

# Is Boycotting an Election a Successful Strategy?

written by Nurlan Huseynov Nurlan Hüseyinov

Elections in an authoritarian system tend to be unfree and unfair. Because of that the opposition is faced with two options, both of which actually lead to a strategic setback. The opposition could either choose to take part in uncompetitive elections, which would give them only the possibility of legitimizing and losing the election, or they could choose to withdraw from the process. In protest against the unfairness, opposition parties sometimes adopt a strategy of boycotting elections – purposefully refusing to participate in the electoral process. Azerbaijan's snap presidential election is scheduled for February 7. Two of the country's opposition parties – the Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party (PFAP) and Musavat – have decided to boycott the election. The opposition parties' refusal to participate sparked a nationwide debate regarding the decision to *boycott* or *contest*. In this article, I will seek to clarify whether or not election boycotts are an effective strategy in authoritarian systems.

Election-boycotting parties may pursue multiple objectives, such as gaining support by reducing the legitimacy of elections in the eyes of the domestic electorate and international community as well as achieving a fairer electoral process, political reform and democratization. However, election boycotts always bring up questions: should opposition parties take part in an unfair election? Is a boycott an effective strategy? Can it contribute to democratization?

Debate in political literature concerning the impact of a boycott basically points to it as an ineffective tool. According to Ian Smith, for example, boycotts hasten a

noticeable depression of turnout and negatively impact perception of the legitimacy of elections, but ultimately do not lead to fair elections or democratization.[\[1\]](#) Staffan Lindberg suggests that although boycotting elections and rejecting the outcome have led to gradual democratization in several countries, more generally, participation in the electoral process leads to a greater increase in the level of democratization.[\[2\]](#) The few successful boycotts mentioned by Lindbergh, mainly due to international support, can force a ruler to make concessions and lead to democratization.[\[3\]](#) A comprehensive study of 171 threatened and actual election boycotts at the national level around the world between 1990 and 2009 by Matthew Frankel demonstrates that in these cases, roughly 4% resulted in positive outcomes.[\[4\]](#) Frankel finds that a boycott or a threatened boycott could be effective in three instances.

First, if elections receive a great deal of attention from the international community, then a boycott can be effective. Thus, the opposition's threat of an election boycott, when it attracts the attention of international audiences, increases international pressure on the incumbent. As a result, the ruler or ruling party is forced to make concessions. The most striking example of this is South Africa's vote in 1994, when president of the Freedom Party Mangosuthu Buthelezi's decision to boycott the election and denounce the electoral process as unfree and unfair, led to an increase of international pressure on Nelson Mandela. Consequently, the threat of boycotting the election by Buthelezi caused the abolishment of the single vote system, and amendments to the constitution with regard to local self-government.

Secondly, if boycotts are part of the opposition's street protest campaign, then they can pay dividends. If the opposition enjoys strong domestic popular support and a boycott is also part of their overall campaign involving street protests and other activities, then these boycotts can yield results. An example of this is the 1996 election and

opposition boycott in Bangladesh. The Awami League, an opposition party, launched massive protests that swept the country along with a boycott two days before election day. The general opposition's boycott and ongoing street protests eventually pushed the government to hold a new election and the opposition faction managed to win that election.

The third effective method is the quorum boycott. In some parliamentary republics, the president of the country is elected by a parliamentary majority. In these systems, a decision by the opposition to boycott can put the presidential election in a deadlock and force the ruling party to make concessions. As an example, Frankel cites how the Moldovan parliamentary opposition utilized this tactic in 2000 to prevent a communist candidate from ascending to the presidency.

Frankel notes, however, that unsuccessful boycotts usually end in the marginalization of the boycotting group and the further empowerment of the existing ruler and their party. Lindberg, on the other hand, finds that participation even in flawed and rigged elections is useful in terms of greater involvement, voter turnout, safeguarding of political competition, and at the very least, opposition participation takes votes away from the ruling power.

Azerbaijan's PFAP and Musavat party have been boycotting elections since 2013. The PFAP decided at its convention to boycott the snap presidential election scheduled for February 7, as it did the previous (1998 and 2008) presidential elections. Popular Front chairman Ali Karimli said: "We are for free, fair, democratic elections but will not participate in this circus in the name of elections." [\[5\]](#) The Musavat party also reached a decision not to field a presidential candidate this year, citing a deteriorating pre-election democratic environment and growing repressions. [\[6\]](#) We can clarify whether these previous boycotts were successful as a strategy by looking at Frankel and Lindberg's assessment of the effect of

boycotts on participation.

First of all, none of the boycotted elections in Azerbaijan received international attention, and therefore there is no actual evidence that points to consistent political pressure on the Azerbaijan government. It is difficult to say that boycotts deprive the Azerbaijan government of its legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. On the contrary, after each election, Western countries gradually accepted the election results and continued cooperation with the government. In other words, the boycotts failed to garner the expected international support.

Secondly, the opposition parties were unable to stage boycotts alongside widespread mass protests. Although there were rallies attended by several thousand people amid the boycotts, by and large the protests did not become widespread. Other attempts at demonstrations were crushed by force. Namely, boycotts could not have been part of a large-scale protest campaign that Frankel suggests is necessary to be effective. In the previous Azerbaijani opposition boycotts, the opposition simply abstained from participating in the elections.

(We do not take the quorum boycott—the third instance mentioned by Frankel—into account because it is not possible in Azerbaijan's political system.)

In addition, the previous boycotts never led to any changes in the government's traditional policies either. The government was not pressured to and did not undertake any reforms of the electoral system or human rights and freedoms because of a boycott.

It should be noted here that in many authoritarian systems, Azerbaijan included, opposition parties implicitly justify a boycott on the grounds that contesting the election makes opposition members vulnerable to more government repression. Because of this danger of repression by the government, an

opposition might choose to boycott not in an effort to create political pressure so much as in an effort to protect party members and resources. In addition, though not stated outright, it is clear that opposition parties do not want to be on the losing side all the time. This could both damage their reputation and potentially discourage their supporters, and therefore, a boycott would help them save face.

But in my opinion, parties ultimately have to choose between their concerns and the ideals they proclaim, taking into account the above-mentioned general outcomes. Although opposition parties might be trying to protect their resources and reputation when boycotting, they ultimately go against the interests of society and their own ideals. A boycott in this sense being a largely ineffective tool, also damages society's democratic customs, as Lindberg notes, such as greater involvement, voter turnout, safeguarding of political competition, all of which are important to democratic practice.

In view of these outcomes, we can say that the traditional strategy of Azerbaijani opposition boycotts in recent years has failed to achieve its goals, and therefore cannot be considered an effective strategy because these boycotts have not attracted international attention, were not accompanied by large-scale street rallies that would cause the government to make concessions or accept meaningful political reforms, and, ultimately, have threatened to make society abandon core democratic habits.

#### **Notes and references:**

[\[1\]](#) Ian O. Smith, "Election Boycotts and Hybrid Regime Survival," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 5 (April 2014): 743–65.

[\[2\]](#) Staffan I. Lindberg, "Opposition Parties and

Democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2006): 123–38.

[3] Beaulieu, Emily Ann. "Protesting the Contest: Election Boycotts around the World, 1990-2002." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2006.

[4] Matthew Frankel, "Threaten but Participate:," *Foreign Policy*, no. 19 (2010).

[5] "Seçkidə namizədlər və boykot qərarı," Azadlıq Radiosu, 2023,  
<https://www.azadliq.org/a/axcp-secki-boykot/32735043.html>.

[6] "Müsavət seçkidə iştirakdan imtina etdi," Arqument.az, 2023,  
<https://arqument.az/az/musavat-seckide-istirakdan-imtina-etdi/>.