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Scott Radnitz [a]

[a] Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, USA

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Oil in the family: managing presidential succession in Azerbaijan

Scott Radnitz*

Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, USA

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This article argues that Azerbaijan did not display a backlash against the 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space because the primary threat to the regime came from within, and not from below. Thanks to the overlap of power and property in Azerbaijan, the ruling elite's revenues from oil resources, and the failure of international actors to support the opposition, civil society did not pose a major challenge to the regime's dominance during the 'revolutionary' period in the mid-2000s. However, there was a risk that the regime could fragment due to factional in-fighting. President Heydar Aliyev had laboured to consolidate power throughout the 1990s after years of turmoil, and, although Azerbaijan was stable by 2003, his passing did not guarantee a smooth transition. Instead, his successor – his son, Ilham – had to carefully manage rival factions to maintain the political status quo. The article argues that scholars of post-Soviet politics, though usually drawn to formal political opposition as a source of potential change, should also pay attention to the divisions among those in power, and not take a unitary state for granted.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; colour revolutions; Aliyev

In October 2003, following several days of protests and crackdowns, Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime ended up as the domino that failed to start the others toppling, passing to Georgia the role of 'revolutionary' vanguard in the post-Soviet region. Prior to the October election, a strong case could have been made that Azerbaijan would be likely to experience a peaceful regime change from below. The country, born out of political turmoil (in 1918 as well as 1991), was in the midst of a sensitive transfer of power to a new president. It had a small, motivated community of civil society activists, at least in the capital, Baku, and the party of the incumbent, outgoing President Heydar Aliyev, was to engage in a massive campaign of election fraud to facilitate his son Ilham's rise to power. Yet a 'colour revolution' did not materialize. Azerbaijan smoothly continued on its path toward authoritarian consolidation, and to this day has faced minimal resistance toward that goal.

*Email: srad@uw.edu

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When surveying the landscape of popular mobilization and the backlash, most scholars have paid attention to the most visible and inspirational of forces for change – civil society organizations, charismatic politicians, youth and ordinary people seeking justice – and framed the issue as a struggle of regime versus opposition.[1] Yet not all countries are the same, and the threats posed to autocrats from below can vary widely. There is not sufficient space here to assess the relative strengths of regimes and oppositions in post-Soviet states in comparative fashion, although I allude to some of those cases. Instead, in this article I use the case of Azerbaijan to argue that the greatest threat to the stability of non-democratic regimes may lie not in organized political opposition but in a challenge from within the regime itself. As such, the conventional objects of analysis of the colour revolutions, that is, civil society actors[2] who are visible, vocal and usually eager to share their aspirations with reporters and researchers, may be less important than the less transparent, informal mechanisms by which an incumbent maintains cohesion within his ruling coalition. In such a milieu, when a moment of opportunity arises at the commanding heights of political power, aggrieved or ambitious elites in the coalition may be tempted to make a bid for power, perhaps using existing oppositions as allies. If the actors who control the levers of state power can reach an agreement – or more precisely, if the president can deter defections and maintain loyalty in the coalition – then the ruler faces a significantly weaker threat.[3] If he cannot, the coalition may be at risk of fragmentation.

A ruler who is able to correctly discern the predominant threats to his power can economize resources to address the most critical threats to his regime without overreacting. In Azerbaijan, the leadership correctly discerned that it faced a greater challenge from the splintering of the ruling coalition than from a popular anti-authoritarian movement – such as occurred in the broader post-Soviet region – and expended resources judiciously to head it off. Thus, what may appear to be an Azeri 'backlash' against wave-like revolutionary forces when viewed in a regional context may be better understood as manifestations of a continuing movement toward authoritarian consolidation in Azerbaijan, which was neither hastened nor retarded by events in Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan.

This article analyses Azerbaijan as a case of a pre-empted potential putsch by the shoring up of power internally during a trying period of leadership succession, rather than as an escape from deposition by its (feeble and disorganized) opposition. I first provide relevant background to the lead-up to Azerbaijan's critical 2003 and 2005 elections, detailing the gradual process of state-strengthening and consolidation of power that took place in the 1990s. I then analyse how the incumbent managed the transfer of power to his son and how the heir apparent secured continuity among his father's coterie. Despite the turmoil that followed the two elections, that strategy proved a success, in part thanks to lack of Western pressure and the availability of oil rents. I discuss actions the president's circle took during the period of apparent revolutionary upheaval across post-Soviet space and question whether a causal link can be drawn between regional events and self-serving measures taken by the Aliyev regime. Finally, I use the case of

Azerbaijan as a way to broaden the scope of inquiry into the colour revolutions and backlashes, and to contribute to the study of attempted and failed challenges to authoritarianism more generally.

In the course of researching for this article, in summer 2009 I conducted interviews with 12 Azerbaijani scholars, analysts and activists in Baku. These include longtime observers of domestic politics and several people who have served in the government. The interviews were conducted in Russian or English and lasted 45 to 60 minutes on average. On two occasions I re-interviewed the same source with follow-up questions. Because many of the topics we discussed are sensitive, in this article I refer to sources' professions rather than use their names.

Azerbaijan's quest for stability

The first part of Azerbaijan's first decade as an independent state was spent fighting to defend its territory and attempting to build a state. Unlike the euphoric Baltic States or Ukraine, which emerged from perestroika looking toward a better future, Azerbaijan left the Soviet Union mired in a bloody fratricidal conflict with Armenian secessionists in its autonomous republic Nagorno-Karabakh (1988–1994). By 1992, a nationalist and pro-democracy movement, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) and its leader, President Abulfaz Elchibey, were running the country and leading the war effort. As the leading advocates for independence, they enjoyed popular support but they also lacked the experience or organizational skill to channel it effectively into military success. As Azerbaijan continued to suffer significant human and territorial losses and Armenia gained ground, Elchibey faced insurrection from a rogue militia leader. In order to stave off disaster, militarily and politically, Elchibey made the critical decision to invite Heydar Aliyev to the capital as head of parliament. Elchibey later fled and Aliyev engineered a coup to oust him. Aliyev, the country's leading power broker – a former leader of the republic, head of the KGB, and member of the Politburo – ended the country's tentative steps toward democracy but brought about a chance for stability when he became president.

Aliyev, like his Georgian counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze, who also came to power following years of turmoil, promoted stability over national assertion, and made state-building and regime consolidation the overriding objective of his remaining years in power. Unlike the PFA, a party of liberal intellectuals and nationalists who sought a break with the Soviet past (having based its legitimacy on harkening back to Azerbaijan's short-lived period of democracy and independence earlier in the century),[4] Aliyev utilized the informal networks he had cultivated, and employed the methods he had honed, over a career of service to the Soviet state.[5] Aliyev replaced the ministers of foreign affairs, defense and internal affairs with associates from his past and staffed the corresponding ministries with loyalists. He averted several coup attempts from rogue elements of the security services and removed cabinet members whose allegiances were suspect. He cut Azerbaijan's military losses in Nagorno-Karabakh by agreeing to a cease-fire

with Armenia in 1994, and brought about a restoration of state services to relieve hardship at home.[6]

Aliyev brought two critical advantages to the presidency. First was his access to a coterie of people who had been educated and socialized in the same Soviet institutions, to staff the bureaucracy. Unlike the ideological PFA, these officials were pragmatic and competent functionaries who shared a common working language. The second of Aliyev's advantages was the skills he honed over a career in Soviet politics and as head of the KGB, including the ability to anticipate threats and selectively but effectively use repression against his opponents.[7]

Aliyev, together with his brother Jalal and Ramiz Mehdiyev, the head of the presidential administration, held highly sought-after information on personnel and ensured that all transactions were routed through the president's office. Even low-level appointments within ministries had to be approved by the president.[8] Aliyev was assisted by a sophisticated intelligence apparatus that gathered *kompromat* (compromising material) on the officials working under him. As this collection of information was common knowledge, the threat of arrest and expropriation was a strong deterrent to disloyalty or insubordination, and helped ensure the compliance of subordinates. In cases where an official presented a challenge, Aliyev would preemptively strike, as he did in 1995 when the commander of the OMON (Special Forces) apparently planned to stage a coup. A special battalion comprised solely of troops from Aliyev's native region of Nakhichevan – a form of praetorian guard – was called up to defend the president, leading to a shootout that killed the mutineer.[9] Force was similarly used in purported coups in 1996 and 1998. Power remained concentrated around Aliyev until the end of his presidency.

The Aliyev regime ruled according to familiar (Soviet) methods from its inception, but it had to contend with residual pluralism from the PFA period and was forced to abide, at least superficially, by the international norms of democracy that were now hegemonic globally. This was especially the case while Azerbaijan was poor, war-torn, and reliant on Western aid. Azerbaijan held presidential elections in 1993 and 1998, and parliamentary elections in 1995 and 2000 with the participation of opposition parties. A moderately independent media developed in the mid-1990s and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supported by the West opened in the country. At its peak, Azerbaijan earned a grudging 'partly free' rating from the non-partisan organization Freedom House until 1993 and again from 1997 to 2003, thanks to a tolerable civil liberties score.[10] There was some hope, not completely unfounded, that Azerbaijan could evolve into a pluralistic semi-democratic regime. However, this hope was not borne out.

The opposition to Aliyev was disadvantaged from the beginning. The new Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), which represented the Baku intelligentsia and absorbed activists from the PFA in 1997, advocated democratic reforms and an alternative to Aliyev's concentration of power. However, lacking funds – in part because the business community was supportive of Aliyev's *Yeni* (New) *Azerbaijan Party* (YAP) – and unable to distribute benefits to potential supporters, the

opposition party could not compete well against the regime.[11] In the 1998 presidential elections, Aliyev defeated his opponent Etibar Mamedov 76.1% to 11.6%, although independent counts estimated that the margin of victory was narrower.[12] After the parliamentary elections of 2000, the opposition called a boycott in protest of government-imposed obstacles to its ability to run candidates, but with little discernible effect.

The regime's ability to fend off rivals was strengthened beginning in 1994, when Azerbaijan signed a 30-year production-sharing agreement with 10 of the world's major oil companies to develop fields that had been discovered in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The so-called Contract of the Century greased Azerbaijan's path out of weakness and fragility. Privatizing oil and gas fields to foreign companies rather than to domestic actors ensured that the state would benefit from foreign technical expertise without losing control of how the resulting revenues would be used, unlike in Russia, which privatized to domestic actors.[13] Having a guaranteed source of rents for the foreseeable future made the work of both state-building and regime consolidation far easier. By 2000, oil already comprised over 40% of government revenues.[14] By its 10-year anniversary in 2001, Azerbaijan no longer resembled the war-torn, fragmented and democratizing polity it had been. An increasingly confident, secure regime could throw its weight around domestically and internationally, including bucking Russia by acting as the source country for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a priority for US foreign policy.[15] With the aid of oil rents, Aliyev loyalists obtained control of privatized assets, ensuring that possession of economic resources would buttress political domination. Sustaining opposition to the ruling elite became even more difficult. By the beginning of Aliyev's second term in 1998, there was little doubt that he had consolidated power.

An inside job

Focusing only on the formal aspects of politics – political parties, legislatures and elections – may be the appropriate approach for understanding the dynamics of political development and change in many countries. However, in a setting where informality predominated, as it did in the Soviet Union, and where democracy was introduced only recently and lacks indigenous roots, a focus on formal institutions may distract from more important features of politics.[16] In Azerbaijan, a salient axis of politics that has the potential to shape major political developments is that of regional affiliation.[17] Internal opposition on the basis of this cleavage was of great concern to Aliyev. It also presented the greatest threat to his son Ilham during the presidential succession, rather than mobilization by civil society, which seemed to be endangering other post-Soviet regimes.

Two factions, representing the Azeribaijani region of Nakhichevan and descendants of immigrants from Armenia (so-called Yeraz, or Yerevan Azeris), respectively, were considered the most influential. Once an independent khanate, Nakhichevan was claimed by both the Armenian and Azeri Soviet Socialist

Republics after the Bolshevik Revolution and ultimately granted autonomous status within the Azeri SSR. Detached from the rest of Azerbaijan, in the post-Soviet era it became an enclave accessible only by air, and its isolation contributed to the development of a distinct identity. Nakhichevani migrants to Baku retained strong ties of solidarity years after resettling[18] and Aliyev, who was born in Nakhichevan, drew from those networks to shore up his regime.[19] These appointees, once in power, utilized their common background to maintain a dominant position within Aliyev's ruling coalition.

The Yeraz also developed a distinct identity. Azeri migrants from Armenia came to Azerbaijan in three waves: 1904–1905 after a series of pogroms, after World War II, and during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a minority living in Armenia, they had developed a sense of self-awareness, which translated into mutual support when many migrated to Baku. Aliyev, whose father had been born in Armenia, also brought representatives of Yeraz into the government as a source of trusted subordinates.[20] Aliyev relied heavily on the loyalty of these two contingents, which in turn were able to block the entry of other factions into the system.

In order to govern, the president balanced between competing factions by remaining above them. As appointees and their subordinates were chosen on the basis of close personal connections to Aliyev, they owed their livelihoods to him and faced uncertain prospects under a different leader. The president stood at the apex of a pyramid in which information and resources flowed upward, and decisions and orders were sent down. Aliyev spent much of his time regulating the distribution of power between factions and defusing potential rivalries before they devolved. When it was announced in 2003 that Aliyev had contracted cancer, the complex system that he had created and nurtured as the basis of Azerbaijan's stability came under threat.

Surviving the succession

Though it may appear inevitable in hindsight, the collapse of a regime as a result of mass mobilization is not a foregone conclusion; many factors must congeal for the opposition to succeed.[21] States possess control over the means of violence, are better equipped than grassroots movements to act collectively and are able to disseminate propaganda on a massive scale. Regimes can thus counter the effectiveness of 'people power' tactics by taking certain measures: cutting off media access to demonstrations, co-opting and selectively harassing members of the opposition, paying the security forces sufficient salaries and cracking down early to deter future activism. Furthermore, states that are capable of subsisting without external aid can endure outside criticism more easily than ones that are dependent. The Aliyev regime had both the means and the will to endure. However, an unanticipated event called into question its apparent resilience.

Before any regional revolutions had occurred (with the exception of Serbia in 2000, though not considered by many a model for Azerbaijan to emulate),[22]

Azerbaijan experienced its first succession in a decade. Heydar Aliyev, who had already suffered a heart attack during the run-up to the 1998 election, prepared for his impending passing by stepping down before the presidential election, leaving his son Ilham to run in his place. He had appointed Ilham prime minister two months earlier, having presciently passed a referendum in 2002 transferring authority, in the case of the president's death, to the prime minister rather than to the speaker of parliament.[23] He had begun grooming his son for the post even earlier by appointing him as the vice-president of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) in 1994 and later the head of the National Olympic Committee. This effort to ensure a smooth – and self-serving – transition masked political conflicts taking place behind the scenes.[24] Although the elder Aliyev had managed to suppress conflict between competing factions in his government, there was no way to ensure that elites would remain loyal in conditions of uncertainty during the transfer of power. Most of Heydar's advisors rallied around Ilham, thanks to Heydar's deliberate passing of his torch and the paucity of rival claimants.[25] In 2003, the short time between Aliyev's promotion and the election left little opportunity for his opponents to coalesce around a different candidate. Ilham also reputedly gave personal assurances to his father's officials that he would leave them in their posts and refrain from disrupting their informal power centers.[26] Heydar Aliyev's death was announced on 12 December 2003.

Despite giving assurances, the younger Aliyev faced internal threats. Throughout Heydar Aliyev's tenure, a subset of elites sharing the Yeraz identity had resented the favouritism they perceived Aliyev showed toward Nakhichevanis. Two leaders of this faction, Ali Insanov, who was also the Health Minister, and Farhad Aliyev, the Minister of Economic Development (responsible for privatization), reputedly refused to recognize Aliyev's inheritance and sought a better deal for Yeraz elites.[27] They were arrested in 2005, along with three other government officials and charged with conspiring with exiled oppositionist Rasul Guliyev to launch a coup against the president. Between 2003 and 2006, Aliyev made several less dramatic replacements to the staff he inherited, while leaving in place critical power-brokers, such as his father's confidant, Mehdiyev.[28] The ministers' arrests, though likely on fabricated charges, had a claim to populist legitimacy – like most officials they had become wealthy by virtue of the access their ministerial posts conferred. They were reputed to be unpopular, except by those who relied on them for access to resources.[29] That the arrests took place two weeks prior to the elections suggested that the regime was sending a signal to elites who hoped to use the elections to build an anti-Aliyev bloc.

The 2003 presidential election, while instigating a drama that unfolded behind closed doors, also produced a reaction on the streets. The opposition objected when it was declared that the younger Aliyev had won in the first round with 76.8% of the vote in an election that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) diplomatically stated 'fell short of international standards in several respects'.[30] A coalition of local NGOs conducted a parallel vote count with a limited budget, but it was sufficient to cover 60% of precincts.[31] Its tabulations

contradicted the official announcement, coming out instead in favour of opposition candidate Isa Gambar.[32] On the evening the election results were announced, up to 10,000 supporters of Gambar gathered in Azadlig (Freedom) Square in the center of Baku.[33] The government, anticipating opposition protests, deployed soldiers and riot police to the scene, where they proceeded to violently disperse the demonstrators. In the several days following the election, one person was killed by the security forces, over 300 were injured, and 400 were arrested, including Gambar, who was charged with instigating the violence and released almost one month later.[34]

The Aliyev regime deployed rhetoric to defend its actions after the crackdown, arguing to the international community for the need for stability: 'The radical wing of the opposition has again demonstrated its essence. . .Azerbaijan is a strong state and is capable of defending itself. . .[Opposition] leaders and those who provoked people into acting will be brought to book.'[35] By the time the Georgian revolution occurred, culminating in Shevardnadze's resignation on 23 November, the new Azeri president had dealt with the post-election demonstrations and secured international recognition of his 'victory'.[36]

Several explanations have been offered for the failure of the opposition to effectively challenge the regime despite the ostensibly weak position of the victor. Many claim that the international community, particularly the US, failed to support the opposition, having already decided to throw its weight behind Aliyev in the interests of stability and to preserve Western oil interests.[37] Another argument focuses on the tendency of revolutions to follow regime splintering, noting how the succession from father to son ensured that elites would rally around the chosen heir rather than pursue their individual interests.[38] A different approach highlights the failure of the business community to support opposition demonstrators, since it was not independent of the regime.[39] Finally, there is the fact that the security forces remained loyal to the regime and followed orders to use force against protesters, rather than defect to the opposition as many officers did in Georgia and Ukraine.[40] Each of these explanations reveals an important part of the story, suggesting that Azerbaijan's regime stability was in some sense overdetermined. The upshot was that a potential revolution failed to materialize; instead of undermining the status quo, the election reinforced it.

Backlash or coincidence?

The authors in this special issue, following on arguments about demonstration effects and international diffusion,[41] consider the proposition that non-democratic regimes used various tactics to pre-empt domestic mass protests after observing successful bottom-up challenges in states with otherwise similar characteristics. To confirm the occurrence of an authoritarian backlash, it is necessary to demonstrate, at the very least, that protests in one state were followed by crackdowns in another. Certainly, repression against the opposition was used in Azerbaijan between 2003 and 2005, consistent with this requirement. However, that is not

sufficient to support the 'backlash' argument. One must also show that a revolutionary event *caused* a regime to become more repressive than it was before. Unlike other case studies of this special issue, Azerbaijan does not meet this second test. In fact, close attention to the timing of Azerbaijan's major public crackdown on the opposition in 2003 reveals that the causality was reversed; the crackdown *preceded*, rather than *followed*, successful mass mobilization elsewhere. Instead of precipitating a wave of revolutions, Azerbaijan could just as well be seen as the crest of a wave of repression against pro-democracy demonstrations that had begun in China (1989), gained inspiration from Vladimir Putin's emasculating of Russia's opposition, and migrated to Belarus (2001) and Armenia (2003). If we can imagine Azerbaijan establishing a demonstration effect for Georgian activists to absorb, it would be to fear their government, not to challenge it. Yet this example clearly failed to make an impression, as the opposition in Georgia enjoyed more favourable conditions than in Azerbaijan, and took advantage of them.[42] In the aftermath of the 2003 Rose Revolution, the Aliyev regime continued its suppression of civil society, which persisted even after the most intense revolutionary fervour in the region had subsided. The timing of its repressive measures strongly suggests that these moves were not a response to events in Georgia, Ukraine, or Kyrgyzstan, but rather the continuation of a long-term approach to managing the opposition.

Following the Rose Revolution, the Aliyev regime took several measures against civil society and the media, but nothing beyond what it was already doing before 2003. It continued to make life difficult for the opposition by intimidating critics and spreading propaganda through the state-run media. The government detained many journalists in the aftermath of the 2003 demonstrations and temporarily shut down the popular opposition newspaper *Yeni Musavat* in 2004 and 2005.[43] In February 2005, two journalists for the opposition newspaper *Azadlig* were beaten and had compromising material revealed to the public, presumably in revenge for publishing anti-Aliyev material.[44] In March, the editor of a prominent opposition magazine, *Monitor*, Elmar Husseinov, was assassinated.[45] The government also launched a campaign to discredit a nascent youth movement, *Yeni Fikir*, which had been emulating Georgia's *Kmara* and Ukraine's *Pora*.[46]

Aliyev responded to the wave of regime change in the region rhetorically as well, making the case that evolution, not revolution, would be the appropriate mode of change, as had other anxious leaders in the region.[47] He tried to discredit the opposition and its tactics before the 2005 parliamentary election, saying, 'It is a deliberate attempt of the opposition to create violence, to be beaten by police, and then to demonstrate that there's no democracy in Azerbaijan. . .Their goal became to be shown by various TV channels and to find their names in the world press and to try to present Azerbaijan as a country where freedom of assembly is not provided.'[48] He also argued that Azerbaijan's booming economy – growing at an astounding rate of 26.5% in 2005 – made it less susceptible to a revolution than Georgia or Ukraine.[49] The government instructed its diplomats abroad to condemn the revolutions at every turn.[50]

The 2005 parliamentary elections were a second chance for Aliyev's opponents to challenge the regime, this time using the revolutionary template. Although exit polls provided no smoking gun proving fraud, the opposition and foreign observers documented pervasive falsification in favour of the ruling YAP.[51] The opposition, led by Kerimli, staged a sit-in in Baku.[52] As in 2003, a short but brutal crackdown put an end to street demonstrations, preventing a drawn-out struggle in which the opposition could occupy the square, generate media attention and encourage ordinary people to join. YAP garnered 56 of 125 seats in parliament, to the opposition's eight.[53] A large number of MPs who won as independent candidates were supporters of Aliyev, thus giving the president a comfortable majority in parliament. In protest, the opposition MPs who won their elections rejected the results and refused to accept their seats.[54]

After the 2005 elections, the government continued to constrain civil society – even after the revolutionary wave had subsided and other autocracies were seemingly loosening restrictions they had imposed in the period of concern. In 2007, the government announced the creation of a 'Council for State Support of NGOs', which would rival foreign sources by providing grants to support – and co-opt – domestic NGOs. It awarded about $2 million in 2008 and $2.5 million in 2009.[55] In 2007, a critical reporter at *Zerkalo* was arrested and also charged with slander against victims of the Karabakh conflict, although his real sin appeared to be criticizing the Aliyev regime. The same year, Ganimat Zahidov, the editor of *Azadlig* who had been set up in 2005, was arrested for 'hooliganism' and sentenced to four years in prison.[56] In 2009, parliament proposed a bill which would have limited foreign funding of NGOs, and required NGOs to set up branches in one-third of the regions of the country. It withdrew the most stringent parts of the proposal only after a barrage of international criticism. In July 2009, two young bloggers who had produced a video mocking President Aliyev and posted it on YouTube were arrested and charged with 'hooliganism'. A 2010 law prohibited journalists from taking images of people without their permission.[57] These recent moves against civil society evince a pattern of continuous harassment and co-optation even though the regime was already quite secure, and not a pointed crackdown following the Rose Revolution.

The secrets of its success

Ultimately, the absence of a serious threat from below, obviating the need for a 'backlash', can be attributed to the security of Azerbaijan's regime, a surprising outcome given its turbulent early years of independence. As the above argument demonstrates, the foremost medium-term factor ensuring its security was the consolidation of the ruling elite, which shared common methods of governing and benefitted materially from its control of the state. This gave it a stake in preserving the status quo, including supporting the president, which also meant that further democratic and economic reforms were not in its interests. The principal actors on Aliyev's team, once installed, remained in place for over a decade,

including Ramiz Mehdiyev (1994–present); Ramil Usubov, minister of internal affairs (1994–present); Namik Abbasov, minister of national security (1994–2004); Safar Abiyev, minister of defence (1995–present); and Natik Aliyev, head of SOCAR (1993–2005, until his promotion to minister of industry and energy).[58] The stabilization of the cadre and the demonstrative closing of ranks around the president in the mid-1990s provided stability, deterred challengers and created barriers for the liberal opposition to make inroads.[59]

The second factor that enabled the ruling elite to maintain power was the concentration of economic resources in the regime's hands. Although Azerbaijan undertook moderate economic reforms in the early 1990s, as the Aliyev regime consolidated power it also re-established partial state control over the economy.[60] As Azerbaijan gradually came to resemble a 'petrostate', oil revenues distorted the economy by concentrating economic growth at the top and reducing the space for private commerce. This change placed a greater amount of resources at the disposal of the regime to distribute as patronage, which further enabled it to maintain political control.[61] The oil sector also provided the putative middle class and ambitious young people with lucrative employment opportunities and a stake in preserving the system, reducing the incentive to engage in pro-democracy activism.

At the same time, the shrinking share of the economy in private hands precluded the emergence of a business elite autonomous of the regime – a potential ally of the opposition in a bottom-up challenge and a critical component of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan's revolutions.[62] Wealthy elites who did not support the regime were considered threats. Some, like the ultra-wealthy Rasul Guliyev, who was once head of the state oil refinery, were forced into exile.[63]

A third advantage for the Aliyev regime was the tacit yet undeniable support it received from the West. Whereas the US spent $41 million on support for civil society in Serbia and $65 million in Ukraine in the years immediately preceding their revolutions,[64] mostly through quasi-NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI), it spent only a small fraction of that in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, despite its increasingly undemocratic trajectory, avoided much of the criticism from the West directed at authoritarian states such as Belarus and Uzbekistan.[65] As the source point of one million barrels of oil per day flowing to Europe, the site of the largest energy contract signed since the end of the Cold War, and an ally sharing the West's goal of reducing Russia's influence in Eurasia, Azerbaijan was accorded special status that allowed it to avoid criticism.[66] When the regime was caught falsifying election results in its favour – twice – it was rebuked by the OSCE but suffered only a mild reproach from individual Western governments. The opposition, no less sincere or motivated than the opposition in Georgia, did not enjoy the same level of support from abroad. And with no hope of joining the European Union or NATO, the external tug that stimulated reform in the Baltic states, Ukraine and Georgia, was barely felt in Azerbaijan.[67]

The consolidation of power around a small number of people eventually generated its own countervailing forces in the form of resentment by those excluded from

the system, but that was not sufficient to cause a revolution. Ordinary citizens developed justifiably burning grievances in response to widespread corruption and the low quality of public services despite the immense wealth of their country. People in rural areas lack clean water and suffer from high unemployment, leading many to migrate abroad in search of work, while 'oligarchs' drive around Baku in shiny Mercedes Benzes and invest in multi-million-dollar condominiums overlooking the Caspian Sea. In the 2003 and 2005 elections, voters expressed their dissatisfaction at an unjust system, but to little avail. Authoritarian regimes can survive long after they lose popular support. The Aliyev regime controls the instruments of coercion, the media and the revenues from oil with which to buy off potential rivals. Ordinary citizens face a collective action problem in ordinary situations, but the barriers are much more severe in the face of such an overwhelming imbalance of resources. A succession is one occasion that might reveal a split within the regime, giving opposition actors a chance to contest for power with the help of elite allies, but the Aliyev family endured. The elder Aliyev's careful preparation and skillful management of personnel ensured that his regime would survive its greatest challenge after his death and preserve his legacy.

The importance of these factors can be seen in the contrary case of Georgia. There, although Shevardnadze's restoration brought a modicum of stability to a country wracked by civil war, the regime was never able to centralize power and weaken rivals to the same extent as Aliyev. In part because of the greater fragmentation of the state, Shevardnadze was forced to cut more deals and cede more authority to other actors in the early years of his reign. Although he gradually restored the coercive power of the state, he was unable to reestablish control over critical parts of the economy, which enabled actors outside his coalition (and potential opponents) to wield power autonomous of the regime. When opposition politicians – who had once served under Shevardnadze – capitalized on mass grievances by mobilizing crowds to protest, the president watched as his coalition fragmented and his allies turned against him.[68]

Lessons for authoritarian backlash: states and regimes

In analysing post-Soviet states, it is useful to understand how their institutional inheritances shape their politics, in ways that differ fundamentally from the West European states that often act as the baseline for analysis in political science. Where perestroika-era reformers failed to gain or hold onto power following the Soviet collapse, the new order would operate much like the old one, only with Soviet-era elites now enjoying the trappings of statehood. These leaders built states and ruling coalitions by tapping into their personal and professional networks, and employed informal means to regulate power. Official posts were divided according to the logic of intra-elite bargaining, as a result of which the beneficiaries used the bureaucracy to pursue their own interests with little accountability to society. Analysis of how incumbents respond to the threat of mobilization from below must keep in mind the logic according to which

such a state functions. Precedents from consolidated democracies are likely to be misleading at best.

Azerbaijan's response to bottom-up demands for change in the region cannot be understood in isolation from the construction of the Azeri state. Aliyev's strengthening of the state from 1993 to 2003 involved building a coalition of loyalists and marginalizing forces outside the coalition. This consolidation of power made the regime more vulnerable to threats from inside the state than outside it. If enough elites rival to either of the Aliyevs were to connive against him, they could launch a coup. The challenge for the younger Aliyev when Heydar became ill was to prevent defection by elites in the coalition who were at risk of mobilizing against him.[69] Ilham, having secured the support of critical allies, made a pre-emptive move against potential challengers. Subsequently, he became confident enough to replace parts of his father's team with members of his own network.

As this article has demonstrated, Azerbaijan's reaction to the colour revolutions cannot be considered a backlash. This is not to say it was permissive of opposition – on the contrary, the regime cracked down on protests even *before* Georgia's Rose Revolution took place. But once the 'wave' began, the regime was well positioned: it enjoyed a lopsided balance of power and faced a weak civil society. Insofar as NGOs were the driving force behind other revolutions – a proposition still being debated[70] – in Azerbaijan they did not pose a serious threat. The nature of the Azerbaijani state meant that the key to avoiding an outcome remotely like Georgia's – or a quieter, less 'democratic' transfer of power by coup – was to get its house in order. The Alievs did not need to speculate on what Shevardnadze should have done to confront NDI, the Soros Foundation, or *Kmara*, but could instead emulate Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, who had so reduced the space for autonomous citizen activity that he could be confident of surviving a rare protest outbreak. The Aliyevs were then free to focus on the more serious task – managing power among acquisitive and jealous elites in their ruling coalitions, which, while sometimes fractious, also served as efficient vehicles for ensuring the durability of the regime.[71]

Notes

1. For example, Åslund and McFaul, *Revolution in Orange*; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders.*
2. Ibid.
3. Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; Slater, *Ordering Power.*
4. Azerbaijan was independent between 1918 and 1921, after which it was forcibly absorbed into the Soviet Union.
5. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics*, 194–222.
6. Since then, Armenia has occupied all of Nagorno-Karabakh and 14% of Azerbaijan's territory.
7. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics*.
8. Author's interview with Analyst, Baku, 24 July 2009; Politician, 14 August 2009. Names of sources are kept confidential for safety reasons.

9. Author's interviews with Analyst, Baku, 24 July 2009; Academic II, Baku, 5 August 2009.
10. http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=439. It also hovered on the border between 'anocracy' and 'autocracy' until 1998 according to the Polity Database. See http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/aze2.htm.
11. Freizer, 'Dynasty and Democracy'; Alieva, 'Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections'.
12. Cornell, 'Democratization Falters'.
13. Luong and Weinthal, 'Rethinking the Resource Curse'.
14. Wakeman-Linn, Mathieu, and van Selm, 'Oil Funds'. The country was projected to earn $160 billion from the contract by 2025. Schleifer, 'Azerbaijan Oil'.
15. Ismailzade and Rosner, *Russia's Energy Interests*, 22.
16. Ledeneva, *How Russia Really Works.*
17. Gusseynov, 'Aliev posle Aliyeva'; International Crisis Group, 'Azerbaijan: Turning'.
18. Fatullaev, 'Odna golova'; Swietochowski, 'Azerbaijan: Perspectives', 421; author's interviews in Baku: Analyst, 24 July 2009; Academic, 30 July 2009; Academic II, 5 August 2009; Journalist, 10 August 2009.
19. Gusseynov, 'Aliev posle Aliyeva'; Smirnov, 'Azerbaijan: The Transfer of Power'.
20. Gusseynov, 'Aliev posle Aliyeva'; International Crisis Group, 'Azerbaijan: Turning', 9; author's interviews with Politician, 20 July 2009; Analyst, 24 July 2009, Academic, 30 July 2009; Academic II, 5 August 2009; Journalist, 10 August 2009.
21. For some of these conditions, see McFaul, 'Transitions from Postcommunism'.
22. Beissinger, 'Structure and Example'; Way, 'Real Causes'.
23. Valiyev, 'Referendum in Azerbaijan'.
24. Data for the following section comes from interviews conducted by the author in Baku in July and August 2009 with journalists, academics, former politicians and independent analysts.
25. Hale, 'Regime Cycles'.
26. Author's interview, Journalist, Baku, 21 July 2009.
27. Sabarskiy, 'Okhota za prezidenta'.
28. The foreign minister was made ambassador to Poland, the speaker of parliament resigned, and the ministers of Communication and Youth were fired. Author's interview with Politician, Baku, 20 July 2009.
29. Peuch, 'Azerbaijan: Government in Control'; International Crisis Group, 'Azerbaijan's 2005 Elections', 10; author's interview with Analyst II, 12 August 2009.
30. OSCE, *International Election Observation Mission*.
31. Author's interview with NGO Leader, Baku, 6 August 2009.
32. Trilling and Mielnikiewicz, 'Unrest Rocks Baku'.
33. Valiyev, 'Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan', 21.
34. Human Rights Watch, *Crushing Dissent*.
35. 'Crackdown Deepens'.
36. Human Rights Watch, *Crushing Dissent.*
37. For example, Alieva, 'Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections'. The fact that Heydar Aliyev was being treated in a Cleveland hospital during the election lent some support to this contention.
38. Hale, 'Regime Cycles'.
39. Radnitz, 'The Color of Money'.
40. D'Anieri, 'Explaining the Success'; Way, 'Real Causes'.
41. Elkins and Simmons, 'On Waves'.
42. Beissinger, 'Structure and Example'; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*.
43. Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Cases 2004'.
44. Nazli, *Nations in Transit 2006*, 14.

45. The magazine was rumoured to have damaging information about the first lady. Author's interview with NGO Leader, Baku, 6 August 2009. Suspects living in Georgia were charged but never captured.
46. Valiyev, 'Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan', 24–5.
47. Author's interview with NGO Activist, Baku, 20 July 2009; Saudabayev 'The Kazakh Way.'
48. Holley, 'No Revolution Coming'.
49. Ibid.; http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Azerbaijan.
50. Author's interview with NGO Activist, Baku, 20 July, 2009.
51. Chivers, 'Crowd Protests Fraud'.
52. Socor, 'Kerimli Battle-Cry'.
53. Alieva, 'Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections'.
54. Nichol, 'Azerbaijan's 2005 Legislative Election'; Abbasov and Muradova, 'New Azerbaijani Parliament Convenes'.
55. Human Rights House Network, 'Azerbaijan: Proposed Amendments to NGO Law'.
56. Yanusik, 'The Right Tool'.
57. Kazimov, 'New Azeri Law'.
58. The ability of these principals to bring about stability was aided by the fact that their authority extended back to the previous regime. For example, Mehdiyev had been in charge of ideology for the Azeri Communist Party, Usubov had been deputy chief of Internal Affairs in Nagorno-Karabakh and Minister of Internal Affairs in Nakhichevan in the 1980s, and Abbasov had been deputy chairman of the KGB in Azerbaijan. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
59. Levitsky and Way make a similar argument to account for the survival and demise of other post-Soviet regimes. See Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism.*
60. '…access to resources runs through the state, which functions as a network for the informal distribution of income. Private businesses exist, but the ruling clique keeps them dependent in ways that stop them from backing opposition movements.' Alieva, 'Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections', 148.
61. Alieva, 'Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections', 152.
62. Radnitz, 'The Color of Money'; Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy.*
63. International Crisis Group, 'Azerbaijan: Turning'.
64. Beissinger, 'Promoting Democracy'.
65. International Crisis Group, 'Azerbaijan's 2005 Elections', 17.
66. *Azeri Times*, 'In 2010 Forecasts on Oil'.
67. Levitsky and Way, 'International Linkage'.
68. See Fairbanks, 'Georgia's Rose Revolution'; Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening.* On the dynamics of elite defection, see Hale, 'Democracy or Autocracy'.
69. Hale, 'Regime Cycles'.
70. Way, 'Real Causes'; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*.
71. Saidazimova, 'Uzbekistan'; Kimmage, 'Kazakhstan'.

Notes on contributor

Scott Radnitz is Assistant Professor of International Studies at the University of Washington. His research deals with authoritarian politics, informal networks and identity, with an emphasis on Central Asia and the Caucasus. His book, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-led Protests in Central Asia*, was published by Cornell University Press in 2010. His articles have appeared in journals including *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Nationalities Papers*, and *Europe-Asia Studies*.

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