. As in 2003, a short but brutal crackdown put an end to street demonstrations, preventing a drawn-out struggle in which the opposition could occupy the square, generate media attention and encourage ordinary people to join.<sup>32</sup> A large number of MPs who won as independent candidates in the 2005 parliamentary elections were supporters of Aliyev, thus giving the president a comfortable majority in parliament.<sup>33</sup>

The opposition used the latest 2013 presidential elections as a tool to draw attention to the regime's faults, but not to challenge it. The National Council, a coalition of opposition groups, remained organizationally weak.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Azerbaijanis paid less attention to this election.<sup>35</sup>

### **Manipulation of the Political Arena: "Independent Candidates" and Puppet Opposition**

Artificially increasing the number of independent candidates was another tactic used by the government to block the opposition from gaining influence through elections. Independent or non-affiliated candidates in fact should not support or be affiliated with any particular political party or coalition; however, journalist investigations found out that independent candidates in most cases were partisans masquerading as independents.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2003 Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan. November 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Caviar Diplomacy: How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe. European Stability Initiative (ESI) Report. May 24, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Radnitz, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Radnitz, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Farid Guliyev. "Different Meanings of the October 2013 Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan: Elites, Opposition, and Citizens." *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 55, October 24, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Guliyev

<sup>36</sup> Rovshan Ismayilov. 2005. "Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Election: When is an Independent Candidate Truly Independent?" Eurasianet.org, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav103105a.shtml>.

In practice, most of them were supportive of the government<sup>37</sup> and the ruling party,<sup>38</sup> and even were affiliated with it. They often joined the ruling party in support of issues as a political bloc, marginalizing opposition members and blocking opposition members' proposals for the agendas of commission meetings. Among the so-called independents were many businessmen seeking the immunity from criminal prosecution that they would gain as MPs. The rest were NGO representatives, journalists and former officials.

In the 2000 parliamentary elections, registered independent candidates made up the largest group, with 147 independent candidates, while the pro-Aliyev YAP registered 140 candidates.<sup>39</sup> During the next parliamentary election period, more than half of all the 2,063 registered candidates were independents.<sup>40</sup> In the 2010 parliamentary elections, independent candidates again were more than half of all registered candidates.<sup>41</sup> Those candidates gained a significant percentage of seats in the last four parliamentary elections (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Percentage of seats won by independent candidates in the last four parliamentary elections.**

Year	Percentage of seats gained by independent candidates
1995	44%
2000	20%
2005	37%
2010	34%

Source: *Results of Parliamentary Elections*, The Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. July 15, 2011.

Besides gathering independent candidates to support its policy, the regime also organized “puppet” opposition parties. These parties strongly support the governmental rather than criticizing it. For example, the *Ana Veten (Motherland) Party*, registered in 1999 and led by Fazail Aghamali,

<sup>37</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. November 2005

<sup>38</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions on the 2010 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. November 2010.

<sup>39</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2000-2001 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. January 2001

<sup>40</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions on the 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. November 2005.

<sup>41</sup> OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Interim Report #1 on 2010 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. October 2010

defines itself as an opposition party, but its leaders explicitly support the government. Some of these parties even claimed to be new factions of the two mainstream opposition parties: *United Popular Front* established in 2004 by Gudrat Hasanguliyev and *Modern Musavat* established in 2001 by Hafiz Hajiyev prior to the presidential elections in 2003. Even if not explicitly supportive of the government, the *Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party* established in 2005 by Asim Mollazade is recognized by many as a “pocket opposition” because of the party leaders’ wealth, which is unusual among members of the opposition, and the party’s silence on many crucial issues. The party ideology is based on liberal democracy.

As a result of regime pressure, the opposition had only limited access to the electorate and potential supporters.<sup>42</sup> Opposition leaders did not have a chance to expand their resources; on the contrary, the existing resources gradually dwindled. Their activity remained limited to the capital, Baku. In the rare events when the opposition had a chance to deliver its message to the public, it used old slogans and focused only on the mistakes of the incumbents, rather than on promoting their own policies. To date, there is no opposition party that has succeeded in clearly articulating its political message, and, as a result, the traditional opposition groups have failed to win the attention of the new generation of politically active voters.

Pressure from the oil-rich and internationally supported government is not the only reason why the political opposition in Azerbaijan failed. It did not succeed in coming together. While opposition parties and groups often united in a single political bloc during campaign periods, this unity dissolved once the elections were over. No single leader could effectively act as a symbol of a united opposition. Moreover, the opposition was not successful in building a strategic plan within the coalition.<sup>43</sup> The Azerbaijani opposition is personality-driven,<sup>44</sup> which seriously hinders it from building a strong political ideology. The traditional opposition’s lack of an ideological appeal was one of the main reasons why the new generation of opposition-minded citizens refused to join it. However, the political opposition did come together after the elections to reject the election results<sup>45</sup> and protest some government decisions. Since for many years it could not secure permission from the Baku city mayor for peaceful protests in the city center, the opposition held some unauthorized actions that were

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<sup>42</sup> Valerie J. Bunce & Sharon L. Wolchik. 2008. “Azerbaijan’s 2005 Parliamentary Elections: A Failed Attempt at Transition.” Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, Number 89, September.

<sup>43</sup> Katy Pearce & Farid Guliyev. “Azerbaijan post-election report and what comes next.” Monkey Cage. October 15, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Pearce & Guliyev and Bunce & Wolchik. p.16.

<sup>45</sup> Bunce & Wolchik. p.16.

broken up by the police.<sup>46</sup> Although the opposition rejects violence as a technique and relies on peaceful protest,<sup>47</sup> the police interference and arrests were seen by society as violence. Additionally, these events gave the political opposition the image of a “street protest opposition” that was too old fashioned for a new generation of open-minded citizens.

Moreover, while their communication channels were blocked by the government, the traditional opposition was reluctant to take advantage of the new information technologies. Although Bunce and Wolchik argue that the opposition in Azerbaijan had access to electronic media, internet usage by the population remained limited.<sup>48</sup> In particular, the opposition groups failed to make the most of social media tools.<sup>49</sup> Most opposition parties do not have their own websites and their social media pages are disorganized. Their only access to the public is via opposition newspapers. However, they do not use this opportunity to deliver information about their platform or effective political messages. Most newspaper articles about opposition parties highlight the thoughts of party leaders, which makes the parties leader centered, rather than ideology focused. These problems and others have led younger activists – a new generation of opposition-minded Azerbaijanis – to criticize traditional opposition party leaders.

While an opposition victory in the presidential elections was difficult to imagine under the repressive Aliyev regime, Azerbaijanis desirous of change saw the parliamentary elections as the only possibility to achieve diversity in government. Thus, the failure of the opposition in the parliamentary elections significantly damaged its image as an effective challenger to the authoritarian Aliyev regime. Those failures led to the emergence of new opposition groups who wanted political change in the country, but did not want to join the traditional opposition to achieve these ends.

### **A New Generation and New Hope for Change**

The failure of the traditional opposition and fraud in the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections inspired some disappointed young people to establish their own organizations to increase political awareness and civic participations among Azerbaijanis. Of the first groups to appear, the most popular were the Dalgha youth movement, AN network and Ol movement.

Dalgha was established by seven students of the Azerbaijan State Economic University, the youngest 20, the oldest 22. One of its founders

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<sup>46</sup> The Guardian. Azerbaijani police break up opposition rally in run up to Eurovision. May 24, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Bunce & Wolchik. p.16.

<sup>48</sup> Valerie J. Bunce & Sharon L. Wolchik. p 8

<sup>49</sup> Pearce & Guliyev.

had been supportive of the traditional opposition's mission and had participated in its actions and events until 2004. However, soon he lost confidence and moved away from the established opposition parties. The mid-2000s was a period when the young generation was seeking a new, alternative opposition community, totally independent from the traditional opposition. Young people considered the traditional opposition's strategy too backward to challenge the Aliyev regime. Some young people established their own organizations, one of which was the Dalgha (Wave) youth movement. Its goal was to inspire the young generation to play an active role in democratizing the country, as well as establishing a strong civil society and state which operated according to the rule of law. Dalgha promotes liberal values, human rights, gender equality and access to better education through various trainings.<sup>50</sup>

The popularity of Dalgha increased mostly due to its protest actions,<sup>51</sup> which for many in Azerbaijan were bold. Members of the group involved in demonstrations were often taken to the police station and had trouble at their universities.<sup>52</sup> The movement mostly protested against corruption, rising prices, pollution and the forced movement of people from their settlements for public projects.

The AN network was organized by young graduates of Western universities, mainly European ones. One of them was Emin Milli, now a popular dissident. They mostly wanted to share the knowledge and skills that they had gained abroad to fill the gaps created by the local education system. AN leaders believed that the young generation was less open to universal values and sought to change that situation. Like Dalgha, they called on young people not to ignore public life in the country. One of AN's successes was using the internet to involve more people. AN was one of the first groups in the country that took full advantage of information technology by creating Yahoo groups and forums for discussions, sharing information and inviting people for events. They organized free lectures and interactive discussion clubs where Western values, philosophy and democracy were the main topics. AN's priority mission was to build a bridge between Western-educated Azerbaijanis and local students. Learning through entertainment was also part of AN: In movie clubs, young people could watch a film and share the message that they received from it. Unlike Dalgha, which relied on grants, AN preferred to be a grass roots movement.<sup>53</sup> Although the authorities broke it up, the network

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Fazilet Samedsoy, board member of the Dalgha movement, November 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan.

<sup>51</sup> Bunce & Wolchik. p.19.

<sup>52</sup> Ulvi Hasanli, the second chairman of the movement was expelled from the Azerbaijan State Economics University for his civic activity.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Rashad Shirin, one of the founders of the AN network. November 2013.

introduced a few young opinion leaders to Azerbaijani society, with Milli the most prominent.

Established in early 2006 by five young Azerbaijanis, OI is a liberal civic movement. Unhappy about the administration and falsification of the 2005 parliamentary elections, OI founders decided that in order to change the existing system, the development of civil society is more important than political activity. They believed that the significant lack of civic and political knowledge among the population should not be ignored. OI's biggest project was establishing the Free Thought University (Azad Fikir Universiteti), an alternative education institution launched in 2009 to educate young Azerbaijanis on human rights and democratic values. A Western-funded project to promote democracy, AFU's strategy of challenging the ruling government was through lectures. It acted as an alternative education project to give young people a platform for free and open discussions, based around learning democratic values. More than two hundred lectures were organized on issues such as human rights, democracy, economic development, global policy, gender issues, social science, philosophy and public activity. On April 10, 2013, the Chief Prosecutor's Office, sealed the doors of AFU and closed the school, without warning the project coordinators about what was coming.<sup>54</sup>

All three movements had latent political ambitions: to change the political culture in the country, establish a strong civil society that could make government responsible, and democratize the country. They aimed to form a more European community in the country which would be open to changes. However, none of them had the ambitions of being in government. They were more focused on training society what democracy is and making it ready to undertake serious political changes. They worked to keep the government responsible, but not to replace it with a new set of authorities. In general, the movements functioned more like civil society activists than trying to establish their own political platforms and supporting electorate.

The 2010 parliamentary elections led to the emergence of three new groups: Positive Change (Müsbət Dəyişiklik), Free Youth (Azad Gənclik) and N!DA. Like the previous parliamentary elections, the 2010 elections also ended with the failure of the opposition and the falsification of the vote totals.

The young people who established Positive Change were volunteers working for the campaign of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a prominent young candidate competing for a parliamentary seat in 2010. Although Hajiyev, who ran his campaign under the slogan "Positive Change," lost the election,

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Baku, Azerbaijan

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Vugar Salamli, one of the founders of the OI movement. November 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan

which Western observers deemed had failed to meet democratic standards, the group of 35 young people, deeply disappointed by their experience with election falsification, but inspired by their campaign work, re-grouped to pursue long term objectives. They aimed to bring together those youth who wanted to change the country through non-traditional methods. Like the youth groups formed in 2005, they focused on increasing awareness of public life, which included respect for the constitution, fighting against domestic violence, and the importance of good leadership. Mostly local students and graduates of Turkish universities, the youngest among the founders was 18 years old and the oldest was 28.<sup>55</sup>

The Free Youth movement was created in early 2011 by four young Azerbaijanis,<sup>56</sup> students and recent graduates of local universities, the youngest being 20 years old and the oldest 25. One of the founders was Ulvi Hasanli, once second chairman of the Dalgha movement. The inspiration for establishing the new group also grew out of the 2010 parliamentary elections. Like the members of Positive Change, these young activists also sought to bring young people together to change the country. Similar to other youth groups, Free Youth also focused on public awareness, organizing flashmobs to interest people in reading books, film festivals, lectures, and many other activities.<sup>57</sup>

The N!DA civic movement was established by four young people soon after the appearance of the Free Youth movement. Started in February 2011, the movement is one of the most prominent forces within the new opposition. Its manifesto says that “N!DA wants freedom, justice and truth. We don’t want to come to power for this purpose. But N!DA wants change in the country. N!DA wants a government established through popular will.”<sup>58</sup> Seven members of the movement, mostly board members and founders, were arrested in spring 2013. The charges brought against them include possession of arms and narcotics, which they and their supporters say are unfounded.<sup>59</sup> The official narrative of the N!DA case has mixed allegations of “Facebook revolution” with suggestions that the youth group planned to engage in violence, and hints that foreign powers were behind the whole thing.<sup>60</sup> The movement organized several protest actions in the country. Shortly before the arrests, the group promoted two protest actions criticizing non-combat soldier deaths in the Azerbaijani army. One of the

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Nermin Rehimli, one of the founders of the Positive Change movement. November 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan.

<sup>56</sup> Ulvi Hasanli, one of the founders, was the second chairman of the Dalgha youth movement.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Ulvi Hasanli, one of the founders of the Free Youth movement. November 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan

<sup>58</sup> Official website of N!DA movement: <http://www.N!DAvh.org/manifest>

<sup>59</sup> Shahla Sultanova. 2013. Harlem Shakedown in Azerbaijan. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, May 22.

<sup>60</sup> Sultanova.

peculiarities of N!DA was its rejection of a leadership system. It was run by a board to avoid idealizing a single individual as the driving force behind the movement.

### **Republican Alternative (ReAl)**

ReAl (Republican Alternative) is the only group among the new opposition that has overt political ambitions and therefore deserves separate analysis.<sup>61</sup> It is the most popular of the new opposition groups in the country and its large support base gives it a potentially promising future. Although new to the political arena in Azerbaijan, the organization quickly won recognition among the newly emerging middle class of the country, a feat that both the traditional opposition and other fragments of the new opposition failed to achieve. Its charter includes a free market economy, an open society and a rule-of-law state as the main platform planks. In fact, those elements do not distinguish ReAl from other opposition forces since they all, along with the government, mention such fundamentals as mission priorities. One of the reasons for the group's success could be the background of its founders and current board members. ReAl is the first political group that could overcome the backwards image of the traditional opposition and the emotional "too young" and unambitious image of the new opposition.

It was established in early 2009 as a protest response to the constitutional amendment which lifted the two-term limit for the Azerbaijani presidency. Seeing the leader's extended rule as a serious blemish on the basic foundations of the republic, ReAl seeks to re-build a strong democratic system. Thus, its ideology is based on republican values. Although ReAl founders shared most of the traditional opposition's values in building democracy in Azerbaijan, they did not join those groups to avoid repeating the traditional opposition's failure to gain power in the early 1990s and in each election afterwards. Besides, its target audience was different: the new generation of Azerbaijanis who represent the middle class.

ReAl's strategy focuses on building a parliamentary republic, which is its main distinction among the opposition groups. Another novelty the organization promises to implement if it comes to power is to unite existing small administrative divisions in the country into bigger units that they call "el," which means county. Els will have self-governance. Establishing a Credit Insurance Fund in order to provide small and medium-sized entrepreneurs with credit insurance is also included in the platform.<sup>62</sup>

The party leader and the founder of the organization Ilgar Mammadov was a deputy chairman of the opposition National Independence Party

<sup>61</sup> All information about ReAl is based on leaflet printed out by ReAl office in Baku and interview with Natig Jafarly, executive secretary of ReAl board and one of the founders. November 14, 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan.

<sup>62</sup> Leaflet printed out by ReAl office in 2013.

between 1998 and 2003. A graduate of Central European University, Mammadov is one of the harshest critics of the traditional opposition leaders. He often demanded that they should either leave politics or adopt reforms.

All six founders of ReAl, including Mammadov, had been popular opinion leaders in Azerbaijan. In their late 30s and early 40s, most of the current twelve board members also share the same popularity. As experts in the military, economy, legislation, human rights, political science and history, most have participated in long-term and short-term exchange programs in Western countries. Most have advanced Russian and good knowledge of English. Another important characteristic of ReAl leaders is their financial status. Besides their political activity, almost all of them have jobs, which make it possible to own property, such as a house and a car, a sign of relative success in Azerbaijani society. Thus, the organization could break the stereotype that opposition members are typically a group of unsuccessful jobless people or those who are seeking opportunities to capture the government to get rich. While from time to time ordinary Azerbaijanis and the local media raise questions about where mainstream opposition parties and their leaders get their money<sup>63</sup> and why their supporters are jobless and poor, the questions remain unanswered. Yet there is no room to raise the same questions about ReAl leaders. It seems that they are attractive to a newly emerging middle class, who share the experiences, life style and political thoughts that are ReAl's driving force. For this reason, the organization gets support not only from unhappy low income people and mettlesome youth, but also from those who do not experience financial difficulty, but want a better system of governance in the country. As its name suggests, ReAl claims to be alternative to both the government and the opposition.<sup>64</sup>

Although ReAl is not hostile to the classic opposition and shows its support on occasion, its backers do not want it to be affiliated with the traditional opposition. During the 2013 elections, it was once again obvious that its popularity is largely due to it being different from the traditional opposition. ReAl's decision not to join the National Council, a union of opposition forces in Azerbaijan established during the 2013 presidential election period, was applauded by the majority of its supporters. Considering the fact that its supporters are middle-aged Azerbaijanis, I posit that the need for the formation of an opposition group with a new strategy was significant.

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<sup>63</sup> Azeri Press Agency (APA). February 6, 2012. [http://az.apa.az/xeber\\_Siyavush\\_Novruzov:\\_%E2%80%9CMuxalifet\\_partiyalari\\_\\_250171.html](http://az.apa.az/xeber_Siyavush_Novruzov:_%E2%80%9CMuxalifet_partiyalari__250171.html)

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Natig Jafarly, executive secretary of ReAl board and one of its founders. November 14, 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan.

Although reluctant to officially register as a political party, ReAl's participated for the first time in Azerbaijani politics in the 2013 presidential elections. It was the first political group among the new opposition to campaign. While in pre-trial detention, Ilgar Mammadov sought to run for the presidency, but was rejected by the Central Election Committee. Mammadov was arrested in February 2013 and charged with staging riots in the town of Ismayilli, which he visited during the unrest there. Expecting failure, ReAl took the advantage of the 2013 elections to attract wider recognition in the country.

No matter how promising the future of ReAl is, the organization does not enjoy the same level of recognition throughout the country which Musavat and AFP have enjoyed for many years. The government has for a long time strictly controlled all traditional radio and television broadcasting,<sup>65</sup> which is the main information source for Azerbaijani people. With mainstream communication channels being blocked, the organization has to limit itself to internet media as a means of communication, but this audience is limited to those who are on-line. Although the state statistics committee estimates that 50 percent of the population uses the internet,<sup>66</sup> the reliability of this number is in doubt.

In order to change the ruling regime, possibly through elections, ReAl needs to win popular support among Azerbaijanis, a task that does not seem feasible while the state controls the mainstream broadcast media. Finding alternative communication channels may take many years unless new discoveries occur in information technology that make it possible to reach a broader audience without state interference.

## **Parties vs. Movements: A New Mode of Opposition in Azerbaijan**

The new opposition groups in Azerbaijan were established mainly by young people who had no affiliation to the traditional opposition, neither in past, nor at the time when they created the new groups. Although recognized as part of the opposition by the general public, with the exception of ReAl, none of these groups see themselves as oppositional or want to be connected to the general opposition. The new opposition consists of young people who find it hard to work with the traditional opposition, which is not open to reform and actively courts public support only during election campaigns. Besides, they do not want to carry the heavy burden of the mistakes made by the traditional opposition in the past. They prefer

<sup>65</sup> Azerbaijan's Critical Voices in Danger, Semi-Annual Azerbaijan Freedom of Expression Report. Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety. January 01-July 01, 2012, p. 28. [http://www.ifex.org/azerbaijan/2012/08/16/irfs\\_freedom\\_of\\_expression\\_report.pdf](http://www.ifex.org/azerbaijan/2012/08/16/irfs_freedom_of_expression_report.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan. *Information Society The basic infrastructure of the information*. (Informasiya Cəmiyyəti, İKT-nin əsas infrastruktur göstəriciləri), 2012.

to act as civil movements or NGOs with no political ambitions. The new opposition drew the lesson from the traditional opposition's participation in previous elections that overtly political forms of struggle inevitably fail under strong pressure from the Aliyev regime.

Nevertheless, the new opposition does not ignore politics; in fact, most of the activists have strong political ambitions. However, they prefer to establish their electorate first, guiding them in what the most important issues for the country and society should be. For example, Positive Change mostly focuses on training leaders. OI established the Free Youth University. The AN network focused on discussions, offering free lectures twice a week on democracy and freedom of expression and media. It was the government pressure on these youth groups that forced them into the opposition and made their most active members and leaders more effective than their counterparts from the traditional opposition.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, it is hard to deny the influence of the traditional opposition on the emergence of new ones; however, the impact came not through inspiration, but disappointment in the former. The falsification of the two previous parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2010 also played a strong role in the evolution of the new opposition. Almost all the groups in the new wave believed that challenging the Aliyev system by using political parties would be ineffective and that new methods should be applied to win some success. After the serious and less fully anticipated failure of the traditional opposition in the 2003 presidential elections, it was expected that the regime opponents would have at least some success in the 2005 parliamentary elections. The subsequent collapse of the traditional opposition in that campaign led to distrust among the population. Those interested in political and civic activism began searching for new oppositional forces that would act on a different strategy, thereby giving the newly created civic movements an advantage in relation to their older colleagues. Although, at that time, there were plenty of civic youth organizations, the majority did not raise their voices about violations of human rights or the need for democratic leadership and government responsibility.

In this way, the new opposition groups began to fill the gap among existing opposition forces. But only a few of them emerged after the 2005 elections. As they gained popularity, they also began to receive more attention from the authorities. Their promotion of "freedom" and "government responsibility" came under pressure. The new opposition groups

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<sup>67</sup> Adnan Hajizade, one of the founders of the OI network, and Emin Milli, one of the founders of AN network were arrested in 2009 on trumped up hooliganism charges. Ulvi Hasanli, one of the chairmen of Dalgha, was expelled from the Azerbaijan State Economic University for his activity. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested in 2011 on charges of evading military service, which he denied, and was sentenced to two years in prison. All three were released prior to the expiration of their terms.

often received denials in their applications for venues where they could hold their activities, their members experienced problems at universities, and the founders of some of the groups were arrested. The AN network gradually had to stop its work. OI was silent for a while, until it launched the Free Thought University in 2009. Thus, the demand for alternative opposition groups was growing as the government increased its pressure on civic youth movements. The 2010 parliamentary elections brought new inspiration to fill the gap, driven by the most recent failure of the traditional opposition and the falsification of voting results.<sup>68</sup>

The signifying characteristic of the new opposition in Azerbaijan is its preference for presenting itself as a civic movement rather than a political party. The new oppositionists believe that society should be ready to embrace democracy, understand the importance of human rights and stand for them. That very fact made the new opposition avoid overt political ambitions, while trying to work within the larger framework of civil society. With the exception of ReAI, all new opposition groups refuse to explicitly state their political ambitions, but do not deny the fact that they have latent ambitions, including such goals as changing the authoritarian ruling system, which, in fact, is the main goal of the traditional opposition. In essence, the new opposition prefers to bring change by building a democratic civil society while the old one saw taking power as the only realistic option. However, no matter how much the new opposition tries to avoid being labelled as an opposition, the government continued to treat them as serious opposition forces. Thus, it was almost impossible for them to fully avoid being in the same line with the traditional opposition, at least as far as the Azerbaijani government is concerned.

Asserting independence from political parties attracted those who trusted neither the government nor the traditional opposition. The new opposition was more creative and more colorful; each group worked on different projects, used different slogans, and disseminated different messages. Their main focus was an awareness of the elements of democracy, which has never been a strategy of the traditional opposition. Additionally, the new alternative opposition was more open to discussing topics like gender, the family, religion and others that were considered taboos in Azerbaijan's political culture. For the first time, they began promoting social change that they believe will drive political change in the country. In particular, young activists were critical of some traditional values, like early marriages and kinship preferences in the business sphere, that they considered to be obstacles for democracy.

Although it is not supportive of the traditional opposition, the new one did not publicly question its effectiveness until recently. In 2012, for

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Nermin Rehimli, founder of Positive Change, Ulvi Hasanli, founder of Free Youth, Aygun Penceliyeva, board member of N!DA. November 2013. Baku, Azerbaijan.

example, Milli questioned the ability of opposition politicians to lead charge. The dispute reflects not only a difference in perspective on tactics, but also an apparent generational divide between the middle-aged Gambar and Kerimli, who entered politics under Soviet rule, and younger, often foreign-educated, activists, who have come of age in an era when change can seem just a mouse-click away.<sup>69</sup>

Milli, a 32-year-old blogger and former political prisoner, criticized Gambar for not joining street protesters in 2003 to condemn the fraud in the presidential election, which brought Ilham Aliyev to power. Gambar was one of the candidates.

“Gambar’s absence is a passivity born of alleged international diplomatic pressure and a fear of losing supposed party access to foreign funding. We cannot let it happen again. We must PURIFY the democratic struggle first, and then we will WIN. Gambar and Kerimli should continue “their activities as experienced politicians, but not as party leaders. They fought for democracy, but were not successful.”<sup>70</sup>

The ability of the traditional opposition leaders to bring democratic change to Azerbaijan was questioned by some even before Milli raised the issue. When he articulated their thinking, a significant number of politically active people supported him.

Similarly, 31-year-old democracy activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, who spent over a year in prison on charges of dodging military service after he called for anti-government protests via Facebook, has criticized the opposition for failing to make its political message clear.

“It is not clear who will be foreign affairs minister, deputy minister, what their potential is, what specifically the foreign policy will be. Who will be in what position and based on what qualifications? Why are those people better than those who are in government now? What will happen to those who hold positions in the current government? If they will be released, is there a team to replace them?”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Shahla Sultanova. 2012. “Do Azerbaijan’s Opposition Leaders Face a Mid-Life Crisis?” EurasiaNet. September 17.

<sup>70</sup> Sultanova. “Do Azerbaijan’s Opposition Leaders Face a Mid-Life Crisis?”

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Bakhtiyar Hajiyev. 2012. September 2012. Baku, Azerbaijan

## **Conclusion**

The opposition in Azerbaijan, both traditional and new, has so far failed to challenge the Aliyev regime. The main reason for this failure is the tactics of oppression and manipulation employed by the authoritarian government. Additionally, many members of the opposition also connect their lack of success to the international community's failure to denounce the wrongdoing of the Azerbaijani government. In fact, western countries have had little interest in replacing the authoritarian Aliyev government. By putting their own national interests in Azerbaijani energy above free and fair elections, they preferred to turn a blind eye toward the worsening human rights situation and increasingly authoritarian nature of the ruling elite and, in some cases, actively opposed regime change.

However, the traditional opposition's reluctance to change its ideology, party structure and political communication channels also makes it unappealing to the new generation of political activists and voters. The similar ideologies and messages among opposition parties make them seem like interchangeable parts of an umbrella, rather than different political elites competing with one another. Thus, the new generation of anti-regime activists does not feel motivated to join the opposition parties' struggle against the regime, preferring to act individually or to join youth organizations that define themselves as apolitical to differentiate themselves from the opposition parties.

It remains to be seen if the strategy of the new opposition will work. On one hand, divisions among the traditional and new oppositions may make the overall opposition movement more vulnerable and easier for the government to silence. On the other hand, the strategy of changing society may be effective over the long-term, leading to greater change than the traditional opposition has been able to achieve so far.

