

Restrictions in radio broadcasting, referendum on president mandate and a lawsuit against a famous human rights defender – latest news from Azerbaijan

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Last New Year's Eve a miracle happened in Azerbaijan – a small country located between Russia and Iran. President Ilham Aliyev pardoned a number of journalists and political prisoners being held in prison. So at this turn of the year people were expecting a miracle to occur again, but things seem to be changing.

After being reelected with nearly 90% (an outcome that has made organizations like to OSCE very suspicious) 15 October 2008, president Aliyev seems not to be afraid of the reactions of neither the passive society and opposition nor of the Western world.

After the election rush government voiced its concerns on whether the foreign radios' broadcasting in Azerbaijani should continue their activities on the FM waves. And right one day before the new year it was decided that the foreign radios BBC, VoA and RFE\RL instead of broadcasting on fm waves daylong, should go for one hour reporting on short waves (which cannot be received on most radios in Azerbaijan). Later in January, foreign radios were to apply for a permission for broadcasting on short waves. A requirement that did not even exist during Soviet Union times.

On the other hand in December the Azerbaijani parliament Milli Majlis decided, that on March 18th there will be a referendum deciding on whether the president will have the right to be reelected for more than two times. This would practically mean that Azerbaijan would turn from republic into monarchy.

Government opposing journalists are no longer surprised about much when it comes to Azerbaijan but recently the government has gone yet one step further: now the government targets human rights advocates. E.g. minister of interior Ramil Usobv brought a lawsuit against the famous human rights advocate Leyla Yunus, claiming that she has slandered him in an interview to the newsportal www.day.az.

The government is still declaring its willingness to integrate into the EU and the Western community but practically seems to approach Central Asian and African regimes. With the Azerbaijani community being totally frightened and the weak and slowly acting opposition on one hand, and a period where the US government is changing (and does thus not have a fixed foreign policy), the OSCE chairmanship passing from Finland to Greece and the European Union mostly being worried about energy issues after the Russian-Ukrainian gas scandal, president Aliyev doesn't any more take their opinions or statements into consideration, and is acting most freely and independently.

Although nearly every international organization, as well as the EU and the US, has reacted, they usually keep a low profile, while it would be wishful for the Azerbaijani people to see effective reactions. And even if the EU and the US are stating that the current situation may affect the relations between Azerbaijan and the Western world badly, in practice it seems that both care much more about energy resources, which Azerbaijan can provide to Europe. International NGOs like Freedom House or Human Rights Watch are simply ignored by the Azeri government as they do not represent concerns of concrete states.

These events are accompanied by the permanent crashing of historical monuments and artificial woods in the capital for building new multistoried buildings, while the economical situation of the common citizens is worsening.

Recently the Freedom house has issued a report on freedom rates in the world, and for the first time unrecognized states were included. Freedom house included Azerbaijan into the non-free countries list, while Nagorno-Karabakh is on the partly-free list.

Another report by the Human Rights Watch says the 15 October 2008 election was a chance for Azerbaijan to make a step towards democratic standards, but the country failed that task.

But why should it take the step if nobody cares?