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And though last Sunday's opposition rally only gathered what seemed a disappointing 300 people in the center of Baku, opposition strategists say it was all part of the plan.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the authorities - who only last week conducted a surprise purge of the government, arresting a number of ministers, former ministers, and other public figures for allegedly plotting a coup - say the opposition hasn't got what it takes to oust President Ilham Aliiev.</p> <p>According to Murad Gassanly, a strategist for the Azadlig Bloc opposition group, the Sunday demonstration was just a practice run for "flash mobbing" - a new technique that involves a group of people suddenly assembling in a public place and, according to the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, doing "something unusual or notable" and then dispersing.</p> <p>Gassanly says "flash mobs" give the opposition the flexibility to scout several possible sites for rallies simultaneously, choosing the location with the fewest police.</p> <p>"Sunday was practice," Gassanly told ISN Security Watch. "If the police know where a demonstration will take place, they can block it. But our strategy is to use flash mobbing to get there before the police arrive."</p> <p>The Azadlig upper echelons had signaled to reporters and their own cadres that last Sunday's rally would take place at Baku's May 28 Metro Station. But since the police had been tipped off and had surrounded the station in advance, Azadlig leaders decided to switch the rally to a public square near the Narimanov Metro. "Not even I knew what had happened," said Gassanly.</p> <p>Most sources agree that roughly 300 people arrived to hear Popular Front leader Ali Keremli speak to supporters.</p> <p>"By the time the police arrived, we had made our point," Gassanly said, although large numbers of police appeared soon afterwards, arresting 15 demonstrators, according to Baku police, though Azadlig says 50 were arrested.</p> <p>By remaining flexible and using small groups of 30 or 40 flash mobbers to reconnoiter locations, the opposition hopes to outwit police in their selection of a possible tent city site on 7 November, the day after elections.</p> <p>Drawing parallels between the tense atmosphere in Azerbaijan and the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, Gassanly discussed the Azadlig Bloc's strategy.</p> <p>"We will need 300 people to kickstart the process on 7 November" if the elections are described as seriously flawed by the international community. Once the site is chosen and the demonstrators move in, they plan to set up a tent city, taking their cue from the supporters of Viktor Yushchenko in Kiev.</p> <p>The color revolution template is being discussed openly here, although the word "revolution" is used with caution.</p> <p>"If the election is free and fair, then we will accept the result," said Gassanly. "This is not about us trying to take control of parliament. All we want is to get a parliament that does not rubber-stamp the president's wishes."</p> <p>Superficial comparisons?</p> <p>Many analysts in Baku say the comparisons with Georgia and Ukraine are superficial. A popular overthrow of the government - not to mention victory at the polls - is very unlikely, they say.</p> <p>Pro-government parliamentary candidate Micram Huseynova, a professor of international relations at Baku State University, told ISN Security Watch "there is no basis in our society for a color revolution".</p> <p>Overdue reforms are being spearheaded by President Aliiev, she said, adding that "what happened in Ukraine and Georgia has caused problems in those societies".</p> <p>But Azadlig's Gassanly takes comfort in comparisons with the pre-election atmosphere in both countries, which "saw mass rallies after the flawed elections, not before". In Tbilisi [the Georgian capital], they "started with only a few hundred people who gathered at the parliament building" the night [veteran leader Eduard] Shevardnadze was overthrown.</p> <p>"We have more support than the pro-democracy forces had in either Ukraine or Georgia. Did you have 20,000 to 30,000 demonstrators in Ukraine or Georgia before the elections?" he asked.</p> <p>Gassanly says he is encouraged by what his Georgian contacts tell him: "They couldn't have imagined that kind of support!"</p> <p>Elin Sulmeymanov, senior counselor at the Office of the President, took a skeptical view of the parallels drawn between the impending elections and the color revolutions in the Ukraine and Georgia.</p> <p>"There are several factors necessary for a 'color revolution'," he said. "First of all, the government must be</p>	<p>Search</p> <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="GO"/>
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failing. Secondly, the leaders must be unpopular. And thirdly, the opposition has to be popular and have charismatic leaders. Just the opposite is true in Azerbaijan today!"

President Aliiev "has a 70 per cent approval rating" and the opposition "has no coherent program, no charismatic leaders", he said.

An artist on Baku's "Passage" - a popular pedestrian mall - agreed, asking: "Who are their leaders? What is their program? The opposition is against many things, but what are they for?"

On the recent purge of government officials, Sulmeymanov told ISN Security Watch that "it was well-received by the population".

"These people had an image of being involved in corruption. It's an ongoing investigation, but the arrests show the evolution of how government is moving ahead in its fight against unpopular, corrupt officials," he said.

Government concessions

In response to widespread criticism of pre-election irregularities, Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission (CEC) on Wednesday approved election-day inking of voters' fingers, a measure that had been urged by a number of international organizations.

The Azerbaijani government has also announced that it would end the ban on election monitoring by NGOs that receive more than 30 per cent of their funding from foreign sources.

Local media report that the opposition has largely welcomed the move.

Both the opposition and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had expressed concern regarding tactics in which voters could be issued with multiple voter ID's and then vote in multiple districts.

Fuad Mustafaeiev, deputy chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front party, called this the "carousel" technique.

"The CEC has 500,000 more voter ID cards than is needed," he said. "So one person can vote in different districts using the different ID cards of different voters. Maybe one of these voters is in Russia. Maybe one has moved to another region, maybe one is dead."

It is easy to glue a photo into the ID card laminate, he added.

The new government concessions on finger-inking and NGO monitors come only a week after Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried's speech at Baku State University in which he both praised and chided Azerbaijan's government.

While stressing that the US was "deeply, deeply grateful" for Azerbaijani troop contributions in Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, Fried also expressed the Bush administration's unease over the recent government purge and police tactics.

"Recent events have caused much discussion in Baku, and caused us in the United States concern," he told a large audience at the university.

"We are disappointed in steps backward concerning the freedom of assembly in the past month [...] Mass detentions - including detention of some candidates - restriction of media access, and the overwhelming deployment of security forces raise questions about the government's commitment to a free and fair campaign," he said.

Also in Baku last week were two Russian intelligence officials - Sergei Lebedev of Russian foreign intelligence (SVR) and Nikolai Petrushev of domestic intelligence, the Federal Security Service (FSB).

This was no coincidence, according to Gassanly, who stressed a geo-strategic link between the visit by Russian intelligence and the arrest the same day of Economic Development Minister Farhad Aliiev and others on charges of sedition and corruption.

"What this means is that the pro-Russian camp within the government is taking over. Aliiev was sending a message to the West: 'If you try to topple me, we will succeed and make life difficult for you. I will be very happy to work with the Russians'."

However, Sulmeymanov said such an interpretation was far-fetched.

"Of course the Russians are trying to get closer to Azerbaijan. They send people here on a weekly basis," he said.

With only occasional visits by people such as Secretary Fried, the Americans are not displaying the same level of commitment, he maintained.

In its latest interim report on the pre-election situation, the OSCE said "the campaign has been seriously marred by numerous police arrests of opposition candidates and party members, who were either detained briefly or sentenced for up to two weeks imprisonment, often 'for resisting police instructions'".

Sulmeymanov cautioned that the report should be taken in the wider context of how the government is responding to the allegations.

"I don't disagree with what they said. But the problem is that such a report creates only a snapshot of the moment. It doesn't correspond with what the situation is today. It's a process that is evolving. The changes of two days ago [the concession for finger-inking and regarding campaign funding] incorporate what the OSCE was asking for," he said.

A mere nine days to the elections, the government is emphasizing its fight against corruption and the alleged coup d'etat, while the opposition prepares for what it says will be further harassment and intimidation.

Inspired by the successful revolutions in Kiev and Tbilisi, Azadlig organizers are planning their strategy for the day after the election.

"If the international observation missions say that the election has been falsified, then that is the key," said Gassanly. "We have funding, we have tents", and the flash mobbers will be ready.

In the meantime, there is much speculation about the possibility of the return to Baku next week of exiled Azerbaijan Democratic Party leader Rasul Guliev, though government officials have said they were skeptical the opposition figurehead would return before the elections and Guliev himself has not made his intentions clear.

The return of Guliev would surely rock the boat ahead of elections, as those arrested by the authorities last week were accused of plotting with the exiled opposition leader to overthrow the government during the elections.

Karl Rahder received his master's degree from the University of Chicago's Committee on International Relations and 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 based in Baku and the US.

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