



A family business



The Aliyevs, father and son

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In October 2013, Ilham Aliyev won the presidential election for the third straight time. He had to change the Azerbaijani Constitution to do so, since it did not allow for one person to be president for more than two consecutive terms. According to the opposition and international observers, the election was rigged and several opposition activists were arrested. Furthermore, the results of the vote had been determined before the results were even announced – Ilham Aliyev won with 84.5 % of votes.

Ilham Aliyev took over the presidential office for the first time in 2003, after he replaced his deceased father – former First Secretary of Communist Party of Azerbaijan and KGB general Heydar Aliyev. The First Lady of Azerbaijan, Ilham's wife Mehriban, is a member of the Pashayev family, probably the most powerful family in the country. Individuals from these two families control virtually all essential state offices, state companies, and the largest private companies. Mehriban's father, Arif Pashayev, her daughter Arzu and other relatives own luxurious properties all over the world.

Lack of freedom of assembly



Photo: Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety

Although freedom of assembly is guaranteed by the Azerbaijani Constitution, in practice it is almost impossible to exercise this right. Every public protest is required to have official permission, but the majority of applications are automatically rejected. The few permitted gatherings are assigned special locations, usually at the outskirts of cities, far from all governmental offices. However, even the gatherings that are permitted are often forbidden from taking place, while the organizers and potential attendees are harshly penalized. Sanctions for involvement in unauthorized demonstrations escalated

significantly since 2013 with the introduction of the new Penal Code – ordinary participants can be fined up to 600 Manats (around 600 Euro) and organisers even up to 3000 Manats. It is important to note that the average monthly wage in Azerbaijan is 426 Manats.

However, in cases where people are accused of disturbing the peace, which is interpreted solely at the discretion of the authorities, the accused can be sentenced to up to 3 years in prison. Brutal force, which in most cases is absolutely illegal, is also frequently used by the police against protesters.

Lack of freedom of the press



Photo: Journalist Khadija Ismayilova being detained during a protest on January 26, 2013

The Press Freedom Index, annually issued by Reporters without Borders, places Azerbaijan in 2014 at an unflattering 160th place out of 180 countries. Countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan or even Belarus were ranked higher. The case of the brave journalist, Khadija Ismayilova, a former director of Radio Free Europe, is emblematic. Since 2010 she has published several investigative reports that expose the dirty business activities of President Aliyev and his family. She has been threatened by powerful figures ever since and even became the target of a disgusting and vilifying campaign by the pro-governmental media. Someone installed a hidden camera in her bedroom and subsequently threatened her that intimate scenes from her private life would be uploaded to the Internet.

However, she would not be intimidated and continued with her activities – despite the impact that these recordings could have in conservative Azerbaijani society. When the attempt at blackmail did not succeed in silencing her, she was accused of anti-state activities and sentenced to 220 hours of community service.

Apart from corruption and illegal businesses that often include individuals from the ruling Aliyev's clan, there are other "forbidden" topics – for instance clarifying the deaths of soldiers, which is usually connected to bullying by senior officers, or the torture and abuse of prisoners.

Unlawful expropriation and demolition of properties



Photo: Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy, www.freeeconomy.az

Baku and other cities in Azerbaijan have gone through a period of wild development over the last few years. The construction boom has been supported by revenue from the oil and gas sector and in many cases has been fuelled by the organization of huge international cultural and sport events, e.g. Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, European Games (planned for 2015) or F1 Grand Prix (in 2016). In Baku itself, around 4000 apartments were demolished to make room for various construction projects between 2009 and 2011. Most of these apartments were situated in lucrative areas close to the city centre.

The amount of compensation that has been paid to the evicted people is rarely comparable to the market value of the former property. In many cases, those who were evicted get no compensation at all. Naturally, such unlawful demolitions have resulted in active resistance by the affected people. However, such protests have usually been dispersed by police and the protesters have sometimes even been taken into custody and detained for up to 30 days.

Oil and natural gas business



Photo: CC BY 2.0: Nick Taylor via Flickr

Azerbaijan is one of the oldest oil producers in the world with a history of drilling that dates back to the first half of 19th century. Even though it no longer belongs among the top ten oil producing countries, Azerbaijan is still a considerable exporter with some 800,000 barrels of oil being exported per day. Azerbaijan also sells more than 200 billion cubic feet of natural gas every day. The money earned from the gas and oil trade has enabled the representatives of the

regime to stay in good favour with European governments.

However, these rich natural resources have proven to be a curse rather than a blessing for Azerbaijan. Not only are they keeping the repressive government in power, but the activities connected to the drilling, refining and transportation of oil are also destroying the unique nature and environment of Azerbaijan.