



*National Democratic  
Institute for  
International  
Affairs*

**Report of the Survey Mission to**

**AZERBAIJAN**

**April 3 - 7, 1995**



# NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Report of the Survey Mission to AZERBAIJAN

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The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted a survey mission to the Caucasus during March 25 - April 7, 1995. The survey team visited Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to investigate preparations for parliamentary elections expected to take place in each republic between July and November this year. On the basis of this visit, NDI has decided to develop programs in each republic to reinforce the democratic content of elections by strengthening the efforts of political parties and nonpartisan groups to participate in the process.

The attached report discusses the survey mission's findings in Azerbaijan. For a companion report on Armenia, please contact NDI.

### **Institutional Background**

NDI first began activities in the Caucasus in 1992 in advance of parliamentary elections in Georgia in October that year. It has since established an office in Tbilisi, from which a field staff provides assistance on a regular, ongoing basis to national and regional political parties, parliamentary committees and groups, and nongovernmental organizations.

NDI developed an interest in working in Azerbaijan as the result of a visit to the country in February of 1993. The survey team was deeply impressed by the sophistication and vigor demonstrated by political parties and civic groups at that time. NDI concluded the trip with plans to initiate a program there soon thereafter, but a coup in June that year prevented any activity from taking place. A two-year absence from Azerbaijan concluded with the survey mission this spring, when the prospect of parliamentary elections in the fall induced NDI to return to Baku and explore possibilities for undertaking programming once again.

Plans to visit Armenia followed from the announcement of parliamentary elections on July 5. NDI had not worked in the republic previously. As the purpose and itinerary of the survey trip suggest, NDI plans to expand its programs to all the republics in the Caucasus. The small size of these republics, their receptivity to Western ideas and their command of great human resources are among the reasons that have attracted NDI to the region. Each demonstrates great potential for building a prosperous, self-sustaining and democratic state, and warrants international attention and support.



the prospect that elections will afford the possibility of affecting real change, will be influenced not only by a host of structural factors, but by the willingness of the leadership to administer a genuinely competitive process. The active participation of political parties, nongovernmental groups, and voters in the elections will help to engender a process that recognizes citizens as having a role in determining their fates. On this basis, the work of building democratic institutions can proceed.

## **Program**

The NDI survey team visited Azerbaijan between April 3 - 9 to develop an impression of the political situation and to assess the probability that parliamentary elections will take place this year. Because of NDI's explicit concern with the electoral process, the team studiously avoided engaging in discussions about Nagorno-Karabagh. The findings of the mission, described below, suggest the outlines of a sustained field-based program that NDI hopes to initiate in Azerbaijan this year.

Ambassador Nelson Ledsky, Senior Associate and Program Manager for NDI's programs in the former Soviet Union; Joanna Levison, Program Officer for the Caucasus; and Bulent Aliriza, a regional specialist, constituted the survey team.

During the visit the team met with Azerbaijan's leading parties, including the Azerbaijan Popular Front, *Musavat*, the Azerbaijan National Independence Party, the Social Democratic Party and New (*Yeni*) Azerbaijan Party. Meetings were also conducted with nonpartisan organizations that demonstrated an interest in participating in the elections. In addition, the team met with the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, political researchers and pollsters, and local journalists. On Thursday, April 6, the team met with President Heidar Aliev. Because of time constraints, the survey mission was limited to Baku.

In most cases, the survey team met with the party or organizational leadership and several members. In each meeting, the team described NDI's status as a nongovernmental and nonpartisan organization, and stated the Institute's interest in contributing organizational and informational support to political parties and nonpartisan groups in advance of the elections. Discussions were used to solicit the broadest possible range of opinion on general political development in Azerbaijan and the likelihood and implications of the elections scheduled for this fall. The team also sought to stimulate suggestions for developing a field-based program, before and possibly after, the elections.

For several reasons, the timing of the trip turned out to be particularly opportune. A coup attempt three weeks earlier by the country's internal security forces was still sending reverberations throughout Baku and had the effect of focusing the public's attention on politics. Announcement of Exxon's decision to join the Caspian Sea consortium added a palpable element of confidence to the general public mood of anticipation surrounding the pending oil deal. Conspicuously absent from the visit were discussions about Nagorno-Karabagh and any evidence that the country is painfully and ignominiously at war.

debate, and instead predicted that the President would when necessary simply promulgate his draft. The constitution, they argued, would be produced by similar means. Even members of pro-government parties expressed concerns to the survey team about adequate financing, material supplies and media access for the purpose of developing an electoral campaign. Opposition parties questioned the very concept of conducting a campaign under conditions of curfew and censorship. Some opposition leaders reflected on the relationship between the oil deal and the elections, speculating that the promise of impending wealth would discourage many citizens from casting a vote that might imperil the status quo. Across the spectrum all party leaders worried about low voter-turnout, and none could predict how the problem of enfranchising refugees might be solved.

Despite their uncertainty and misgivings, political party leaders had begun to prepare their organizations for electoral competition. The Popular Front, for example, was attempting after several refusals to obtain a permit to hold a congress to declare itself a political party, a legal status necessary for running candidates in the elections. The National Independence Party planned to implement a self-styled training program for members of its staff and prospective candidates in advance of the elections. Leaders of every party with which the survey team met offered early thoughts on how they intended to mobilize resources and candidates for single-member districts and party lists, and whether they envisioned forming coalitions for the fall. The Democracy Development Fund, a nongovernmental organization, was also engaged in formulating a schedule of activities to educate voters about the electoral process and to provide nonpartisan support to parties in advance of election day.

In conjunction with their preliminary planning for elections, party leaders requested organizational and strategic assistance from NDI. Without exception, they also declared the necessity that international organizations be present in Azerbaijan to monitor activity on election day. They insisted that this presence would supplement, not replace, the efforts of Azerbaijani citizens to monitor the elections themselves. Finally, they speculated that NDI could provide useful assistance to the new Parliament after elections, in the areas of parliamentary organization and practice, professional ethics, accountability and representation.

Near the conclusion of the visit, the survey team had an audience with President Aliiev. The President described progress on the formulation of an election law and preparations for developing a new constitution to replace the document he penned in 1978. Elections, he said, would follow upon the completion of these two tasks in September or October, 1995. The President declared his eagerness to open the process to the participation of all forces that renounce violence and espouse constructive means for promoting the interests of the people of Azerbaijan. He invited NDI to open an office in Baku, as it had already done in Tbilisi, to provide support to the political process in advance of elections, and to assist with the task of building and consolidating new institutions afterward.

### *Election Law*

As the discussion above suggests, Azerbaijan has not yet formulated an election law for administering the scheduled parliamentary elections. While reports suggest that anywhere

parties represent a great spectrum of interests and include approximately six pro-government parties, over 30 opposition parties, ethnic parties, an Islamic party, and a party of entrepreneurs. Most have office space and a video camera and publish a newspaper; several, including the Azerbaijan Popular Front, *Musavat*, the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, and the National Independence Party boast well-developed internal structures and claim to have regional organizations. Few of the parties are represented in Parliament, since the *milli mejlis* was formed before most of their organizations existed. The opposition, in particular, has been particularly disadvantaged by the Parliament's small size and attrition among deputies over the years. Exclusion from the Parliament has weakened all the parties by depriving them of the opportunity to contend with rivals in an official forum and to subject their members and their message to public scrutiny and criticism.

Despite their numbers and diversity, the parties identified with the opposition have demonstrated an impressive ability to cooperate. The Azerbaijan Popular Front, *Musavat*, the Azerbaijan Democratic Party and others organized in early 1994 to form the Democratic Congress. The majority of the parties of the Democratic Congress joined over 20 other parties to form a larger, loosely-structured political party roundtable organized in January 1995. During the period of the survey mission, the roundtable was drafting a statement to present to President Aliev that established conditions for participating in parliamentary elections and threatened a boycott if their demands went unaddressed. The roundtable also united in defense of the *Boz Gurd* party, which was disbanded by the government in the aftermath of the attempted coup, and whose leader, former Interior Minister Iskander Hamidov was jailed. While few members of the roundtable itself believe that it is sufficiently cohesive to form an electoral bloc, liberal-leaning and centrist groups within it profess plans to coalesce for the elections.

There is little information on the relative popularity of the parties and even less consensus. A pro-government Member of Parliament projected that, in a fair election, the opposition would capture 1 percent of the vote, while predictions among the opposition itself ranged from 30 - 50 percent. Public opinion does converge on the political appeal of President Aliev, with all sides avowing that he enjoys enough popularity and has neutralized the competition sufficient to win a (hypothetical) presidential race and assure the parliamentary prospects of the pro-government parties. Some commentators offered the cynical opinion that the popularity of candidates and parties was of secondary importance at the polls since, in a fair election, people simply wouldn't turn out to vote.

### *The Media*

Azerbaijan's potentially vibrant and diversified press is stifled by chronic censorship and government-imposed bans.

In the aftermath of the coup attempt three weeks before NDI's visit, the government instituted a four-tier system of censorship that empowers the government apparatus, the military, municipal authorities and the police to control the press. The new restrictions on media only intensify the three-tiered system that has operated since a state of emergency was declared last October, and which affords the government a de facto monopoly over the press.

## *Human Rights*

The government of Azerbaijan has demonstrated regularly a willingness to suppress unsanctioned public activity and to detain, interrogate or jail detractors for reasons of political expediency and control. Those victims interviewed described such actions as attempts designed to hassle and demoralize the political opposition. While they avowed that these episodes are coerced, highly stressful and illegal, they refrained from accusing the perpetrators of using violence. Even the most unmitigated expressions of contempt for the regime were, in essence, political indictments that equated it with a "Mafia" or a "clan" that governed in total disregard for the law. During the visit, the survey team experienced government harassment first hand when forces from the local militia interrupted a meeting with opposition leaders..

In an affirmation of the primacy of human rights, members of the roundtable announced plans to draft a collective statement renouncing violence in politics. The ban on the *Boz Gurd* party and the imprisonment of its leader evoked despair among many political activists as a violent act that violated political freedoms, human rights, and international norms entitling prisoners to adequate medical care.

**List of Meetings and Contacts  
Survey Mission to Azerbaijan  
April 3 - 7, 1995**

**President Heidar Aliev**

**POLITICAL PARTIES**

**Azerbaijan Democratic Party**

Qurban Calal Mammadov

Sardar Jalaloglu

**Azerbaijan Popular Front**

Ali Karimov

Asim Mollazade

Fuad Mustafayev

Sabit Bagirov

Najaf Najafov

**Azerbaijan Independent Democratic Party**

Leyla Yunusova- Chairperson

**Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan**

Arzu Abdullaeva

Zardust Alizade

**Azerbaijan Democratic Independence Party**

Gabil Husseinli- Chairman

***Musavat* Party**

Isa Gambar- Chairman

Nasib Nasibzada

Sabit Bagirov

**National Equality Party**

Fakraddim Aidayev

**New (*Yeni*) Azerbaijan Party**

Ali Mammadli Hasanov

**Democratic Party of Entrepreneurs**

Ilham Amiraslanov

Mahmut Mamedov

