

Another Seven Years for Elections or Total Quarantine Regime

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Azerbaijan [has announced](#) that the special quarantine regime will remain in effect through April 2, 2024, accompanied by the closure of land borders, which have been closed since 2020. Perhaps something could be said about this absurd situation, which probably does not exist anywhere else in the world, but here I will talk about a more general quarantine regime. On February 7, 2024 the temperature is not only the thing expected to be below 0 degrees, but also any expectation regarding the discontinuation of the Aliyev regime's 30-year *total quarantine regime*. A snap presidential *election* will be held in two months in a country where democratic institutions have been destroyed. Is it necessary to participate in this election?

Of course, when I talk about participation in the *election*, I do not mean whether citizens should go to the polls individually or not. I mean participation or boycott of the opposition or opponents of the regime in this election by any means – by choosing a unified presidential candidate or participating separately. In any case, I will try not to be dogmatic about whether or not to participate in the election, but I will try to look into assumptions about the minimal benefits of participation under current conditions.

Let's talk about the semi-reformist expectation that the authorities will hold the first post-war *election*, this time democratically, at least for the sake of spectacle. For those who claim this, or for those who are convinced of it, the incumbent government has an opportunity to prove that it will win a truly free and fair election, and will seize that

opportunity. One of those who seems to think like this is [Zardusht Alizade](#). He argues that in order to prove his legitimacy to the world, Ilham Aliyev will finally hold a free and fair election. Alizade believes that because the Second Karabakh War elevated the political fortunes of Aliyev, he can safely win a free and fair election. Therefore, Aliyev will take the opportunity to hold such an election for the sake of spectacle. It seems to me that there are not a few people who share this view, and therefore it is necessary to sort through this claim.

Of course, it is reasonable for Aliyev to test himself only at a time when he is popular and to call an *election* at a time that suits him. For Aliyev, however, to finally hold a free and fair election to prove the legitimacy of his hold on power means that he will expose his power to certain fundamental risks, at least for the next seven years. Note that a free and fair election is not only about the fraudulent processes that take place only on election day – a lack of cases of ballot-stuffing, carousel voting, and violation of protocols, among others. For elections to be free and fair, there must be equal rights of all political competitors as provided by law during the election campaign period. For example, the right to freedom of assembly must be ensured, that is, political competitors must be given permits for rallies. But it seems absurd to me to believe that the authorities will hold a genuinely free and fair election, even to impress others. Even if we assume that Aliyev will win by a large margin on the election day, during the pre-election period the authorities cannot and will not recognize the opposition's right to free assembly. The authorities will not create conditions for political marketing against themselves.

At present, the political opposition groups in Azerbaijan have no access to mainstream media – i.e., radio and television, and rally grounds. And they are actually barred from carrying out political campaigning in the streets. In that case, there is nothing left for them but to use social media to spread

their voices to citizens. But even on social media, a small portion of the population is interested in political discussions and news. For this reason, opposition voices are not recognized by a large section of the population and are not followed consistently. If the government were to allow the opposition to campaign in the process of holding a genuinely free and fair election, then, for example, it would have to give airtime on television to a potential unified opposition candidate, as well as allow this opposition candidate to carry out election campaign in the streets and give permits for rallies in the areas demanded by the candidate.

By using this opportunity, the opposition candidate would be able to get their message across to the masses. As a result, they would potentially be able to convince more people of themselves and reduce Aliyev's popularity. In the worst-case scenario, the opposition candidate would reduce people's sympathy for the government and make voters suspicious of the government's success stories. And this is extremely dangerous for the authorities. Because if even a few thousand people, despite the high popularity of Aliyev, were to take to the street or squares to support an opposition candidate, it would put into question Aliyev's popularity. Therefore, the authorities will not hold a free and fair election. If the rights of opponents are not ensured during the pre-election period, it will be pointless to see what happens on election day (e.g., the correct ballot count, minimizing fraud, etc.). And we see that even now the last pockets of independent media, which play an important role in covering the electoral process, are being attacked and shuttered.

Even the suggestion that Aliyev would hold free and fair election for the first time to prove his legitimacy would raise expectations of reforms in society and the opposition, but such a prospect is dangerous for the authorities. I think that stories about potential reform, which have often been used in the last few years before the war, might have deceived society as well as real opposition groups and individuals. But

by winning the war, the authorities have seen that they don't even need to make promises of reform to manipulate people. Before the war, when the authorities did not fulfill promises of reform, they often pointed to the Karabakh conflict as a pretext. They diverted people's attention from internal problems with the Karabakh issue. Now that pretext is gone, because the Karabakh conflict, as the authorities claim, is over. Now, to the contrary, it will be dangerous for the authorities to build up anticipation of reform and deceive people – to incite people's anger against the authorities – because they have nothing to point to if they fail to deliver. Therefore, for the public, holding even one election, free and fair, builds up anticipation of reform, which is dangerous for the authorities.

Now let us return to the main question: Is it necessary to participate in this election? Here, when I say 'participation,' I am talking about whether the opposition should nominate and promote a candidate. There can be three, albeit weak, justifications for opposition participation in the election.

Firstly, one benefit the opposition can garner from the coming election by participating is the opportunity to test whether it will be free and fair. I do not believe that there will be a free and fair vote, but as I said above, it seems that many people have an expectation that this *election* will be different for some reason or another. They expect that the government will not curtail the campaigning capacity of the opposition because Aliyev's team knows that regardless of the opposition's strength, the government will win the highest percentage of votes in a completely free and fair election. To ascertain whether this expectation is at all justified, the opposition can send its supporters to the polls by nominating and promoting a candidate.

Secondly, even if election results are rigged in the typical way, the opposition can draw public attention to the political

process that resulted from its participation in the election. This is because even in a significantly apolitical society an election exposes and creates excitement around politics and the political agenda of the day. Opposition groups should have it as their goal to politicize society and therefore, participation in the election towards this end makes, albeit small, strategic sense.

Thirdly, some opposition groups may participate in the *elections* in order not to miss the opportunity to engage with people during this small period of political opening, given the possibility that the presidential vote will indeed be free and fair. That is, given this possibility, some opposition members may optimistically believe that their candidate/s may receive a certain percentage of popular votes in the election compared to previous ones. Thus, they can strengthen their capacity for future political activity. But, as mentioned above, I absolutely do not believe that this election will be open and transparent.

I think that it would be inconsistent for real opposition groups to register as a party according to law on the one hand, and then, on the other, not participate in the election based on at least one of the goals I mentioned above. If they believe in the importance of the process and the law, then they should participate in the election, regardless of how fair it is. If they don't want to participate, then they should pin their decision on their resource shortfalls, such as not having enough observers (in any event, opposition groups, if they participate, must point to lack of resources created by the suppressive authoritarian regime). But I think their participation in the election is an important issue in the name of political integrity.

Finally, I would also note that a must for any of the above justifications is a unified candidate from the opponents of the regime to run in the election. I do not think that opposition participation or lack thereof will have any effect

on legitimizing the current Azerbaijani authoritarian government. In my opinion, the opposition's various decisions in the past, to participate or not participate, has not affected the world's view of the current Azerbaijani government's legitimacy. In any case, the activities of the opposition in Azerbaijan are entirely grounded in legal activity; the opposition does not pursue democracy through *illegal* or revolutionary means. In so doing, the opposition's role is largely to complain, but they also occasionally benefit the Azerbaijani government in some cases. The sudden end of the Karabakh conflict and the potential for change seem to be alarming for opposition parties and many claiming to be opposition. It is therefore clear that the opposition has no choice but to go to the polls in the name of political mobility.

It may be that this time the authorities won't tire their opponents out much at all because they likely won't even permit a unified opposition candidate to register. Even should the opposition decide not to boycott the election and back a single candidate, the necessary 40,000 signatures for a candidate to get on the ballot will likely not be registered. In short, the authorities may not even need the small spectacle of a free and fair election. At the very least, this election will make it possible to pinpoint exactly what the goal of the political regime is and how it will structure future possibilities for the opposition.

Just prior to publication of this article, Musavat and the Azerbaijan People's Front parties declared that they will not participate in the presidential election. The rationale behind their decisions was that the authorities would not give any guarantee that the election will be free and fair, and that the government has been persecuting and arresting journalists in the lead up to the February election. This will be the opposition's second election boycott of a presidential election since 2013. The opposition participated in the 2013 presidential election, nominating a single unified candidate.

They did this despite the fact that shortly before the 2013 election, the authorities carried out large-scale arrests of many political and social activists. In that election, there was no serious hope that the opposition would make a serious change. So, what has changed today to make their decision different? Almost nothing.