

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Director  
420 West 118<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10027 <http://www.harriman.columbia.edu>

*April 15, 2009*

## Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan

On April 15, the Harriman Institute hosted Emin Milli, co-founder of AN Network, a network of young civic activists in Azerbaijan, for a talk entitled, “Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan: The Referendum Abolishing Presidential Term Limits.” Columbia University Professor Lincoln Mitchell moderated the discussion.

The AN (“moment”) Network is a discussion forum for young people, both in Azerbaijan and abroad, to generate new ideas and propose an alternative vision for Azerbaijan’s development. The Network’s activists have organized a series of events in Europe and are planning one at the U.S. congress to celebrate the 91<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the 1918 founding of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. In one of its most visible and successful projects, the AN Network has cooperated with the Azerbaijani government in its “The Future Is What You Do Now” campaign, giving talented Azerbaijani students an opportunity to study at prestigious universities abroad.

On February 9, Milli and a group of his fellow youth activists held a protest in front of the New York UN headquarters against the recent referendum on abolishing the presidential term limits in Azerbaijan. Subsequently, in what he claims was retaliation for his role in organizing the protest, one of his relatives in Azerbaijan was fired from his job. With the death of former President Heydar Aliev, many in Azerbaijan and abroad believed that his son Ilham, a businessman by training and profession, would loosen the screws of the state’s repressive machinery and institute gradual democratic reforms. Alas, “we were proven wrong,” Milli lamented, as Ilham Aliev has since his father’s death in 2003 proven himself even “less of a democrat” than his predecessor.

As a result of the controversial 2003 elections, in which the Ilham Aliev succeeded his father, the first political dynasty was created on the territory of the former Soviet Union. In 1918, the republic became the first democracy in the Muslim world, and was duly recognized as such at

the 1920 Paris Conference. Now, 90 years later, Azerbaijan is a veritable museum dedicated to the former president, with his portraits hanging in offices, his image gracing large billboards and monuments to him a ubiquitous sight throughout the country, including one containing, seemingly modeled after the Marx-Engels-Lenin trinity, the profiles of Heydar, Ilham and Ilham's eldest son Heydar, who is reportedly being groomed for succession.

The Azerbaijani opposition decided to boycott the 2008 presidential elections, where Ilham officially received 89% of the votes. Shortly afterwards, the government marked the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1918 Republic by taking the broadcasting services of BBC and RFE/RL off the air—they have subsequently only been able to broadcast on short-wave frequency. Simultaneously with this crackdown on foreign media, *Yeni Azerbaijan*, the ruling party, put forward an initiative to hold a referendum on a total of 29 proposed amendments to the constitution – the initiative that both the president and his acolytes “kept mum about during the election campaign held just a month earlier,” as the activist noted. Most of the proposed changes constituting a “mere window-dressing,” as Milli believes, the main reason for the referendum was to scrap presidential term limits, allowing the current president to be elected beyond the end of his second term. On the day of Ilham Aliev's birthday, December 24, the Constitutional Court gave the referendum a green light. Milli noted that it took the judges only 35 minutes to approve the referendum, which included 29 changes to the constitution.

In his interview at the economic gathering in Davos, President Aliev defended the referendum as having been held “in line with the European democratic tradition,” whereby citizens “must have the right to elect their leader for as many terms as they wish.” This was in contrast to the expert opinion of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, which found the referendum to be in “contravention of European standards” and compared Azerbaijan with Belarus in lacking “consultative democracy.” Milli added that even with the referendum's approval of the constitutional changes, President Aliev cannot, “from the legal standpoint,” be reelected, since the provision comes into force only starting with the next elections' cycle. To do otherwise, according to the activist, would be to “contradict the principle of non-retroactivity of law.”

Azerbaijan is a country rich in energy resources, including its vast deposits of oil, which make up over 90% of the government's revenues. Consequently, in 2006, Azerbaijan had one of the highest annual GDP growth rates, of 34.5%. As Milli pointed out, it is precisely Azerbaijan's oil wealth which has led most experts to be “pessimistic about the prospect of democratic change in Azerbaijan in the near future.” Azerbaijan's “oil curse” has also earned it one of the lowest rankings on the corruption scale by Transparency International: 158<sup>th</sup> among 180 countries in its 2008 report. According to Milli, the regime has been exploiting the existent system of corruption to “buy loyalty of clans and the majority of citizens,” who are therefore “forced to be a party of this system.” Likewise, the absence of the

process of the economy's diversification and its increasing monopolization has "prevented the building of a modern society in Azerbaijan." Milli predicted that as oil deposits dry up, Azerbaijan's democratic prospects will become brighter. The peak in oil production is projected for 2012. Likewise, the activist added, the consequences of the current global economic crisis have yet to be felt with full force in Azerbaijan, portending troubles in the near future.

On the external front, Milli mentioned the ongoing state of war with Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh as another factor which keeps Azerbaijan's democracy muzzled. In commenting on US policy in Azerbaijan, Lincoln Mitchell recalled a news program on National Public Radio following the 1998 presidential elections in Azerbaijan, announcing that a "democrat [Heydar Aliiev] has been elected president of Azerbaijan."

Pointing to the presence of the neighboring Iran, which has increasingly meddled in Azerbaijan, including by sponsoring religious schools, and America's "short-sighted" policy of giving a "blank check" to a country rich in oil and a nominal partner in the Bush administration's anti-terrorist campaign, Professor Mitchell predicted that "things are not going to end well" for the US in Azerbaijan. As an example of the blank-check policy cited by Mitchell, Milli referred to the membership of former US Ambassador in Baku, Stanley Escudero, in the ruling *Yeni Azerbaijan* party.

In conclusion, Milli pledged to continue to follow a "constructive path" in articulating its vision for Azerbaijan and maintain a "long-term approach" to the solution of the country's problems.

*-Peter Zalmayev*