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100 days in, even Azerbaijan's opposition backs Nagorno-Karabakh blockade

Friday 31 March 2023, by [KITACHAYEV Bashir](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2023).

Baku speaks with one voice in support of the Aliyev regime's aggressive campaign - but change may be in the air

More than a hundred days into the [blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh](#) by Azerbaijani protesters, it's hard to escape two facts.

Firstly, the protesters, who claim to be environmental activists concerned about [illegal mining in the region](#), appear to be supported by the Azerbaijani government. And secondly, the country's opposition appears to largely support President Ilham Aliyev's aggressive campaign to take control of the disputed region.

The blockaded Lachin corridor is the only road that links Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnically Armenian enclave surrounded by Azerbaijani territory. Hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis fled the regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh during the [First Karabakh War](#) in the early 1990s.

The authorities consider the blockade a "[civil society](#)" protest, which the government blames on Russian peacekeepers stationed in the region after the [Second Karabakh War](#) in 2020. But there are [indications](#) that the government planned the road block, which has sparked a [humanitarian crisis](#) in Nagorno-Karabakh.

It is significant that there is no opposition to the Karabakh blockade inside Azerbaijan despite years of repression by the Aliyev regime. The prospect of returning Azerbaijani control to Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territory, which is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani, has long preoccupied both the regime and Azerbaijani society.

State propaganda has added to Azerbaijan's trauma over the two Nagorno-Karabakh wars and ethnic cleansing of the past 30 years. This means new offensives against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia itself, as well as the current blockade, enjoy significant support from Azerbaijani society.

But while there is little chance the Azerbaijani opposition will seek an end to the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh right now, there are signs of change. New forces are gathering momentum and they could play a role in ending the war with Armenia in the future.

Strategic alliance

For years, one of the Azerbaijani opposition's main charges against Aliyev was that he did not dare unleash hostilities against Nagorno-Karabakh. When Aliyev started the so-called '[Four-Day War](#)' against Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016, the opposition criticised him for failing to achieve much while sustaining huge losses.

Four years later, when the Azerbaijani military mounted a huge offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Azerbaijani society was [practically united in support](#), due to both the government's propaganda and the memories of homes and land lost during the 1990s.

The opposition also expressed solidarity with the authorities. Ali Karimli, the head of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, the country's largest opposition party, announced that he would not oppose the regime during the war. A strange situation ensued in which [Karimli's rhetoric](#) differed little from the government's line, even though he is implacably opposed to Aliyev. He was not alone in his support for the regime, with former political prisoner Ilgar Mammadov and his REAL political party also backing Aliyev's war.

The Second Karabakh War ended with Azerbaijan regaining most of the territories it had previously lost, including the historic town of Shusha, inside Nagorno-Karabakh.

But then the opposition's patriotic euphoria was replaced by resentment that Azerbaijan had not taken complete control of Nagorno-Karabakh and allowed the Russian army into the region to play the role of a peacekeeper. Even so, the opposition hoped to bask in the reflected glory of Aliyev's post-war political capital by not going against popular opinion on Karabakh.

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This support has not wavered as Azerbaijan mounted new, smaller offensives against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia throughout 2022. In September, when Azerbaijan attacked Armenian [territory](#) and captured areas directly on its border, Azerbaijan's main opposition parties supported the escalation. In fact, REAL's [Mammadov](#) repeated Baku's official position and accused Armenia of attacking Azerbaijan.

When it comes to the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh starting in December, the majority of the opposition has spoken out critically mostly on the fact that protests are suppressed in Azerbaijan itself - while a "civil society" protest is allowed to blockade the population of Nagorno-Karabakh. They have also repeated the authorities' interpretation that it is the Russian peacekeepers who are responsible for the blockade.

For example, Karimli, from the Popular Front, has accused Aliyev not of forcing tens of thousands of people into a humanitarian blockade, but instead stated that the authorities are not stubborn enough to expel Russian troops and Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.

That said, some politicians and bloggers have [condemned the 2022 attacks](#) on Armenia despite their previous support for the 2020 Karabakh war and Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. And some politicians have criticised the heavy losses and small gains.

The only political group to have condemned the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh outright is the Democracy 1918 movement, known as D18. This centre-left youth organisation highlights social issues and focuses on workers' rights, solidarity with trade unions and regional peace initiatives. On the second day of the blockade, D18 accused the regime of trying to prolong the Karabakh conflict.

What use is the opposition?

At first glance, most of Azerbaijan's opposition might appear to benefit the authoritarian government rather than ordinary citizens.

In fact, it serves a vital purpose for Aliyev, who has been in power since 2003. He is able to claim

there is freedom of speech in Azerbaijan, which is particularly relevant in light of the [mega deal signed by the European Union](#) in July to double gas exports from Azerbaijan by 2027. European officials need not be ashamed to buy fossil fuels from Baku even though they indirectly sponsor the Karabakh conflict and state repression.

It's another matter that the Azerbaijani opposition fails to offer genuine solutions to the country's political and [socio-economic problems](#). Generally, it broadcasts the same nationalist rhetoric as the regime, only occasionally diluting this with demands for democracy and freedom of speech and assembly.

“Someday Ilham Aliyev will definitely answer to an international court for the crimes committed not only against the Azerbaijani people, but also against the Armenian people
- Ahmad Mammadli”

In fact, the opposition does not have much of a political presence in Azerbaijan. Some party leaders and independent activists enjoy a degree of popularity, but the vast majority of electoral candidates fielded by the opposition are unfamiliar to voters. In any case, once the election is over, the candidates disappear, until the next date with the ballot box a few years later.

This means that in Azerbaijan, the opposition's role is reduced to informing people of what is happening in the country. This has some value in a country with little space allowed for independent media, but it does not stop the regime from passing repressive laws that require journalists to engage in the [“objective” interpretation of facts](#) and events.

If bad news does manage to filter out despite the authorities' best efforts, populist measures are taken, such as a full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh or escalation of the conflict with Armenia.

A political culture

Despite everything, Azerbaijan's opposition does preserve an embryonic political culture. This is key, given the regime's attempts to depoliticise society as authoritarian regimes don't need total support, but total indifference.

Since the 2020 war, fledgling movements that capitalise on widespread discontent with falling living standards have been drawing young people and trying to change the political discourse in the country.

With Azerbaijan having retaken its territories and established a foothold deep in the heart of Nagorno-Karabakh, the regime is finding it more difficult to distract people from the country's internal problems by pointing to an [“external enemy”](#).

Perhaps a sign of this is the rise of D18, which says its anti-war position has made it more, not less popular since 2020. D18's followers, who oppose war with Armenia and support democratic values, are “anti-system,” according to the group's chairperson Ahmad Mammadli.

But they're also paying the price. When D18 youth group's leader Ahmad Mammadli [spoke out](#) strongly last September against Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia proper, he was sentenced to 30 days of solitary confinement in prison.

“Someday Ilham Aliyev will definitely answer to an international court for the crimes committed not only against the Azerbaijani people, but also against the Armenian people,” Mammadli said, before he went to jail.

Perhaps this niche political concern of Azerbaijani society will grow as people finally tire of the 'successes' Aliyev has delivered in the years since the 2020 war. And Azerbaijan may finally start to count the social and economic cost of those 'successes' – dead soldiers and higher prices.

30 March: this article was updated to reflect the position of the Azerbaijani opposition in greater detail.

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