

The Final Demise of Electoral Institutions in Azerbaijan

written by BRI Political Studies Group BAI Siyasi Araşdırmalar Qrupu

Azerbaijan's latest election cycle has concluded. In addition to the snap parliamentary elections on 1 September 2024, the country held snap presidential elections earlier this year. These election campaigns have not produced any surprises; all national elections have long ago become purely ceremonial, and the results are known beforehand. It should be noted, however, that unlike the presidential elections, the parliamentary election campaign was a somewhat competitive process that increased political activity and participation in the country, even if the results were ultimately rigged. This month's election revealed that Azerbaijan in general faces a very difficult situation in the area of human rights and freedoms, because even a period of limited competition and minimal political activity has been left behind. In this article, I analyze the factors that made the recent parliamentary election campaign uninteresting, the reasons why voter turnout was so low, even based in the inflated official result, and local activity in electoral districts.

Feeling stronger and more confident after the victory in the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijani authorities step by step are shrinking freedoms at home. They have conducted this process legally by passing stricter legislation. The new [Law on Media](#) adopted during the past period has introduced restrictive norms in this field, aiming to assert control over online media channels, just as they did over the traditional media. A mass media register was established pursuant to this law, and its management was entrusted to the Media Development Agency, a public legal entity, created by presidential decree. The unregistered activities of media stakeholders and journalists are now illegal, and unregistered media representatives are

not acknowledged as journalists.

This was followed by the promulgation of a new [Law on Political Parties](#). This law also requires the registration of all citizens who are party members. Thus, political parties must provide the Ministry of Justice with personal information about their members (all political parties are required to have at least 5.000 for registration). The law makes it difficult for new parties and new figures to enter the political arena and gives the government additional control over existing parties, including forcing the cessation of their activities. Following the installation of these tighter controls over media and political parties, repressive measures were taken: Authorities imprisoned both the management and the entire editorial team of *Abzas Media* in November 2023 and of *Toplum TV* in March 2024. All of them are still in prison. There are other detained journalists and activists, particularly human rights defender Anar Mammadli, the founder and chairperson of the *Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS)* and a winner of the Council of Europe's Václav Havel Prize.

Basically, both election campaigns in the country were conducted in an unfree environment and under conditions of considerable pressure of harassment and intimidation over opposition politicians, civil society representatives and journalists. The small number of candidates in the parliamentary elections can be attributed to the undemocratic environment. A total of 1.508 candidates stood for these elections, 1.420 of whom received signature sheets, 1.195 collected and submitted to the Central Election Commission the signatures required to enter the parliamentary race, and [990](#) were registered. By comparison, out of 2.431 candidates in the previous [elections](#) (also snap elections) held on 9 February 2020, 1.637 persons were registered. In the run-up to that election, there were rumors on parliamentary sidelines that the composition of the Milli Majlis (the parliament) would be radically changed. The political climate in 2020 showed signs

of relative permissiveness, sparking enthusiasm among candidates. This led to an unusual situation within the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), where some party members decided to challenge the officially endorsed candidates in various constituencies. However, this internal competition was short-lived. When faced with threats of expulsion from the party, these rival YAP members promptly withdrew their candidacies, yielding to the leadership's preferred choices.

According to the CEC, the voter turnout for the 1 September 2024 elections reached 37,27%, the lowest in Azerbaijan's post-communist history. And the votes for winning candidates constituted only 21-22% of the overall electorate. According to official numbers, 76,43% of Azerbaijanis voted in the presidential election. There is no doubt that both these official figures are far from the truth. Although 25 political parties contested the parliamentary elections, the multi-party system exists only on paper.

There is a public perception that most of these parties are not opposition but are as satellites of political power. The Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party (PFAP), Azerbaijan's mainstream opposition, boycotted the latest parliamentary elections in conformity with its political line adopted in 2015. Twenty-four candidates from the Müsavat Party, another opposition group, participated in the parliamentary elections. However, Isa Gambar and Arif Hajili, the party's current and previous leaders, did not run. The reason is clear, these politicians were sure that even if they were elected, they would not be admitted to the Parliament.

The Republican Alternative (ReAl) Party, whose genuine opposition has been disputed by activists and other opposition, nominated a total of 12 candidates. However, ReAL started preparing for the parliamentary elections earlier than the other parties: It set up its electoral headquarters back in January. In reality though, ReAL, while consistently and harshly criticizing the PFAP's boycott tactics, serves the

interests of the government, constantly stresses that it advocates active participation in elections, and draws attention to the possibility of changes in the country only in the context of elections. Despite this, ReAL failed to participate in the 2024 presidential elections. ReAL leadership stated that it would save its limited resources for the upcoming parliamentary elections, as these elections are more important and decisive in terms of determining the country's further development. But ReAL only ran twelve candidates in the parliamentary elections, which demonstrates the gap between its rhetoric and reality. Even if all their twelve candidates had been elected, their representation in parliament would not have changed from the 25 deputies they held before. Ultimately, only one ReAL candidate – Erkin Qadirli – was reelected for a second term.

In general, there was no change in parliament in terms of political representation: 111 YAP members and neutrals, represented in the preceding parliament, secured the same seats in the new parliament.

Political messages from constituency 70

Against the background of a quiet and inert election campaign, events in constituency 70 drew the national spotlight. This constituency encompasses the Neftchala district and has a population of 87.000. Local activist Vafa Nagi's candidacy in this constituency was the most memorable episode of the 2024 elections in Azerbaijan. In the 2019 municipal elections, Nagi, who was a candidate for the municipality in the same district, was able to contest the election with her small team, and as a result, some of the residents of Neftchala, who had lost faith in the country's electoral institutions, voted for her. In the recent parliamentary elections, as was the case in the other 124 constituencies, the government-backed candidate in constituency 70 was declared the winner. But Nagi won second place even in the official results, which implies that she was the real winner of the elections.

The data for local elections in Neftchala give grounds for certain conclusions. The obvious political apathy observed in Azerbaijani society stems from the severe restrictions of rights and freedoms and the atmosphere of fear. In fact, the Azerbaijani population is not apolitical. In this respect, however well-grounded the arguments of the PFAP, which [decided](#) to boycott the next elections may be, they are impractical either for the current stage or from a planning perspective. On the contrary, boycotting elections contributes to the further erosion of electoral institutions, further disengagement from politics, and consequently, to authoritarian rule. Of course, today the real opposition in Azerbaijan has minimal material, technical and human resources. Opposition activists are under constant pressure from law enforcement agencies, and in general, opposition has become a risky and unpromising activity in the country. But, despite these harsh conditions, it would be possible to create a political revival in the country if there were more opposition candidates who could have a sincere dialog with people and conduct active work, as in the case of Vafa Nagi.

Vafa Nagi's campaign showed that despite the non-stop *brainwashing* by official propaganda mouthpieces, people, with the exception of foreign policy issues, are able to distinguish between lies and the truth, are willing to listen to those who hold alternative views and are inclined to believe them. After the war, state-nationalist discourse has particularly intensified in Azerbaijan, and those who express a position contrary to this discourse are subjected to social media lynchings, and even legal prosecution is carried out against those opinion holders. But the Neftchala example also gives reason to say that Azerbaijanis do not vote on ideological grounds, it does not matter to them who is a nationalist and who is a leftist or a liberal. Instead, the electorate prioritize socio-economic issues, particularly those affecting their immediate communities. This trend was evident in Vafa Nagi's campaign, where her focus on addressing

local concerns, such as [water scarcity](#), resonated strongly with voters. The effectiveness of this approach in garnering support indicates that practical problem-solving at the local level may be a more potent electoral strategy than adherence to broader political ideologies.

International reaction

The only authoritative international organization invited to observe the elections in Azerbaijan was the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE ODIHR observation mission in its preliminary [conclusion](#) characterized the electoral climate in Azerbaijan quite objectively, pointing to the lack of real political alternatives for voters, excessive restriction of fundamental freedoms and media, insufficient political pluralism, increased pressure on non-governmental organizations, unjustified arrests and other problems. However, for a long time, such findings and conclusions by OSCE observation missions has also become a formal component of election campaigns in Azerbaijan. Not only Azerbaijani authorities, but also the organization itself and its leading members from the West do not pay attention to OSCE election observers' conclusions and recommendations. The OSCE closed its Baku office a long time ago.

A few days after the elections, President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Italy and the discussions held there once again showed that the energy issue remains the West's primary concern in Azerbaijan.