

CRS Report for Congress

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Azerbaijan's 2003 Presidential Election and Succession: Implications for U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report discusses the victory of Ilkham Aliyev — the son and designated political heir of ailing incumbent Heydar Aliyev — in Azerbaijan's October 15, 2003, presidential election. It describes the campaign and results, and examines implications of this political succession for Azerbaijani and U.S. interests. This report will not be updated. Related reports include CRS Issue Brief IB95024, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, updated regularly.

Background

Since achieving independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been convulsed by secessionism by its Nagorno Karabakh (NK) region, civil disorder resulting in the overthrow of presidents in 1992 and 1993, and a steep economic decline that has left large parts of the population in poverty. The exploitation of oil and natural gas resources — in particular large offshore reserves in the Caspian Sea — may improve living standards, if economic reform and anti-corruption efforts gain headway. Democratic reforms are halting, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other observers, who judged that neither presidential elections held in 1993 and 1998 (in which long-time leader Heydar Aliyev ran) nor legislative races in 1995 and 2000 were “free and fair.” The United States and others in the international community have urged Azerbaijan to improve its electoral record and have provided it with extensive democratization aid. At the same time, U.S. interests have been served by Azerbaijan's support for the war on terrorism and its efforts to build oil and gas export pipelines to Western markets.

The run-up to the October 15, 2003, presidential election witnessed the declining health of candidate and incumbent President Heydar Aliyev. Collapsing in April of reported heart problems, he was in and out of hospital, and in August was flown to the United States for treatment. Heydar Aliyev's continued ill health forced the existing leadership group to hedge by adding Heydar's son, Ilkham, to the ballot, and he pledged to retain his father's personnel and policies. Ilkham Aliyev also was appointed prime

minister in August, the first in the constitutional line of succession, as another hedge in case his father died before the election. As the election neared, Heydar Aliyev's health did not improve and he withdrew from the race in early October in favor of his son, marking the possible end of the Heydar Aliyev era.

In anticipation of the 2003 presidential race, a new unified electoral code was approved by the legislature in June. Many of the suggestions of the Council of Europe's Vienna Commission and electoral NGOs were incorporated into the law, but a major flaw was continued governmental control over the electoral commissions (National Democratic Institute, *Statement on the Proposed Unified Election Code*, Apr. 28). The OSCE reported some irregularities during the nomination and registration of candidates for president. Eight candidates ended up on the ballot (after four withdrew), of whom three were pro-government and five were oppositionist. The two most influential opposition candidates were Isa Gambar, head of the Musavat Party, and Etibar Mammedov, head of the National Independence Party (NIP), who had also run in 1998.

The Electoral Campaign

Although many observers expected Ilkham Aliyev to be elected president, the outcome was in some doubt and the race appeared set to be a lively contest for power. Most polls showed Ilkham Aliyev in the lead, but some indicated major public support for Gambar. While the issue of stability was fundamental to most of the electorate, and may have inclined them to endorse Ilkham Aliyev, other major campaign issues included the status of NK and poor living standards. Ilkham Aliyev stressed that the "catastrophe" of the civil unrest of the early 1990s might return if he was not elected. He promised to create new jobs and otherwise improve living conditions, and to resolve the NK conflict peacefully. Gambar pledged to increase democratization, combat corruption, and boost government wages, pensions, and scholarships. Mammedov promised to alter the constitution to reduce presidential power and to boost military spending to intimidate Armenia and lead to a settlement. Hasanguliyev criticized the other candidates for not calling for war to liberate NK. Campaign rhetoric often appeared vitriolic. The promise of an open campaign was also harmed by government harassment that intimidated many opposition supporters and the general electorate, according to the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch. Opposition candidates were heavily frustrated in their ability to hold public meetings or otherwise make their views known (Human Rights Watch, *Azerbaijan: Presidential Election*, October 13).

Results and Assessments

Turnout was reported at more than 71% of about 4.38 million voters. A runoff was not necessary, since Ilkham Aliyev received more than the required 51% of the vote. Ilkham's large vote margin permitted electoral officials to term him the winner by noon the next day, although a final vote tally was not released until October 20. Noteworthy aspects of the vote included the unexplained annulment of results from 13.4% of precincts (694 out of 5,150), a 100% vote for Ilkham Aliyev among military precincts, and

Election Results	
Candidate	% of Vote
Aliyev, Ilkham	76.84
Gambar, Isa	13.97
Shovket-Hajiyeva, Lale	3.62
Mammedov, Etibar	2.92
Ismailov, Ilyas	1.0
Rustamkhanli, Sabir	0.82
Hasanguliyev, Gudrat	0.5
Hajiyev, Hafiz	0.34

a slightly higher percentage of support for the son than the father had received in 1998. Three opposition party members of the Central Electoral Commission refused to approve the final vote tally, as did dozens of such members of lower-level electoral commissions. In a joint statement on October 16, four of the opposition parties that backed Gambar or Mammedov called on the West to condemn the falsified vote. Gambar claimed that he had actually received over 60% of the vote (*RFE/RL Weekday Magazine*, Oct. 17).

Over 960 international and thousands of local observers monitored the election. In its preliminary report on October 16, monitors from the OSCE and the Council of Europe (COE) concluded that the race was generally well administered and there was an active campaign, but that the overall election process fell short of international standards. They raised concerns in particular about bias by state-owned media, government-dominated electoral commissions, violence against oppositionists, and irregularities in vote counting. Others, however, criticized the preliminary report as minimizing electoral problems. Nearly 200 OSCE/COE monitors issued a separate statement on October 18 that termed the election “absolutely” flawed (*Eurasia Insight*, Oct. 20). Other observers argued that there were fewer electoral irregularities than in previous elections, and that an unblemished race would not have changed the outcome (*Transitions Online*, Oct. 21).

The night of the election, tensions between the government and opposition mushroomed into violence as security forces reportedly attacked and arrested dozens of pro-Gambar supporters who had gathered outside his Musavat Party headquarters in Baku. The next day, thousands of protesters clashed with security forces, resulting in destruction of storefronts and other property, many injuries, and hundreds of detentions. Ilkham Aliyev termed Gambar “the man responsible for the bloodletting,” and the government indicated it would soon arrest him (*FBIS*, Oct. 21, Doc. No. CEP-205). Gambar denied that he caused the riots, and he and Mammedov condemned violence by any side. Several leaders of opposition parties were arrested, their party offices raided, and their media suppressed. Some representatives of opposition parties who served on local electoral commissions and had refused to sign off on the results also were arrested. COE Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer and Parliamentary Assembly Chairman Peter Schieder issued a joint statement on October 20 criticizing “excessive” police force against protesters and government suppression of opposition media, and warning that these incidents “have deepened our concerns about Azerbaijan’s willingness to respect COE standards.” The Azerbaijani government argued that it was necessarily responding to rioting that endangered life and property.

Implications for Azerbaijan

Ilkham Aliyev’s backers hailed the results as reflecting overwhelming support for the stewardship of the Aliyev family and scant support for the opposition party candidates. Lending this view some credibility are suggestions that Ilkham Aliyev drew backing from a substantial portion of the population who work in public sector jobs or otherwise are dependent or politically linked to the Aliyev family. He also may have drawn support from some rural areas where living standards are improving slightly, and from employees and pensioners whose payments were recently boosted by the government. The high ostensible electoral support for Ilkham Aliyev also may have reflected voter endorsement of his main campaign theme, that political and economic stability and a peaceful resolution of the NK conflict would be jeopardized if the opposition won.

Ilkham Aliyev's supporters argue that he brings important skills to his new post that will benefit the country, including experience in the major energy sector, political acumen as a legislator and first deputy head of the ruling party, and familiarity with world leaders. They also state that he belongs to a younger generation (he is 41) that is not oriented to a past "Soviet" style of rule and can embrace democratization and economic reforms (*FBIS*, Aug. 8, Doc. No. CEP-40). His backers claim that Ilkham Aliyev displayed restraint in the face of the October 16 protests, since police reportedly relied on non-lethal methods to suppress protests, resulting in very few deaths (but dozens of injuries), and that the subsequent arrests of "instigators" were justified to prevent further insurrection.

Those who take a more pessimistic view of developments in Azerbaijan argue that the vote and the violent aftermath further set back democratic progress in a country where a developing civil society seemed ready for more pluralism. The political polarization evident before the election has increased since, with the government and the opposition labeling each other incorrigible rather than cooperating in nation-building. Ilkham Aliyev's campaign remarks that the opposition would "never" be allowed to win are indicative of this polarization. Some observers have warned that the government's apparent post-election crackdown on many opposition politicians and media may suggest that it might become more authoritarian under Ilkham Aliyev's rule (*RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, Oct. 10; International Federation of Journalists, Oct. 17).

Ilkham Aliyev faces major challenges in implementing campaign pledges to remedy problems his father was unwilling or unable to solve. His authority may not yet match that of his father, so that he might not be able to deal with alleged growing disputes within the ruling elite that eventually could threaten his tenure (World Markets Research Center, Oct. 16). Ilkham Aliyev also may face as much difficulty as his father in convincing the country to accept compromises to peacefully resolve the NK conflict. His pledge to redistribute wealth to address social needs may well face opposition from entrenched interests. Also, the patience of many in poverty may fray before major energy revenues become available after the completion in early 2005 of an oil pipeline to Turkey's port of Ceyhan. In particular, 550,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to suffer from poor living conditions and unemployment. Ilkham Aliyev maintains that conditions are beginning to improve for the IDPs, who amount to about 7% of the population, but some critics charge that the government is moving too slowly.

Among the main problems faced by Ilkham Aliyev are corruption and poverty. Ilkham Aliyev's promise to retain the existing structure of power may have comforted some corrupt officials and ensured their backing, according to one viewpoint (*Oxford Analytica*, May 2). Many in Azerbaijan and the international financial community call for greater transparency and independent oversight of the State Oil Fund, controlled by the president. Although Islamic fundamentalism appears to be a minuscule threat at present, the protests by some Islamic groups against the election results could indicate an emerging political force.

Most Western governments and international organizations had strongly urged Azerbaijan to hold a free and fair election, and the failure could have repercussions on political ties and aid, although many governments have indicated that they are ready to work with Ilkham Aliyev. Azerbaijan's neighbors Georgia and Turkey, transit states for Azerbaijani oil, and Russia and Iran quickly endorsed Ilkham Aliyev's win as promising stability. Armenia's foreign minister also found reassuring the continuity of policy

regarding NK promised by Ilkham Aliyev. Some oppositionists criticized Western governments of being willing to overlook electoral irregularities because of the belief that a dynastic transfer of power would ensure stability and the continuation of existing contracts with world energy firms.

Implications for U.S. Interests

U.S. objectives in Azerbaijan include cooperation in the war on terrorism, the advancement of U.S. energy security, and progress in democratic and economic reforms. The United States is interested in Azerbaijan's internal stability and a peaceful approach to resolving the NK conflict (*Congressional Budget Justification for FY2004*). There are also suggestions that possible U.S. military access could facilitate power projection in the Caspian and Black Sea areas and the Middle East. The major candidates running in the race did not appear to fundamentally oppose these goals, but U.S. policymakers and others nonetheless remained concerned about Azerbaijan's political future and urged that the contest be free and fair and eschew warmongering. The Administration's interest in stability and cooperation with Azerbaijan seemed apparent in President Bush's letter of congratulations to Ilkham Aliyev when he became prime minister and his brief meeting with the Azeri at the U.N. General Assembly in September 2003. Some in Azerbaijan criticized these overtures as a U.S. endorsement of a dynastic handover of power.

The Administration response to the election appeared mixed, perhaps reflecting the complexity of U.S. interests or an evolution of views. The State Department on October 16 and 20 seemed to take a mild stance regarding the election and its aftermath, according to some observers. It concurred with the findings of the OSCE-COE observers that the elections were orderly but marred by problems with voter lists, coercion, and other irregularities and it voiced concern over reports of violent clashes after the election. It also averred that Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage had telephoned Ilkham Aliyev on October 17 to congratulate him on a strong win and indicate that the United States desired close ties with Azerbaijan. On October 21 and 22, however, the State Department appeared to take a more forceful stance by emphasizing "deep disappointment" with "serious deficiencies" in the election. It also expressed "extreme concern" about post-election violence (by both police and civilians) and "politically-motivated arrests," and urged independent investigations of both electoral deficiencies and the violence. Nonetheless, the State Department spokesman stated that the United States did not view the deficiencies as discrediting Ilkham Aliyev's strong win, and explained that "we are strongly committed to promoting democracy At the same time, we believe that we've got to stay engaged" (State Department, *Press Statement*, Oct. 21, 2003; and *Press Briefing*, Oct. 22; *Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2003, p. A28).

In one view, this U.S. support for continued engagement with Azerbaijan encourages it to democratize, helps it bolster its sovereignty and independence, and safeguards other U.S. interests. In this view, a policy of less engagement in response to the problematic election might harm U.S. interests if Azerbaijan becomes unstable. Moreover, such problems in Azerbaijan could exacerbate instability in the whole South Caucasus region. However, many U.S. policymakers and others question to what extent the United States should assist the Ilkham Aliyev government to maintain stability, particularly if the government commits more human rights abuses. These observers stress the harm of overly linking U.S. interests to one leader — particularly if the new president becomes more authoritarian — rather than cultivating ties with other political figures and groups.

They warn that such links could eventually backfire if a disaffected populace views the United States as supporting authoritarianism. They stress that U.S. efforts to bolster democratization worldwide, including in nearby Iraq, could be set back if Azerbaijan's halting democratization is not addressed (*New York Times*, Oct. 27; *Eurasia Insight*, Oct 17)

Among other possible implications, some observers suggest that U.S. interests in energy development in Azerbaijan may be affected by delays in decision-making during Ilkham Aliyev's consolidation of power over the next few weeks or months. Some observers have been concerned that Russia may be seeking undue influence with the new Azeri leadership, or that Ilkham Aliyev may seek greater support from Russia in response to U.S. criticism of the human rights record in Azerbaijan. Some U.S. commentators warn that Azerbaijani support for the U.S. war on terrorism, including such actions as recently sending some troops to Iraq, could be harmed (*Turkish Daily News*, Aug. 8; *Eurasia Insight*, Aug. 7).

Congressional Response. Congress has demonstrated an interest in democratization in Azerbaijan by excepting most such aid from restrictions that it long placed on some other U.S. assistance because of the conflict over NK. Concern about Azerbaijan's 2003 presidential election included Member and staff participation as electoral observers and in a teleconference on October 7 hosted by the Congressional Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). In opening the teleconference, Rep. Christopher Smith highlighted some Azerbaijani government violations of freedom of expression during the campaign, and stressed that "it is critically important for improved government-opposition relations and Azerbaijan's overall stability that the election be free and fair" (CSCE, *Press Release*, Oct. 10). As in the 1998 presidential race, the major candidates aimed to inform the Administration and Congress, with Ilkham Aliyev, Kerimli, Mammedov, and Gambar visiting the United States before the election, and several other politicians and groups addressing appeals to Members both before and after the poll.

Among other congressional activity, Rep. Mark Kirk in July urged the Administration to press harder for democratic presidential elections in Azerbaijan, and during a visit to Azerbaijan in late August, Rep. Curt Weldon reportedly received firm pledges from Ilkham Aliyev and other officials of a free and fair race (*CR*, July 25, p. H7622; *AP*, Aug. 29). Rep. Frank Pallone, head of the Armenian Caucasus, in September urged President Bush to foreswear ties with the Aliyev government because of its corruption, the "monarchical" succession process, and Ilkham Aliyev's apparent hardline stance regarding NK (*CR*, Sept. 25, p. H8936). Former Rep. Sam Gejdenson, who was an election monitor, reportedly concluded that the election was a "complete fraud" (*Financial Times*, Oct. 23). Sen. John McCain visited Azerbaijan in early October and urged Ilkham Aliyev to make sure that a democratic race was held in a country that is a "reliable partner" of the United States. In a post-election critique, Sen. McCain stated that his and other such pleas to Ilkham Aliyev went "largely unheeded," and he called for the Administration to condition U.S. ties with Azerbaijan on the government's commitment to pluralism and rejection of political violence, and to step up democratization aid to beleaguered civil society groups (*CR*, Oct. 20, p. S12887; Oct. 22, p. S13046).