Different Meanings of the October 2013 Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan: Elites, Opposition, and Citizens

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Abstract
This article offers a contextual analysis of the Azerbaijani October 2013 presidential elections making a number of arguments: (1) during good times (when economic and political shocks are absent), elections are unlikely to induce incumbent defeat or democratic breakthrough; this explains why the October elections were business as usual; (2) the October elections had different roles and meanings for different actors: winning with a fabricated landslide was used by the leader to signal his own and his regime’s strength and to intimidate opponents; for the opposition, it was an arena to mobilize support and to expose government corruption; for citizens, elections were less relevant as something affecting their everyday lives; (3) many citizens hold an instrumental and clientelistic view of government as a system to deliver particularistic services which matches well with the clientelism at higher political levels and might complicate collective action and impede the prospects of the country’s democratization in the future.

Certainty of the Election Results
Most modern authoritarian regimes hold regular elections that allow opposition candidates to compete for government offices. Yet, as the playing field is skewed towards the ruling party, opponents have no real chance to win. Under such conditions, elections sometimes can increase the prospects of liberalization or even democratization of authoritarian regimes. However, in the absence of economic or political crises, which would result in division among ruling elites and loss of support for the regime, elections are not likely to induce incumbent defeat. Instead, they will likely serve to shore up the survival prospects of the existing regime.

Contestation during the October 9 elections in Azerbaijan was not fair as existing political and economic conditions favoured the incumbent’s victory. Ilham Aliyev, now 51, has served as president for ten years since he succeeded his father Heydar in 2003. The unprecedented oil boom allowed Aliyev’s government to accumulate great wealth in the state and spend it (the assets of the state oil fund, the nation’s savings fund, reached US$34 billion this year). A large amount of public funds has already been spent in a relatively short period of time and mainly on infrastructure projects. Under conditions of weak government oversight and an ‘opaque’ procurement system, there is plenty of room for diverting these funds into officials’ pockets. This increase in state spending ensured the loyalty of elites.

Thanks to the pre-emptive measures taken in 2009 to scrap presidential term limits, which had been set at two terms, the president could now run for a third (and more) term. Alleged coups in 2005 notwithstanding, Aliyev’s political power has not been seriously challenged by contenders from within the elite. There are no immediate expectations that he will step down. As economic and political crises were notably absent during this year’s election cycle, conditions were simply not ripe for any government turnover, let alone regime transition.

Even before the voting began, it was known who was going to win. In an election deemed deeply flawed by international observers, President Aliyev secured a third term in office. The incumbent was so confident in his victory that he did not run an election campaign (except for the fact that state-run TV channels were running it for him), did not appear in televised debates and even had his inauguration prepared before official results were announced. Such certainty contrasts sharply with election contests in democratic countries, which are characterized by high levels of ex-ante uncertainty as to who will be the winner.

Even though the election outcomes were pre-determined, the elections were not unimportant or meaningless. In this essay, I show that the October elections had different meanings and played different roles for three distinct sets of relevant actors: the regime, the opposition, and the population. First, for the regime actors—the incumbent president and ruling elites—the election was an act of projecting strength and intimidating potential opponents. Second, for the old opposition parties it was a chance to contest the hegemony of the current leadership and its legitimacy, and for the new entrant political movement REAL, it was a learning experience and an opportunity to prepare for future elections. Third, for the citizens, who have largely clientelistic-particularistic expectations and an instrumental view of government, voting was less relevant as many believe that elections were not going to bring about changes affecting their lives.
Elections—Different Roles for Different Actors

Ruling elites
For the president and the elite, the landslide victory in the October elections signalled the regime’s strength and the futility of any opposition. The voting took place at a time when the regime had been in place for twenty years and had already consolidated power sufficiently so that it had the ability to hold and win elections. Patronage-based elites compete with each other. Their rivalries, often reported in local opposition newspapers, have remained peaceful throughout the years. The ongoing oil boom significantly enhanced the leader’s ability to share the spoils with the elites. A distinct feature of the core group within the elites is its remarkable entrenchment and stability: 20 out of a total number of 43 key ministers and high government officials have served in their positions for more than 10 years. Moreover, families and inter-marriages cement Azerbaijani elite solidarity. Some Azerbaijani parliamentary members, ministers and state officials are related to each other as parents-in-law as their sons and daughters are married to each other. Finally, the regime-state fusion is an additional factor complicating internal elite division and the emergence of strong elite contenders. The regime’s patronage network thoroughly ‘penetrates’ the state apparatus leaving no space for bureaucratic autonomy and thus no space for a moderate opposition to emerge from within the state elite. In other words, the regime and the state apparatus are merged into one hard-line actor who is ‘unconditionally committed to perpetuating the dictator’s rule’.

Opposition
If for the ruling elites the elections served to demonstrate how powerful their regime is, for traditional opposition parties, united for the first time into a pre-electoral coalition called the National Council, it was an opportunity to attempt to change the status quo, to rally support, and ‘to demonstrate that the emperor is naked’ by exposing government corruption, in an effort to win next time. Even though the opposition parties joined forces, mobilized supporters to their rallies, and their leader Jamil Hasanli used allocated airtime on TV to criticize the president’s family and government for corruption and increasing authoritarianism, the opposition parties included in the National Council remained organizationally weak and deprived of financial and other resources. One indicator to gauge the strength of opposition under authoritarianism is the extent to which its members are represented in the legislature. If an opposition presents a viable threat to the regime and cannot be bribed by rents, the regime will try to bargain with it and offer parliament seats as policy concessions. In Azerbaijan, the government does not seem to take the official opposition parties as a serious threat as none of these parties have their deputies in the parliament after the last parliamentary elections were held in 2010.

REAL, the Republican Alternative movement, is an emerging opposition group, which has been working to establish a new political party with a strong programmatic platform. Its leader, Ilgar Mammadov, jailed earlier this year, was legally barred from running. Nevertheless, this year’s electoral participation was a chance for the movement’s leaders to enter Azerbaijani politics as a new political force and prepare for more active participation in future elections. This will not be an easy task given how few people regard and value political parties. The Caucasus Research Resource Center’s (CRRC) surveys show that political parties are among the institutions least trusted by the people: only 16% of Azerbaijanis admitted trusting political parties.

People
For ordinary citizens, the October elections seem to be less relevant than for any of the other actors. For many Azerbaijanis, presidential elections were not seen as an important event because they believed that they will not affect their daily lives and because of the kind of attitudes people hold towards political participation in general. One opinion poll conducted in 2012 found that about 43% of respondents were of the opinion that elections had no influence on the welfare of their family. It is difficult to imagine active voters with an interest in elections who do not discuss politics in private or do not read newspapers with political content. Voters in Azerbaijan are interested in neither. Survey evidence suggests that 32% of Azerbaijanis said they never discuss politics with friends/close relatives, and nearly 80% said they do not read print newspapers and news magazines that have political and current events content.

To cite more anecdotal evidence, I visited Baku during the election week and found passivity and lack of interest among some interlocutors in following candidate campaigns and going to the polls to vote. There was low visibility of campaigning, such as posters for candidates, except at some polling stations (This does not include large portraits of the founding president that dot the capital and other cities). Campaigning was limited to a special one-hour TV debate programme aired on only one TV channel, and occasional opposition rallies of loyal supporters were held in Baku before the voting day. More active deliberation was observed among opposition-minded users and pro-regime supporters on Facebook and other social media. Official results put the turnout figure at 72.1%, but considering the extent of
Attitudes towards government and clientelism

The attitude of citizens toward elections is shaped by the values and orientations they hold about voting as an essential component of democracy. CRRC surveys show that about half of the population considers Azerbaijan to be a full democracy or democracy with minor problems, 26% a democracy with major problems, and 14% not a democracy. About 63% Azerbaijanis believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, while for 17% it matters little what kind of government there is. Thus, a majority of the population do have pro-democracy beliefs.

But what do Azerbaijanis mean by democratic governance? This question is difficult to answer with the available survey data, but some preliminary inferences from this data can be drawn. First, Azerbaijanis tend to have attitudes towards government that are instrumental and clientelistic. Second, it is possible that people view democracy, their preferred form of rule, and government in general primarily in instrumental terms as a stable mechanism for delivering services and benefits to their family or neighbourhood. When asked to list most important issues facing the country at the moment, most respondents indicated unresolved conflicts (which is not surprising), followed by a set of economic and social issues such as unemployment, poverty, corruption, low pensions and wages. It is telling that more intrinsically democratic values like violation of human rights are of marginal salience to the people.

Clientelism seems to be another important aspect of the people’s value system. Clientelism in attitudes is difficult to measure directly, but respondents’ view of government’s role and the importance of connections could be a rough proxy. According to the CRRC, a majority of Azerbaijanis holds a paternalistic view of government: 66% agreed with the statement that ‘People are like children; the government should take care of them like a parent’. 20% held a more contractarian, ‘government like an employer’ view of the citizen-government relationship. When asked about factors determining finding a good job, most respondents (31%) said connections were the most important factor, along with education (21%) and doing favours for the ‘right’ people (another 17%). Nearly 90% of Azerbaijanis agreed that family values are an important characteristic of Azerbaijani society. Azerbaijanis are also more likely to trust their kin than their compatriots: 97% respondents said they trusted ‘a lot’ people in their family, whereas as many as 70% said they did not trust people in their country (26% trusted rather moderately).

Such views also dominate citizens’ explanations for why they support the incumbent president. Supporters seem to care about stability understood in economic terms. According to Rufat Garagozlu, head of the sociological service ADAM, ‘[Those who back Aliyev] fear losing their jobs and revenues in case of political change’. ‘When you ask such people whether they want democracy or stability, they say they want stable development, even with restricted freedoms. Even though they have problems because of corruption, they say they are not sure what will happen if other forces come to power’, Garagozlu said. In a brief survey carried out in the capital Baku, among the reasons for voting for Aliyev respondents mentioned the following: improved living standards, including wages and pensions; new parks and a new beautiful look for the city; the lack of viable alternatives; being used to having Aliyev as president; he will be elected anyways; and Aliyev’s elites have ‘full stomachs’ while the alternative candidates are hungry and unpredictable.

Azerbaijan therefore is a society in which people emphasize family values, connections and favours, and manipulation of the electoral process and ballot-rigging, it is not clear whether that number reflects the actual participation in the voting.

It is true that two thirds (68%) of Azerbaijanis admitted they would participate in a presidential election if held the following Sunday (22% said they would not). It is quite likely that many said they would participate because such participation is socially desirable or perhaps even administratively prescribed for public sector employees and teachers. About one fourth (24%) did not believe that voting was important for citizens. In addition, 43% did not approve of participating in protest actions (28% were positive, 16% said ‘I do not know’). Notably, about 38% of respondents said they did not vote in the most recent elections (61% said they did).

It is also possible that those who are sceptical about voting hold this view because they believe that the elections are fraudulent. About 43% of Azerbaijanis identified the most recent 2010 parliamentary election as fair, but about 38% said they do not know. Such a large number of ‘I do not know’ responses indicate ignorance, indifference, or fear. Survey experts observed that Azerbaijan tends to generally abstain from answering political or sensitive questions in surveys. For example, when asked about whether the country’s domestic politics is moving in the right direction, 20% of the surveyed said they do not know (and interestingly, 26% said domestic politics does not change at all). Indifference may be due to the perception that elections are not clean or that the outcome of voting is fabricated. About 40% believe people are not allowed to express themselves openly (47% said they are)—indirect evidence that fear might be at work.
have low levels of societal trust. Other forms of informal transactions and practices are common. These types of attitudes are highly compatible with clientelism at the higher political level, which can be defined as the asymmetric relationship of power between patrons and clients, in which patrons exchange resources with clients in return for clients’ vote, support and loyalty. Clientelistic relationships are oriented toward the provision of patronage, particularistic benefits rather than public goods, and are more amenable to corruption.

Conclusion
The October presidential elections had different meanings for the different actors involved: for the incumbent, victory with a large margin was meant to signal regime strength and deflect potential dissent; for opposition groups, the elections were a chance to rally support and debunk regime legitimacy; for the citizens, the elections were less relevant as something affecting their everyday lives. Whether the role of elections will change in the future will very much depend on the change in context. What seems clear is that without economic and political crises, elections are unlikely to induce incumbent defeat or democratic breakthrough. While elections are an important arena of contestation, it is economic crisis as well as other exogenous shocks and changes in the power elites that will open a window of opportunity for change.

Many people in Azerbaijan hold instrumental and clientelistic views of government as a system to deliver particularistic services which matches well with the clientelism at the higher political levels and might complicate collective action and impede the prospects for the country’s democratization in the future.

About the Author
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