

Why is it important to vote?

written by İlkin Hüseynli İlkin Hüseynli

Regardless of whether or not the elections are free and fair, it is important for citizens to demonstrate active interest and express their will by voting. Even if elections are unfree and unfair, the higher the voter turnout, the more difficult it becomes to falsify the results, and at least the government learns the people's opinion, and the public becomes more politically active. "Our vote will be ignored anyway," says a citizen who does not vote, hoping for immediate or radical change or having lost hope entirely, but they have missed an important opportunity: by voting, they can express their dissatisfaction, perhaps force the government to take public opinion into account in the future, and most importantly, help to increase political activity. The message of this article is simple – participate in the elections and vote for the candidate you like, or if you do not like any of the candidates, spoil your ballot. The main thing is to get involved in the process, because political participation is important, and as citizens, we lose nothing by participating in elections.

What's going on in Azerbaijan?

Azerbaijan has embarked on a new political era – however clichéd it sounds, it's true. With the exception of the 2005 parliamentary election campaign, President İlham Aliyev's rule is coming to the end of its 16th year in the midst of unprecedented political dynamism, and the main factor underlying this dynamic is a transformation underway within the government itself.

There is a transformation underway, not of the system yet, but of the staffing policy, which has relied on bureaucrats who have occupied their positions for many years and operate by their own principles. Most of the old generation of

bureaucrats appointed under the late president Heydar Aliyev are being replaced. This shake-up is not limited to lowering the average age of the state apparatchiks. It is a significant change that the governance structure, which has been organized more or less according to tribalist principles and over time has produced oligarchs, is gradually being replaced by administrators who are not wealthy and have no monopoly control over their fields (economics, industry, etc.). True, it cannot be said that nepotism has been eliminated from the recruitment process and meritocratic principles have begun to prevail. But in any case, it would not be a mistake to say that the days when regional affiliation played a dominant role in the structure of the government have been left behind, and that political regionalism is gradually coming to an end.

It is worth noting here that the political process that the president calls reform is being carried out at his discretion and under his direct control. Apart from those claiming that this process would lead to the first vice president taking over the presidency, there are also those who say that the current president is simply trying to breathe new life into his long-term rule by updating his team. It is clear that the role and authority of the first vice president in decision-making and the governance of the country are increasing.

The opposition's classic dilemma

The announcement of elections has sparked the traditional debates within the Azerbaijani opposition and once again placed before them the dilemma: to mount an election campaign or not?! Without much time, it was necessary to decide quickly, and all the opposition organizations made their positions known in short order. Although the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan and the National Council it founded favor boycotts, most decided to mount campaigns. However, it seems that these debates will not end until the election, and that if some opposition politicians gain seats in parliament and decide to participate in parliamentary business, there will be

a growing number of mutual accusations.

Since the arguments of both the boycotters and the campaigners have a certain amount of truth, it is difficult to say unambiguously who is right and who is wrong. Over the past 26 years, not only has there been no progress in Azerbaijan politically, on the contrary, there has been regression: authoritarianism has been strengthened, freedoms restricted, the principle of the supremacy of the government and its members has prevailed over the rule of law, the electoral process has become a formality, and, since it is currently impossible to achieve change through elections, citizens' confidence in the institution has been shaken. A majority of Azerbaijanis do not vote, and the actual turnout rate is usually very low. This reality makes the arguments of the boycott supporters look convincing at first glance.

But it is necessary to consider what the results of a boycott might be, as well as what the opposition or the general citizenry stand to gain from it. Taking another look at the recent past, one can see that the elections in which the opposition participated, and those in which they did not, differed in fundamental ways. The elections in which the opposition campaigned have put an end to apathy in Azerbaijan: they resulted in political activism and increased initiative, and apolitical citizens at least tried to ask the question, "What's going on?" and began to take an interest in and think about current events. Take, for example, the 2000 and 2005 parliamentary elections, and the 2003 presidential election. The 1998 presidential election was boycotted by the main opposition parties (APFP, Musavat) and Etibar Mammadov, founding leader of the National Independence Party, was the sole opposition representative, but even that election was able to rouse the country. Election boycotts are usually held in the context of political indifference. For example, the 2015 parliamentary election and the 2018 presidential election are remembered exclusively by a politically active minority.

Boycott supporters can rightly say: "Even the most active political campaigns have been carried out under unequal and illegal conditions. From that perspective, how are the parliamentary elections set for February 9, 2020 any different? The same infamous election administration remains in place, the electoral legislation has not been democratized, and there is no political will to conduct totally different, transparent elections." However, all this does not give the opposition grounds to promote absenteeism and to isolate itself, its supporters, and the protest electorate from the political process. In countries like Azerbaijan, where democratic institutions are underdeveloped, the main mission of the opposition should be to make the most of minimal opportunities. No matter how much rights are restricted, elections create certain opportunities: first of all, the opposition comes into contact with the public, while collecting signatures or at the time of the candidate's registration. Experience shows that it is more difficult to change the outcome of elections with an increased turnout, and that the authorities will be forced to waste more energy and strength than in the case of a boycott. (Take, for example, the 2003 and 2005 elections.)

Why is it important to vote despite all the shortcomings?

For the sake of argument, let's say that as boycott supporters repeatedly claim, nothing will change, and these elections will be the same as before. In that case, the process can be thought of simply as an opinion poll and a passive protest: a disgruntled citizen will not lose anything by stepping out on Sunday and going to the polling station to vote for the opponents of the party in power. In other words, the voter spends up to an hour to get to the polling station and come back, as if taking a walk in the fresh air for their health. But then, even if the votes are stolen, at least the ruling establishment will know how people actually voted, i.e. the true results. In short, the voter has the chance to turn unfree and unfair elections into a safe and legal act of

protest. That is, passive protests through voting may cause the authorities to take into account the citizens' opinions and change their policies, even if only partially. Since the beginning of the year, we have seen that authorities have begun to closely monitor public opinion on social media and to take it into account in their policies.

On the other hand, the growth of the public's activity that occurs during an election campaign gives the opposition an opportunity to expand its social base. Having witnessed gross violations, angry voters often turn to the opposition or identify themselves with the opposition, becoming its supporters. People tend to be indifferent towards the announced results if they did not go to the polls, and fall prey to the thought: "I didn't vote anyway." However, when citizens go and vote, and see themselves as participants in the process, they usually perceive election violations as injustices directed against themselves, and therefore, if possible, they put pressure on decision-makers to count the votes correctly. Also, some citizens who participate in elections become interested in politics and tend to support, directly or indirectly, the political organization they consider closest to themselves.

An election campaign is also an opportunity for political forces that take a scientific approach to the process to create a database: it is possible to collect and study open-source personal data on the social composition, age limits, and mood of the citizenry by city, region, village, and neighborhood. This will provide the foundation for future political activities and the establishment of targeted policies for specific areas and segments of the population, and in the next elections you are working in a district which you already know well. Electoral practice also means not losing political customs and practices, and it creates the conditions for the development of a political culture. Azerbaijan desperately needs this.

Azerbaijan is changing

The difference between these elections and the previous ones is that the country is entering a period of change. True, it is not easy to determine the nature (positive or negative) of these top-down changes, and at this stage it is not clear what direction the country will take. Although much has been said of the reforms, there have still been no real, fundamental reforms, except for staff reshuffling and the emergence of a new generation of representatives in the power hierarchy. However, the country's rulers are aware that the current economic and political system is obsolete and is trying to adapt the system to the modern era. The energy market crash which began in 2014 has exposed Azerbaijan's economic model based on raw materials exports as archaic and inconsistent. This model actually went bankrupt, and at the same time social tension in the country began to increase.

The etymology of the Azerbaijani word for reform, the Arabic borrowing *islahat*, means to correct something that is wrong, i.e. to fix or improve. The president's repeated use of the word recently is, in fact, an acknowledgment that certain policies in some areas have been wrong until now. This is also reflected in the answers given by the head of state to some questions during his visit to Shamakhi at the opening of the ASAN Life Center. For example, Aliyev admitted that there have been violations and shortcomings during his rule. Although his speech a few days earlier at Baku State University's 100th anniversary was an attack on the opposition, the rhetoric in Shamakhi was self-defense. Acknowledging the existence of corruption and bribery, the president stated that he had inherited these problems, i.e. he tried to separate himself from these problems, and he stated for the first time (one of the issues most frequently raised by the opposition) the need for institutional, systemic reforms.

Generally speaking, it is noteworthy that the authorities are seemingly trying to overcome the negative burden of the past

and do not want to own it. But of course, what is important is that the words should be followed by actions, accompanied by specific steps. At this stage, it is clear that the authorities know that the real situation in the country is not the same as that described on the main state TV channel, AzTV. The increased emphasis on youth in the president's speeches suggests that he is aware of generational changes and is trying to build a policy that fits that reality. Since the younger generations were not witnesses to the serious problems of the 1990s, Aliyev is trying to inculcate them with that memory and exhorts them to recognize the value of today's development compared to that period. Unfortunately, due to the lack of professional sociological studies in Azerbaijan, it is impossible to determine what the youth and other social strata think of such appeals and propaganda, and the extent to which they influence their opinions.

The influence of events in the countries neighboring Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus is an undeniable reality. In particular, the political change in Armenia, a result of the revolution there, was followed with great attention and interest in Azerbaijan. Regardless of Azerbaijan's official assessment of the Armenian revolution, the progressive world views it as democratic development. Azerbaijan has actually lagged behind Armenia in this area, which angers the people, and the notion: "at least we won't fall behind the enemy" has increased dissatisfaction with the situation in Azerbaijan. Georgia, a country which Azerbaijanis know well and often visit, is undergoing a simmering political process, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and pluralism have been achieved, and it is likely that the next elections in this country will take place in 2020. Seeing all this, Azerbaijani citizens compare themselves with their neighbors and ask themselves: "why not us?"

It should be reiterated that today it is still premature to speak about fundamental reforms and democratization in Azerbaijan. The question remains as to whether real reforms

will be implemented or not. After the parliamentary elections, perhaps it will be possible to say something more concrete. But all the signs indicate that a gradual political relaxation in the country is inevitable. At such a time, growing political activity among the citizenry and their active participation in the elections could push the process in a positive direction.

Authors:

Shahin JAFARLI

İlkin HUSEYNLI