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Media in the Developing World

The Corrupted Reelection of President Ilham Aliyev

Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but the government still routinely engages in networked authoritarianism that establishes a distrustful atmosphere and dissuades political engagement from forming on social media. The New Azerbaijan Party has continuously violated the civil liberties of the Azerbaijani citizens since President Ilham Aliyev won in 2003. On April 11, 2018, the president won his fourth term, extending his position in power for another seven years. While state newspapers such as *AzerNews* and *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* have promoted Aliyev's image throughout his campaign, the opposition publications *AzeriTimes* and *Turan* have heavily criticized the corrupted election. With the use of cyberattacks from the government, the detainment of journalists, and the strict control of online content, Aliyev attains a high level of censorship that has secured his presidency. Opposition parties are unable to unite against the regime effectively, reducing the ability of dissenters to advocate for freedom.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has struggled to provide adequate media freedom. According to Freedom House, the country has a press freedom score of 90 in 2017, showcasing the high limits to freedom of expression.¹ Once Aliyev won in 2003, he began to censor televised broadcasts and prosecute opposition activists. Indeed, the government transitioned from what the authors of "Four Theories of the

¹ "Azerbaijan," *Freedom House* (2017).

Press” called the Soviet Communist model to a new authoritarian media system.² The media system formally protects freedom of speech in the Constitution, but the remnants of the old system from the Soviet Union prevail in the state control of the press. The president exercises control through the use of several techniques, such as bribes, manipulation of taxes, restrictive media laws, provoking of conflict between shareholders of broadcast organizations, and the select distribution of advertisements.³ Furthermore, a study found that although 27 out of the 35 press enterprises in Azerbaijan have managerial ethics codes, they do not carry out ethics programs.⁴

To control social media, Azerbaijan does not ban material completely, but engages in the psychological intimidation of users by employing networked authoritarianism, which occurs when dictators repress their citizens via artificial intelligence. The surveillance of platforms such as Yahoo! and Facebook is a common practice. Internet users fear offline punishment, especially after the controversy of the “donkey bloggers.” In 2009, Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli posted a video asserting that a donkey has more civil liberties than citizens in Azerbaijan, which resulted in the two bloggers being beaten by two unknown men and then they were sentenced to two years in imprisonment each.⁵ A study that involved 1,795 respondents found that the event did not spark protest, but instead has dissuaded online political engagement.⁶

² Cengiz Gönül, “Transition from Soviet-Communist Media Theory to New Authoritarian Media System: Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan Media Case,” *Romanian Journal of Political Science* (2015): 1.

³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴ Ali Bülent, “A Research on Managerial Ethics in Azerbaijan Media Organizations,” *Online Academic Journal of Information Technology* 5.16 (2014): 34.

⁵ Katy Pearce and Sarah Jendzior, “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Communication* 62.1 (2012): 286.

⁶ *Ibid*, 293.

Moreover to intimidate users, authorities have advised television hosts to describe family tragedies and criminal incidents after young people join social media in order to intimidate users.⁷ Along with an increase in Internet regulation and surveillance, the aggressive campaign is supported by rampant cyberwarfare such as trolling and the creation of fake accounts with negative information for opposition politicians.⁸ The opposition in Azerbaijan is highly fragmented by fear, which has created a trend in which the younger generation supports a broader civic movement rather than traditional parties, which have proven to be ineffective at challenging Aliyev's corrupted regime.⁹

To demonstrate the stark contrast between the media coverage of the presidential election, four different newspaper publications were analyzed. The state papers include the English-language *AzerNews* and the Russian-language *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv*. *AzerNews* is Azerbaijan's first English newspaper and has continuously been named the "Company of the Year." *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* means Baku Worker and is the oldest newspaper in Azerbaijan, released in 1906, and has continuously supported the New Azerbaijan Party. The opposition newspapers consist of the English language *AzeriTimes* and *Turan*, which are both heavily critical of Aliyev. An exiled Azerbaijani activist who seeks to expose the government control of the media founded *AzeriTimes* in 2011. The newspaper prides itself as an independent platform that heavily advocates for the release of journalists who are violated by fraudulent charges and physical violence. *Turan* is the

⁷ Katy Pearce and Sarah Jendzior, "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan," *Journal of Communication* 62.1 (2012): 294.

⁸ Katy Pearce, "Two Can Play At That Game: Social Media Opportunities in Azerbaijan for Government and Opposition," *Demokratizatsiya* 22.1 (2014): 55.

⁹ Shahla Sultanova, "Challenging the Aliyev Regime," *Demokratizatsiya* 22.1 (2014): 28.

last independent news agency in Azerbaijan and was founded in 1990 by a group of journalists from Baku. The newspaper is also offered in Azerbaijani and Russian.

On December 19 last year, a legal amendment allowed Azerbaijan's state institutions to block websites on the grounds of national security.¹⁰ Citizens in Azerbaijan do not have access to five independent organizations that are located in Azerbaijan, which consist of the websites of Radio TV, Azadlig newspaper, Turan TV, Azerbaijan Hour TV, and Meydan TV. State institutions do not block websites that are outside the country and therefore citizens still have access to *AzeriTimes*. Furthermore, *AzeriTimes* reported that through the use of a VPN or a mirrored website, citizens still have access to blocked material.¹⁰ Additionally from the reports on *Turan* and social media, Azerbaijani citizens are well aware of the human rights abuses of the government. *Turan* is the country's only remaining independent news service, but has faced several obstacles to remain independent. Last year, the director Mehman Aliyev was jailed on false accounts of illegal business activity and tax evasion.¹¹ The government proposed financing *Turan* in exchange for control of the publication, but the director refused and was later freed as a result of pressure from the U.S. State department and international organizations.¹¹

Both *AzerNews* and *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* are similar in the coverage of the election, which demonstrates the lack of diversity in viewpoints from state controlled media outlets in Azerbaijan. As a publication outside Azerbaijan, *AzeriTimes* is critical of the president without any restraint. Some titles are so critical to the point in which they are humorous, such as "Aliyev Prefers Pop Stars to Democracy," but all of the subject matter is highly serious and grave in tone. Furthermore, the articles from *AzeriTimes*

¹⁰ "Aliyev's Authoritarianism Goes Digital," *AzeriTimes* (2018).

¹¹ "U.S. Pressure Aid Release of Imprisoned Azeri Journalist," *AzeriTimes* (2018).

tend to be longer and more opinion-based than *Turan*. While the majority of articles from the *AzeriTimes* expose government failure, *Turan* reports on a wider variety of topics. Only a small portion of the articles from *Turan* exposes government corruption as the newspaper also focuses on economics, energy, finance, and analytics. The newspaper, is critical of Aliyev, but is more restrained than *AzeriTimes*. Furthermore, when *Turan* criticizes the government, the newspaper relies on citing information from international organizations rather than asserting outright negative opinions.

To demonstrate the differences in the coverage between the four publications, several key events were monitored beginning from the announcement of the election in February to the conclusion in April. The key events consist of the earlier election date, cyberattacks against opposition parties, detention of journalists, election fraud controversies, and attempted boycotts. To begin, the election was scheduled for October 1, but Aliyev pushed the date to April 11 by his presidential decree. *AzerNews* released a brief notice of the earlier election, stating that the decision to nominate Aliyev in the upcoming election was adopted unanimously by VI Congress of the New Azerbaijan Party.¹² *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* released a more detailed report, explaining that the president took advantage of the right granted to him by the Constitution in order to ensure the unfolding of important domestic and international events in 2018.¹³ Furthermore, the article argues that nobody compares with Aliyev and that “the Azerbaijani people highly appreciates the activities of the head of state and trust him unlimitedly.”¹³

¹² “Ilham Aliyev’s Candidacy Nominated for Upcoming Presidential Election,” *AzerNews* (2018).

¹³ “The Appointment of Elections for an Earlier Date is Important from the Point of View of Solving Important Tasks Facing the States,” *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* (2018).

While the state sponsored newspapers provide strong endorsements for the candidate, *AzeriTimes* denounced the earlier election date and detailed how opposition parties were preparing to boycott. For example, opposition leader Jamil Hasanli of the National Council of Democratic Forces of Azerbaijan decided to boycott a day after the decree was posted on Aliyev's website along with Arif Hajili of the opposition Musavat Party and urged other dissenters to take a stance against the earlier election date.¹⁴ The publication offers several theories as to why the election was brought forward, such as preventing the opposition from properly preparing for the polls, internal disputes within the ruling elite, and the state of Azerbaijan's economy.¹⁴ *Turan* also highly condemned the earlier date of the election, but utilized techniques that differ from the less censored *AzeriTimes*. *Turan* simply cites a statement from the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety that details the human rights abuses and electoral flaws of the government.¹⁵

AzerNews and *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* reported on initiatives that Azerbaijan has developed to increase cybersecurity, but they do not focus on the methods in which the government infringed upon the Internet rights of citizens. According to "Aliyev's Authoritarianism Goes Digital" by *AzeriTimes*, the recent hacking of Facebook and email accounts reflects the policing of the Internet before the election date. For example, reports have developed of the hacking of Facebook and email accounts of dissenters.¹⁶ The articles from *AzeriTimes* have sensational titles and convey a clear bias against Aliyev's complete domination in social media. Another article by the publication reports on the hacking of political leader Jamil Hasanli of the National Council of Democratic in

¹⁴ "Azerbaijan Opposition to Boycott Early Presidential Election," *AzeriTimes* (2018).

¹⁵ "Azerbaijan Announces Presidential Elections on the Background of Total Violation of Human Rights," *Turan* (2018).

¹⁶ "Aliyev's Authoritarianism Goes Digital," *AzeriTimes* (2018).

which all of his posts were deleted on Twitter and his followers were blocked.¹⁷ *Turan* also reports on issues in the Internet rights of citizens, such as how Facebook activists have received up to 10 years of imprisonment.¹⁸ The information is specifically attributed to Gultan Hajibeyli, a member of the Coordination Center of the National Council of Democratic Forces in her interview with the Voice of America.¹⁸

Both opposition newspapers reported on the numerous detentions of journalists throughout the election. *AzeriTimes* details the most significant events in an annual timeline of government pressure on the media, but a particular case that caused a high level of controversy was the sentencing of video blogger and journalist Mehman Huseynov who criticized the government. He was brought before court in March, tortured while in custody, and was sentenced to two years in prison.¹⁹ *Turan* also reported on the issue in April, describing how Huseynov is still in jail, but he is only one of many political prisoners.²⁰ Azerbaijan tortures activists to acquire confessions from them, resulting in further jailing.²⁰ The state sponsored newspapers did not report on the issue.

On April 4, *AzerNews* and *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* discussed a publication by the Civil Initiative for Free and Democratic Election, which found that election fraud did not occur. The report by *AzerNews* asserted that the 15 candidates nominated for the election did not experience any problems during their campaign, the voters rated the election as fair based on an ambiguous survey, and that the legal frameworks are in line with

¹⁷ “Opposition Leader’s Facebook Account Hacked,” *AzeriTimes* (2018).

¹⁸ “Human Rights in Azerbaijan not Respected – Former Member of the Delegation to PACE,” *Turan* (2018).

¹⁹ “Timeline of Government Pressure on Media in 2017,” *AzeriTimes* (2018).

²⁰ “Call to Suspend Azerbaijan’s Membership to International Association of Prosecutors,” *Turan* (2018).

international standards.²¹ Similarly *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* reported that the experts from the Civil Initiative for Free and Democratic Elections found that the pre-election conditions were fair to ensure that the election was democratic.²² The opposition newspapers did not report on the fabricated information from the organization.

On April 11, Ilham Aliyev won with a landslide 86 percent and independent Zahid Oruc won 3 percent. Reports of election fraud were rampant after the results were revealed as all four newspapers reported heavily on the issue with either strong admiration or criticism. During the voting, *AzeriTimes* uniquely offered live updates to demonstrate the election fraud. For example, at 11:24 AM an observer at a polling station reported ballot stuffing.²³ At 3:01 PM, an anonymous independent journalist was assaulted while filming and forced out of the polling station.²³ In a humorous offbeat article, *AzeriTimes* notes the “statistical wonders” of the election, such as how opponent Araz Hajizade received exactly two votes in each of the 35 polling stations in the electoral district in the northwestern exclave Nakhchivan.²⁴ The format of *AzeriTimes* is far more experimental than the traditional standard format of *Turan*.

The article from *AzeriTimes* also details how the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe found that the election was characterized by the widespread disregard for mandatory procedures.²⁴ *Turan* concurred with this sentiment, drawing from

²¹ “Azerbaijan has Legal Framework for Holding Democratic Elections in Line with International Standards - Interim Report,” *AzerNews* (2018).

²² “The Civil Initiative for Free and Democratic Elections Presented an Interim Report in Connection with the Observation of the Presidential Elections,” *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* (2018).

²³ “Election Goes on with Massive Voter Fraud,” *AzeriTimes* (2018).

²⁴ “Five Remarkable Things about Azerbaijan’s Unremarkable Election,” *AzeriTimes* (2018).

the OSCE report that revealed that the election occurred in a restrictive atmosphere.²⁵ Furthermore during the OSCE press conference on April 12, a group of pro-government supporters staged a scandal in which they shouted that the report was a lie.²⁵ The state sponsored newspaper *AzerNews* recognized the report by the OSCE and criticized the information for being biased.²⁶ *AzerNews* supported this notion by citing information from Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission, which found that the OSCE made observations that did not reflect the reality of the election.²⁶ *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* did not report on the issue. Afterwards, according to *AzeriTimes* the key opposition parties organized a mass protest that called for a reelection and the release of more than 100 political prisoners.²⁷ *Turan* also reported on the boycott organized by the Musavat Party and National Council of Democratic Forces, which consisted of 1,000 participants and was broken up quickly.²⁸ The state sponsored newspapers did not report on the rally.

The overarching control of the press from Aliyev is evident by analyzing the coverage of the presidential election. The remnants of the old system of the Soviet Union are highly prevalent in the state control of the media in Azerbaijan. As revealed by the opposition newspapers, networked authoritarianism has effectively dissuaded political dissenters. The government does not completely ban the use of social media, but engages in cyberattacks in order to dissuade the opposition parties from organizing effectively, resulting in a more fragmented political environment. The surveillance and collection of

²⁵ "Elections in Azerbaijan were Held under Limiting Democratic Norms – OSCE/PACE," *Turan* (2018).

²⁶ "OSCE/ODIHR Statements on Azerbaijan's Presidential Election Unfounded – CEC," *AzerNews* (2018).

²⁷ "Azerbaijan's Election is a Farce," *AzeriTimes* (2018).

²⁸ "Opposition Demands Cancellation of Results of Early Presidential Elections," *Turan* (2018).

information on social media platforms is a common practice, creating an atmosphere that is distrustful. Similar to the controversy of the “donkey bloggers,” the detainment of Mehman Huseynov did not spark protests and instead dissuaded dissenters. The Azerbaijani citizens live in constant fear of offline punishment from using the Internet.

AzerNews and *Bakinskiy Rabonchiv* share similar reporting, which showcases the lack of diversity of opinion from the media. *AzeriTimes* and *Turan* criticize the government, but the former is a publication from an Azerbaijani activist who remains outside of Azerbaijan while the latter is the last independent media source in the country. As a result of the greater physical distance from Azerbaijan, *AzeriTimes* is freer, which results in longer editorials and a more critical tone of government corruption. To criticize the government, *Turan* relies on reports from official international organizations, which creates a more hard news approach. As discussed in the readings, Aliyev has limited freedom of the media since he won in 2003, which is demonstrated by the highly biased and false reporting of the election and the dissuasion of online political engagement.

By engaging in aggressive psychological intimidation, the government limits the ability of Azerbaijani dissenters to protest against Aliyev’s regime. The government is very effective at dissuading citizens from using social media platforms for the organization of the opposition. The president will rule until 2025 and will most likely run for a fifth term and win unless strong opposition is organized. Facebook and Twitter are excellent tools for dissenters to voice their concerns on common platforms. Nevertheless, the privacy rights of Internet users are violated and posts are deleted from political leaders, such as the leader of the National Council of Democratic Forces, through the use of networked authoritarianism. A protest that consisted of 1,000 members developed after

the election, but more mobilization is required to challenge the corrupted regime. While the prospects for freedom appear bleak, citizens in Azerbaijan are aware of the human right abuses that they experience from *Turan* and sources outside of Azerbaijan such as *AzeriTimes*, which may develop into more effective political action in the future.

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