

It Is Time for Unity in Thought, Purpose and Action

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An appeal to all citizens who genuinely support and work for the democratization of Azerbaijan

The Aliyev administration has intensified the wave of repression it renewed in 2023. Over the past three years, this repression has severely restricted independent civic and political activity inside Azerbaijan, leaving society with very limited opportunities to organize and resist it.

Regional conflicts and geopolitical rivalries have also weakened international pressure on the Azerbaijani government. Peace, security and economic interests have taken priority in relations between states, while human rights and democratization have received less attention. The Aliyev administration has taken advantage of these circumstances to intensify its campaign against independent civic and political groups and individuals. Its policy amounts to an attempt to eliminate organized political dissent, a process that can be described as politicide.

This repression does not stop at Azerbaijan's borders. The authorities continue to target people forced into exile, both directly in their countries of residence and indirectly through pressure on relatives who remain in Azerbaijan. Similar methods are used against political prisoners and their families. Alongside direct repression, the administration uses indirect means of influence, particularly intrigue and false promises, to create distrust, divide opponents and obstruct cooperation among those facing persecution.

The absence of a single opposition leader or organization with broad political influence, either inside Azerbaijan or abroad, makes these tactics more effective.

Other countries offer different examples. In Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has emerged as a recognized opposition leader who helps coordinate democratic forces abroad. In Venezuela, María Corina Machado and the opposition movement around her have developed political influence both domestically and internationally. Russia, particularly following Alexei Navalny's death, presents a situation closer to Azerbaijan's, with opposition forces facing serious difficulties in building unified leadership.

These comparisons are not intended to assign blame to any individual or group. Azerbaijan's political circumstances have produced a fragmented opposition, and this reality must be acknowledged. If we cannot unite around a single legitimate leader or organization, we should develop a practical model of cooperation based on shared principles, coordinated activities and common objectives. Such cooperation does not require organizational unity or agreement on every political question.

Authoritarian governments do not necessarily distinguish between journalists, civil society representatives, bloggers, politicians and other activists when suppressing dissent. From the administration's perspective, the decisive question is whether an individual or group remains under its control. Those who act independently and refuse to comply with its political demands become targets of repression.

Those working for Azerbaijan's democratization should take this reality into account. Individuals and groups that reject the administration's control should remain open to cooperation across professional, organizational and political boundaries. Their differences should not prevent them from coordinating efforts toward democratic change.

The same principle should guide domestic and international partners in their advocacy, cooperation and support. If democratization is the central objective, the relevant criteria should be an individual's or group's commitment to

democratic principles, independence from authoritarian control, and willingness to defend fundamental rights despite the risks involved. Professional identity or organizational affiliation should not, by itself, determine who receives political and public support.

This raises an important question about international engagement with Azerbaijan.

Why have democratic governments and international actors provided various forms of political and public support to opposition figures such as Machado in Venezuela, Tsikhanouskaya in Belarus and, previously, Navalny in Russia, while independent civic and political actors in Azerbaijan have received comparatively limited political recognition and support?

The question is not whether foreign governments should endorse a particular Azerbaijani candidate in an election. It concerns their willingness to engage meaningfully with independent representatives of society and support the country's democratization. Experiences in Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia also demonstrate the need to consider how international engagement affects domestic democratic processes, although the political circumstances in these countries differ.

Journalists, bloggers, civil society representatives and others involved in public affairs must also recognize that many of the problems they confront have political roots. Sustainable solutions to these problems require political change, although political change does not necessarily mean a change of government. It can also involve changes in institutions, laws, governance practices and the relationship between the state and society.

For this reason, all individuals and organizations interested in Azerbaijan's democratization, both inside the country and abroad, should seek ways to cooperate and coordinate their activities on the basis of common principles.

Those forced to leave Azerbaijan because of political persecution, including people who have since settled permanently abroad, should not lose sight of the circumstances that led to their departure. Where possible, they should continue contributing to efforts to address those circumstances. Their experience, knowledge and international connections can be valuable resources for Azerbaijan's democratic future.

At the same time, the decision to end active civic or political involvement and build a new life abroad must be respected. People who make that choice can still contribute to Azerbaijan through their professional achievements, engagement with their communities and continued commitment to democratic values. Their previous work and sacrifices do not lose their meaning simply because they choose a different path.

We must recognize that the struggle against authoritarianism is deeply unequal. The authorities control state institutions and possess extensive political, financial and coercive resources. Independent civic and political actors operate under far greater constraints.

Under these circumstances, people inside Azerbaijan and those living abroad have different but complementary roles. Those abroad generally have greater opportunities to engage in international advocacy, communicate with foreign institutions, inform international audiences and provide practical support. Those inside the country possess direct knowledge of domestic conditions and remain essential to the development of public opinion and democratic political life, even when repression sharply limits their ability to act.

Political prisoners and other persecuted individuals face particularly difficult circumstances. The authorities may use promises, pressure and personal divisions to weaken their resolve and isolate them from one another. Such tactics should be assessed critically rather than accepted at face value.

Experience also shows that release from detention does not necessarily end political persecution. Restrictions, intimidation and attempts to undermine a person's public reputation may continue afterward.

Those facing repression should not be expected to bear responsibilities beyond their circumstances or personal safety. Nevertheless, their experiences can help expose the nature of authoritarian rule, strengthen public understanding and provide a basis for international advocacy. Imprisonment and exile, however painful, should not result in political isolation or the loss of a person's public voice.

Changing the present situation requires sustained civic and political engagement. International advocacy is especially important because opportunities for independent activity inside Azerbaijan have become severely restricted.

One objective should be to place Azerbaijan's democratization more prominently on the international agenda. This requires communicating clearly with foreign governments, parliaments, international organizations, independent media and civil society networks about political repression, the situation of political prisoners, restrictions on fundamental freedoms and the need for institutional reform.

Another objective is to maintain public discussion of Azerbaijan's political future. Despite restrictions, it remains important to create opportunities for informed debate about democratic governance, accountability, political rights and possible paths toward change. Independent discussion helps prevent the authorities from monopolizing political narratives and defining the limits of public debate.

A coordinated approach would make these efforts more effective. Cooperation could begin by identifying common objectives, agreeing on basic principles and establishing practical ways to share information and coordinate activities. There is no immediate need to establish a new organization or

impose a single leadership structure. The priority should be functional cooperation among existing individuals, initiatives and groups.

Such cooperation should be based on mutual respect, transparency, independence and a clear commitment to democratic principles. Participants should retain their own identities, political views and organizational autonomy while working together on objectives they share.

International partners also have responsibilities.

Governments, parliaments and international organizations that maintain relations with Azerbaijan should consistently raise democratization, human rights, the rule of law, transparency and political freedoms in their engagement with the Azerbaijani authorities. These issues should not be treated as secondary to security and economic cooperation.

Engagement with Azerbaijan should extend beyond official government institutions. Democratic partners should also maintain meaningful contact with independent journalists, civil society representatives, human rights defenders and political groups. These actors are part of Azerbaijani society and should have opportunities to contribute to discussions that affect their country's future.

International cooperation that excludes independent voices risks reinforcing the existing imbalance between the state and society. A more constructive approach would combine engagement with the government and sustained support for the development of independent civic and political institutions.

For Azerbaijan's democratic forces, the immediate challenge is to move beyond fragmentation without demanding complete political or organizational agreement.

We do not need to resolve every disagreement before beginning to cooperate. Nor should cooperation depend on the emergence

of a single leader who can represent everyone. What matters is whether individuals and groups are prepared to work together on clearly defined democratic objectives while respecting one another's independence.

Our common objective should be the democratization of Azerbaijan. Progress toward that objective will depend, in part, on whether cooperation can become practical, transparent and sustainable.

I therefore call on all individuals and groups who reject authoritarian rule and genuinely support Azerbaijan's democratization to take part in a public discussion on two connected questions: **functional cooperation** and the development of a **democratization movement**.

The first step is to express our positions openly, identify where we agree and determine what we can do together. Differences in political affiliation, professional background or organizational identity should not prevent cooperation where common principles and objectives exist.

It is time for unity in thought, purpose and action.