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The opposition is hoping for a Ukraine-style “color revolution”, while the government is playing the appeaser in a bid to halt any revolutionary momentum.</p> <p>By Karl Rahder in Baku for ISN Security Watch (14/11/05)</p> <p>As Azerbaijan’s political opposition movement staged its second rally in five days to protest the results of last week’s parliamentary elections - which saw the ruling party claim victory amid massive fraud allegations - many Azeris are asking what the endgame will be as the so-called revolution reaches a critical juncture.</p>  <p>Karl Rahder, ISN</p> <p>Sunday’s demonstration drew a crowd similar in size to Wednesday’s rally, with a turnout of between 15,000 and 20,000, according to many foreign journalists, although Baku’s police department put the number at 4,500.</p> <p>The government-sanctioned rally included supporters of the Azadlig (Freedom) Bloc, the YeS (Yeni Siyaset - New Policy) Alliance, and other opposition groups. The demonstration was peaceful and hundreds of police in riot gear stood by just outside the capital city’s main square.</p> <p>Wednesday’s rhetoric was fiery as opposition leaders made speeches to cheering demonstrators.</p> <p>Among the speakers was imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu of Baku’s Juma mosque, closed by the government last year due to alleged political agitation. To the roar of the crowd, the imam scolded the government of President Ilham Aliiev.</p> <p>“Shame on those who stole our freedom! Shame on those who steal our laws! We will make them resign!” he told the cheering crowds.</p> <p>Decrying what many see as a clan-based power structure at the highest levels of government, the imam shouted: “We will rid ourselves of this tribal regime!”</p> <p>Panah Husseyinov, who served as prime minister under former president Abulfaz Elchibay (who held office in 1992-1993), told the crowd that the only alternative to a free and fair election was revolution.</p> <p>Sentenced to prison after the October 2003 disturbances and pardoned earlier this year, Husseyinov told the demonstrators “We must have free elections or revolution! They didn’t allow a free election, so we need revolution! We should show them who we are! We should punish those who stole our election!”</p> <p>Opposition plans tactical shift</p> <p>The Azadlig opposition bloc has continually stressed parallels to the color revolutions in both Georgia and the Ukraine. The choreography of the two recent rallies was consistent with this motif, with marchers waving orange banners and wearing orange headbands.</p> <p>But on Sunday evening the tone had muted somewhat in what may be a shift of tactics on several fronts.</p> <p>Unlike during Wednesday’s rally, the word “revolution” was rarely heard from the speaker’s podium on Sunday, and leaders implied that an entrenched battle of wills may be set to begin, but left room for the possibility of talks between the two sides.</p> <p>According to press reports, negotiations between the opposition and the government have begun over how many seats in the Milli Majlis (Azerbaijan’s parliament) both sides will accept.</p> <p>Using a “senior” US embassy representative as well as the local heads of two nongovernmental organizations as mediators, Azadlig was said to be considering a government proposal to concede “an additional 20 constituencies” to the opposition.</p> <p>However, those reports have been strongly denied by all parties involved. One NGO source involved in the mediations told ISN Security Watch that they were playing no role in any alleged negotiations.</p> <p>Fuad Mustafaev, deputy chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (one of three opposition parties in the Azadlig bloc) also categorically denied that such negotiations were underway.</p> <p>The two prongs of their strategy, he said, were “political action”, meaning demonstrations, and using the court system to overturn disputed poll results.</p> <p>What may be taking place is not so much negotiations, but a shift in emphasis by Azadlig.</p> <p>During Sunday’s rally, Musavat Chairman Isa Gambar called on President Aliiev to “begin a dialogue with the recognized opposition leaders in order to save the country from this political crisis” - a far cry from demands for revolution heard from speakers and demonstrators at Wednesday’s rally.</p> <p>Asked on Sunday about the rumored negotiations, Murad Gassanly, one of Azadlig’s chief strategists, pointed toward Galaba Square - awash with orange banners and chanting protesters - saying, “If there was a deal in the works, do you think we’d be doing this?”</p>	<p>Search</p> <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="GO"/> <p>ISN Website</p> <p>» Tell me more about ISN LASE</p> <p>» Comment on this story</p> <p>» Printer-friendly version</p> <p>» Forward this story to a friend</p> <p> Perspectives is a weekly column written by our Security Watch readers. 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But for the demonstrators, rumors of negotiations rather than "revolution" were disappointing.

Ruslan Asadov is a 19 year-old student at Baku State University and a member of Dalga ("Wave") - a pro-democracy student group. When asked how he would react to a compromise over the number of parliamentary seats Azadlig might be allowed to have, he said: "They shouldn't be 'allowed', they should be elected."

But Baku seems keen on talks regarding the eventual composition of the parliament. Elin Suleymanov, Senior Counselor in the Azerbaijani president's office, told ISN Security Watch that the government had begun "overtures" to the opposition.

"We want to have the opposition involved in the parliament, in the political process," he maintained.

But the apparent unwillingness of the opposition since the election to reach a compromise with the government is making an agreement increasingly difficult.

"If they continue their maximalist demands, they risk placing themselves outside the political process," he said.

By using demonstrations and "external pressure" to win a majority in parliament, Suleymanov charged that the opposition was engaging in "backdoor democracy".

But some have argued that the government's overtures indicate its concern that the opposition could possibly succeed in a peaceful revolution, such as those that prompted regime changes in Ukraine and Georgia recently.

Election drama

The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) was strongly critical in its assessment of the election here, saying that its observers reported that the vote-counting process was "bad or very bad" in 43 per cent of polling stations observed.

In the week since the election, Azadlig has joined with other opposition groups in calling for a recount, the resignation of President Aliev, and even revolution.

Recently, Azadlig has said its victorious candidates planned to boycott parliament unless opposition demands were met.

By now emphasizing a court battle and "dialog", the opposition may be signaling a more subtle approach while threatening further demonstrations across the country.

Azadlig can hardly make a deal without appearing to betray its core principles, but the road to more demonstrations and tent cities is fraught with the risk of failure.

Responding to international and domestic criticism of vote counting procedures, President Aliev last week sacked the governors of the Surakhani and Sabirabad regions and has admitted that irregularities may have occurred in "seven or eight" regions.

The Azerbaijani Prosecutor's Office has also announced the arrest of a number of local election officials on charges of "misuse of authority" and "falsification of election documents".

Investigations are continuing across the country, although opposition members say this is part of a strategy to undermine their movement by prosecuting a limited number of low-level officials.

One demonstrator scoffed at the notion that President Aliev was serious about prosecuting election officials who falsified the final vote tallies: "That was an advertisement for himself!" she said. "It's so funny that anyone believes that!"

As of Sunday, Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission (CEC) had reversed election results in at least four constituencies, giving Azadlig a total of ten seats in the Milli Majlis and reducing the initial margin for the ruling New ("Yeni") Azerbaijan Party (YAP) from 63 seats to 58, out of 125 seats in the assembly.

The remaining seats have gone to a wide range of minor parties, many of whom are allied with the YAP. The numbers are expected to change as prosecutions and appeals to the CEC continue.

According to press reports, a recount in the Surakhani region has resulted in Azadlig opposition leader Ali Keremli being declared the winner.

Tajira Mamadova, an election official from the Narimanov region, told ISN Security Watch that at her polling station "Azadlig won many votes". But after the polls closed, police "took the ballots out of the polling station" and "the results were falsified".

"They threw out the votes," she said, "the protocols - everything."

More bombshells may be coming in the weeks ahead.

President Aliev told Russia's NTV television that the arrests of officials would continue, although the process would be gradual. Aliev also characterized the chances for a color revolution in this oil-rich republic as "nil".

As demonstrators began to sit on Galaba Square at the conclusion of Sunday's rally, Popular Front leader Ali Keremli asked them to go home: "I will tell you when to bring your tents!"

Thus, after a month of drama, arrests, a flawed election, and demonstrations, Azerbaijan still waits for the unfolding of events as the opposition and government plan their next moves.

Karl Rahder received has taught US foreign policy and international history at colleges and universities in the US and Azerbaijan. In 2004, he was a Visiting Faculty Fellow in Azerbaijan with the Civic Education Project, an academic program funded by the Soros organization and the US Department of State. He is currently based in Baku.

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