



Old City of Baku with the new modern Flame Towers in the background. May 11, 2015.

PHOTO: SOFIE BEDFORD

Ring out the old and ring in the young:

UPGRADING AUTHORITARIANISM IN AZERBAIJAN

by **Sofie Bedford**

abstract

Using Heydemann's concept 'authoritarian upgrading' as the theoretical point of departure, this article sheds light on the adaptation of the Azerbaijani authoritarian regime that is taking place in the political arena, civil society, media and information sector, and in relation to religious practices. It elaborates on how authoritarian upgrading is associated with the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and suggests that the core of these measures entails making authoritarian norms and values appear more attractive and acceptable. Notably, it illustrates the conscious attempts to engage the younger generation across multiple sectors in authoritarian upgrading making them both a target and a tool in this process.

KEYWORDS: Authoritarian upgrading, reforms, managed pluralism, Azerbaijan.

Although the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan seems stable,¹ developments in recent years have indicated the regime is not static – or at least it does not want to be perceived as such. Most striking was a highly publicized change in cadre in 2019 that replaced older members of the presidential administration with representatives of a new generation. At the end of the same year, the Azerbaijan parliament was dispersed and the snap elections that followed saw an unusual range of candidates, some of them rather young, as well as a surprising amount of campaigning. Observers suggested this wind of change stemmed from falling energy prices that left the Azerbaijani economy vulnerable and in need of international backing. Thus, these “reform-looking measures” were a concession to the demanding political conditionality of Western partners in exchange for funding or support.² Azerbaijan is indeed often described as a ‘rentier state’ in which revenues from oil and gas provide a core of stability for the autocratic rule.³ This article proposes that these developments may also be interpreted as part of a broader ambition to strengthen the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime by giving it a ‘facelift’ in various sectors – a phenomenon described by Heydemann as *authoritarian upgrading*.⁴ Authoritarian upgrading is used by a regime to respond to external or internal pressure for change by establishing an image of their country as reforming, liberalizing and/or democratizing,⁵ without actually “modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest levels of government”.⁶ Heydemann’s research is focused on the Middle East, but the processes he describes can be observed across the world. Using authoritarian upgrading as a theoretical point of departure, my article sheds light on the adaptation of the Azerbaijani authoritarian regime that is taking place in the political arena, civil society, media and information sector, and in relation to religious practices. It elaborates on how authoritarian upgrading is associated with the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and suggests that the core of these measures entails making authoritarian norms and values appear more attractive and acceptable.

A greater understanding of the features and function of authoritarian upgrading in Azerbaijan is relevant to this special issue as it indicates that the main driver of authoritarian norms and values may be internal rather than external. Moreover, the involvement of youth is an intrinsic aspect of authoritarian upgrading. By adding young faces to the country's political arena, allowing young 'independent' voices in the media and civil society, and molding a new generation of religious officials, the regime shows it is changing. At the same time, it controls this change by establishing ownership of public discourse in these different fields.

Outline of the study

The study builds on my research in the Azerbaijani context, which has been conducted over the past six years, and specifically on observations and insights from four previous projects: research on the concept and phenomenon of *opposition* in authoritarian contexts, a study of *Traditional Islam* in Azerbaijan, an assessment of the country's *media and information sphere* commissioned by an international organization, and two feasibility studies conducted as part of preparations for the Swedish Institute Leader Lab for *young civil society leaders in the EU's Eastern Partnership*. The data collected in the framework of these projects include interviews with 'oppositional' actors, e.g., advocates for change such as political, civic and human rights activists, as well as critical journalists during field trips to Baku between 2015 and 2020; online interviews with Azerbaijani civil society actors working towards Goal 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) and Goal 5 (gender equality) in Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development⁷, in the fall of 2020 and November 2021; interviews in Baku during the spring of 2018 with the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations, members of the religious elite, and a number of academics and experts; and interviews conducted online between November 2020 and January 2021 with a range of media and information actors working within or towards the Azerbaijani media and information sector. In addition, a wide range of secondary material has been consulted while working on both the previous and the current study, including academic and newspaper articles, reports, and the websites of relevant government institutions. Together, all these sources paint a comprehensive picture of how the process of authoritarian upgrading is interpreted and received by different categories of actors, such as specialist communities, those who support the state's ideas and arguments, those striving to change the political status quo, as well as those who describe themselves as 'truly independent' – treading between the regime and its challengers. In order to protect the respondents, their identity has not been disclosed, except in cases where they gave their explicit consent.

The first part of the article is dedicated to a theoretical discus-

sion about how to understand the consolidation of authoritarianism and authoritarian upgrading. The subsequent analysis sheds light on the functions and features of authoritarian upgrading in the Azerbaijani context, focusing on the regime's attempts to renew and adapt institutions, structures and policy related to political life, civil society, media, and religion to facilitate and control change. Finally, the concluding discussion focuses on the implications of this development.

Stability of authoritarian regimes: 'upgrading' and depoliticization

One major insight from the previous literature is that authoritarian leaders cannot only rely on repression to stay in power. Gerschewski concludes that the stability of authoritarian regimes instead rests on the "many interdependencies between the ruler and the ruled" manifested in three interconnected pillars: repression (coercion and threats), cooptation (benefits to certain groups to convince them not to question the system), and legitimation (getting people to justify, accept or at least tolerate the regime).⁸ Research increasingly points to the importance of the latter as being key to how autocratic regimes keep control of the political arena.⁹

CURRENT AUTHORITARIAN legitimation strategies are rarely used to mobilize ideological support for a regime but to shape its political agenda.¹⁰ More specifically, they aim to nurse "apolitical sentiments and apathy among the people" to ensure the status quo remains unchallenged.¹¹ Thus, politics has become a 'non-issue' in many authoritarian states – "reduced to relatively minor squabbles over interpretation, implementation, or the spoils of power".¹² As a result, most of the population seems to accept the political status quo despite being acutely aware that there is a lack of democratic standards

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in their society. When people perceive politics as uninteresting and irrelevant, they do not care about changing the government. This strengthens the authoritarian system as "the status quo regime will survive simply by default".¹³ However, if an economic crisis or a societal emergency were to trigger one apolitical person to cross their "revolutionary threshold" and start making their personal preferences known, this might inspire others to do the same. This puts pressure on autocratic leaders to adapt to new social, economic and political challenges – exploring more subtle ways to secure their legitimacy and stay in power.¹⁴ They sometimes achieve this by introducing "a state-sanctioned, approved diversity" – 'managed pluralism'¹⁵ – in various sectors of society. This has "changed many of the aspects of traditional authoritarianism and permitted a greater space for society without, however, modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest levels of government" and served to enforce the stability of authoritarian regimes¹⁶ in the Middle East,¹⁷ the post-Soviet space,¹⁸ and China.¹⁹

Heydemann describes this as *upgrading of authoritarianism*. Authoritarian upgrading provides more openness by implementing selected reforms and allowing a range of actors, such as political parties, entrepreneurs, labor unions, civil society, youth groups, religious figures and others, more room for maneuvering. At the same time, it is symptomatic that truly independent activities remain hindered by bureaucratic regulations and informal practices, and that accountability is non-existent.²⁰ He identifies five main features of the authoritarian upgrading process: managing political contestation; appropriating and containing civil societies; capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; controlling new communications technologies; and diversifying international linkages. The regimes showcase their reform process to “minimize political constraints stemming from increased social participation and maximize their relative autonomy from society’s less supportive sectors”.²¹ The modernization that stems from authoritarian upgrading can be described as narrow – “a set of technical policy measures aimed to achieve successful socio-economic development” that does not touch the “broad aspects of political modernization.”²²

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED that authoritarian upgrading could in fact be a “phase within Western-style democratic development”²³ by creating “visible improvements for the country’s population, while also developing the prerequisites for successful future liberalization”, since economic or political reforms are often to some extent genuinely beneficial for the population.²⁴ Yet, the literature consistently argues that authoritarian upgrading strengthens the resilience of authoritarian regimes.²⁵ Implemented reforms aim to secure the legitimacy of the system and do not really provide the population with meaningful ways to engage in the political and social life of the country. This strengthens cynicism in society, especially among the youth, about the meaningfulness of political participation and the possibility of the status quo ever changing.²⁶ That being said, depoliticization stemming from authoritarian upgrading processes has been likened to ‘democratic downgrading’ in democracies in which ordinary citizen participation in institutional politics is declining.²⁷

Largely following Heydemann’s conceptualization, I now turn to an analysis of authoritarian upgrading in the Azerbaijani context by identifying the formal and informal strategies used to reform and renew institutions, structures and policy in the political arena, civil society, the media and information sector, and religious structures.



Flower Day celebration in Baku, May 10, 2015.

Upgrading Azerbaijani authoritarianism: Improving quality and perceptions

One common feature of authoritarian upgrading is the selective implementation of reforms in different sectors to prevent public dissatisfaction. By renewing institutions, structures and policy in, for example, the fields of anticorruption, economic liberalization and integration into global markets, the regime is both adhering to popular demand and expanding opportunities for the social and economic elites to preserve the existing bases of institutional and social support.²⁸ This section of the article starts with a general overview of some similar reforms undertaken in Azerbaijan in response to issues of popular concern, aimed at improving the quality and perception of government institutions and performance – albeit with a clear ambition not to change the country’s overall “authoritarian framework”.²⁹ The analysis then moves to the specific sectors.

Notably, there has been considerable effort on the part of the Azerbaijani government to make the regulation and implementation of public administration more transparent and efficient.³⁰ This includes a strong focus on the application of information

and communication technology (ICT) in governance, economy and the social sector, for example, by introducing ‘e-services’ in key sectors such as government agencies, business, education, health, agriculture, public sector management and public services.³¹ Both the DOST (Sustainable and Operational Social Security Agency) and the highly popular ASAN (Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network) service centers are prominent examples of initiatives that facilitate quick and easy handling of matters that were previously often associated with tedious bureaucratic processes. DOST centers offer “154 services through a single window” in the fields of employment, labor and social protection.³² ASAN centers, similarly, provide citizens with access to a wide range of services in a single location, including birth, death and marriage registration, identity cards, passports, driver’s licenses, real estate records, immigrant status and other civic issues.³³ Not only have these centers simplified government procedures for the population, they have also helped reduce mid- and low-level bureaucratic corruption by bypassing corrupt officials.³⁴ Corruption remains a serious issue in Azerbaijan and is prevalent in almost every sphere of society.³⁵ President Aliyev’s October 2019 speech, which became the precursor to his latest wave of institutional restructuring and reforms, strongly emphasized the need for increased transparency and “a merciless fight against corruption.”³⁶ His speech was followed by a number of arrests of public officials accused of embezzlement, abuse of power, and bribery. Similarly, in 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, local officials across the country were punished for violating the country’s isolation rules and for abusing their power. However, just as in 2019, these measures were perceived as symbolic and were mainly targeted at lower-level officials who were already disliked by the regional population.³⁷

THE COLLAPSE OF global oil prices in 2014/2015 hit the oil-dependent economy of Azerbaijan hard. An unusual outburst of public protests in early 2016 across the country against the deteriorating economic situation put pressure on the government, resulting in a set of institutional and economic reforms to revive and guarantee the development of the non-oil sector of the economy.³⁸ The economic reforms, aimed at establishing monetary policy based on floating exchange rates, increasing efficiency and implementing privatization, development of human capital, and improvement of the business environment, were partly successful.³⁹ The ASAN centers, in combination with changes to the justice system, as well as a “shakeup of the notoriously corrupt customs services”,⁴⁰ made it easier to do business.⁴¹ Still, the economy remains dependent on oil and gas. Through the renovation of old institutions and the creation of new ones, the reforms resolved technical issues and led to increased efficiency in some government operations, but did not address the fundamental problems that prevent change, such as the centralized

nature of governance, dominance of the executive branch, as well as the lack of mechanisms for government accountability.⁴² Although the COVID-19 pandemic stalled the reform processes,⁴³ it seems they are back on track. After Azerbaijan’s victory in the second Karabakh war in 2020, major reforms have taken place, not least in the military sector, which has been re-modeled based on the Turkish example.⁴⁴ Additionally, through the decision to use the ‘smart city concept’⁴⁵ when restoring cities and villages in the previously occupied territories the Azerbaijani government shows commitment not only to regional development, but to continue reforming and modernizing the country.

The political arena: Rejuvenation and controlled pluralism

Azerbaijan has been under the rule of the Aliyev family since 1993. Heydar Aliyev ruled until his death in 2003, after which his son, Ilham Aliyev, came to power. In 2016, President Aliyev appointed his wife, Merhiban Aliyeva, Vice President after this position was created.⁴⁶ When Ilham Aliyev became president he underlined his ambition to uphold the policies of his father and reappointed all the ministers and advisers from his father’s administration.⁴⁷ It was not until 2019 that he conducted a substantial institutional restructuring, completely changing the face of the Presidential Administration by replacing the ‘old guard’ with a younger generation. This was prefaced by his October 2019 speech in which he noted that “some people in power” were against reforms, flagged for “personnel reforms” and the need to attract “qualified young people with a modern outlook and knowledge of the modern economy” to the government.⁴⁸

Under this banner of reform and renewal, some state agencies merged or were shut down, new institutions and positions were established and several influential senior-level officials lost their positions, most importantly: Ali Hasanov, presidential assistant for public and political affairs and Ramiz Mehdiyev, head of the presidential administration, often referred to as the ‘grey cardinal’ in Azerbaijani politics.⁴⁹ All of those who were removed are described as part of the ‘old guard’, both “for the age of its members and their longevity in office”.⁵⁰ The old guard comprises influential politicians who were allies of the current president’s father. In line with the new “policy of rejuvenation”⁵¹ they were replaced by well-known technocratic and reformist officials who represent a Western-educated younger generation.⁵² It has been suggested that the removal of the old guard’s frontrunners contributed to strengthening another influential group in Azerbaijani politics – the president’s extended family⁵³, the circle around the First Vice President (also First Lady) – the Pashayev family,⁵⁴ sometimes referred to as “the reformers”.⁵⁵

AFTER THE PRESIDENT’S public criticism of the government, he dissolved the existing National Parliament – *Milli Məclis* – in

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Azerbaijan's servicemen vote at a polling station during the parliamentary elections in Baku on February 9, 2020. PHOTO: TOFIK BABAYEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

November 2019. In February 2020, snap parliamentary elections were held, nine months early. The election campaign saw an unusually wide range of candidates and political activity. In comparison to previous elections there were fewer obstacles to candidate registration. The OSCE even described the process as “generally inclusive” as most of those who wanted could run for office.⁵⁶ This indicated the authorities wanted to see a high number of candidates, which many interpreted as an opening. Another reason for the dynamic electoral campaigning is believed to be the removal of Mehdiyev and Hasanov. As the duo was seen to have been responsible for ‘managing’ previous elections, their dismissal gave the impression these elections would be more ‘real’.⁵⁷

Liberalizing political contestation by allowing, and sometimes even orchestrating, a certain amount of controlled political pluralism – often in the electoral arena, is a prevalent feature of authoritarian upgrading.⁵⁸ Traditionally, elections in Azerbaijan have been of little interest to the population at large, as they may appear democratic but lack credibility. The people who usually care about participating under these conditions are the political opposition parties – because the election campaign is their only opportunity to gain official access to the public.⁵⁹ As a result, elections are regarded as a well-cho-

reographed play or game with little relevance to most in the population. Against this background, the high number of first-time candidates who decided to take advantage of the opening provided by the snap elections and alleged ‘reform spirit’, as well as the intensity of their campaigns, was unexpected and interesting. A notable group of candidates was young people with a background in civic activism, for example, from civil society and/or social media. With the stated ambition to focus on ‘ideas and ideology’, these activists represented a wide range of perspectives: left-wing, libertarian, feminist, environmentalist, etc. Another interesting category of candidates had no previous experience, either of politics or activism. They entered the race with full force after receiving a ‘signal from above’ that the president had requested renewal of the parliament and subsequent reforms.⁶⁰

DESPITE CALLS FOR reform, the elections reflected the regime’s ambition to maintain a balance between making the elections superficially legitimate while also non-competitive, which is characteristic of electoral authoritarian regimes.⁶¹ Monitoring reports point to many shortcomings similar to those observed in previous elections, related to, for example, voter registration, media coverage, interference by local authorities and abuse of

administrative resources.⁶² Azerbaijan's party system has been described as non-competitive and hegemonic, dominated by the presidential New Azerbaijan Party (YAP).⁶³ This did not change after the 2020 election as YAP kept its absolute majority. Around two-thirds of previous MPs sought reelection and only four of them did not make it into the new parliament, which confirms that the increased participation did not translate into genuine competition.⁶⁴ Even more so, a list published on social media in January 2020 accurately predicted the identity of 120 of the 125 deputies.⁶⁵ The 42 MPs that are new to the parliament suggest that the renewal that took place was an entirely controlled top-down process to ensure the inclusion of regime loyalists hand-picked to embody change. A newly elected previously unknown 26-year-old representing YAP became the youngest MP.⁶⁶ The fact that she is the only one younger than 30 and one of only 12 who are younger than 40 years old also gives the impression that a major rejuvenation of the parliament did not take place.⁶⁷ In January 2023 the president approved a new law 'on political parties' that observers say will make the registration and functioning of political parties even more cumbersome and discriminatory. Many parties are expected either to stop existing or merge with YAP, which will further increase the dominance of the presidential party.⁶⁸

STILL, AZERBAIJANI authorities are aware that opposition is needed in a democratic society. The (s)election of Erkin Gadirli, outspoken member of the Republican Alternative (REAL), is particularly telling in this respect. The major opposition parties, Musavat and the Popular Front Party, are often officially referred to as 'radical opposition' accused of being 'stuck in the past', 'outdated' or 'old-minded'.⁶⁹ An 'ideal' opposition would, in contrast, need to understand and pursue the right political path.⁷⁰ The fact that REAL was finally registered in 2020 after years of rejection and that Gadirli became an MP in the same year indicates the regime decided that REAL is an 'acceptable' form of opposition. This was underlined by the President describing Gadirli's appointment as deputy chairman of the Parliament as an historical event. In the words of the President, it was "an important step aimed at improving the political system and building political relations on a sound footing" and "also a very important step as it, first of all, opens the way for a new configuration of the political system."⁷¹ The new working relationship between REAL and the government was further illustrated by the fact that REAL, as the only opposition party, adhered to the government's call for dialogue after the election.⁷²

Because its leaders were well educated, had successful careers in their respective professions and, importantly, had no formal links to the ill-reputed 'traditional opposition', when REAL was created in 2009, it was able to successfully position itself as a 'new force'. As a result, it was largely well received in society, especially among the young and highly educated. Today, many interpret Gadirli's acceptance of the post as treason and a blow to those fighting fraudulent elections. Others insist his presence in parliament will provide a voice of reason and a much-needed new perspective.

Civil society: Depoliticization, safe topics and successful feminists

One feature of authoritarian upgrading relates to civil society. In the Middle East, Heydemann observed a mix of "repression, regulation, cooptation and the appropriation of NGO functions by the state to contain the deepening of civil societies and to erode their capacity to challenge political authority."⁷³ Some research suggests that the activities of the promoters of Western democracy contributed to this process by the taming of aid programs in order to make them compatible with autocratic regimes⁷⁴ and limiting the ability of supported local organizations to act as agents of change.⁷⁵ In Azerbaijan, an unprecedented crackdown on political activists, civil society leaders, local NGOs and human rights activists that started in 2013 and culminated in 2014 left the sector paralyzed.⁷⁶ It came in the wake of public protests that rocked the country in early 2013⁷⁷ and the presidential election the same year, where the opposition, against all odds, managed to rally behind one oppositional candidate who was also supported by academics, representatives of civil society, religious figures, as well as the new 'Facebook generation' of democracy activists.⁷⁸ Repression, however, was not the only method used to counteract the potential impact of civil society. As in similar contexts, the authoritarian leaders used civil society to strengthen their legitimization narratives by appropriating human rights and democratization discourses and making them their own.⁷⁹ When youth activism was flourishing in Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, facilitated by its use of social media to undermine the government monopoly on information and discussion, the regime "hijacked this trend"⁸⁰ and sponsored its own youth NGOs that followed the government line and supported its policies, albeit claiming to be independent. These included *Ireli (Forward)*, which has been compared to *Nashi* in Russia.⁸¹ Research by Pearce shows in great detail how during this era, pro-regime groups like *Ireli* were particularly active online, fighting pro-democracy activists using creative tools such as memes, 'Twitter shenanigans' and blocking.⁸² Tellingly, activists in regime-supporting organizations from this era later ended up in high government positions.⁸³

The crackdown resulted in a series of legal amendments that significantly decreased the space for civil society.⁸⁴ The opportunity to receive funding from abroad was virtually eliminated and particularly restricted the activities of NGOs working on issues such as democracy, rights, freedom of expression and information, and other social projects that had been dependent on donor support. Those organizations that survived kept a low profile. As a result, civil society became "only engaged in self-defense, and therefore detached from the people."⁸⁵ Although various national state bodies have since been providing grants to civil society organizations, these do not meet their needs. Moreover, the government is still treating organizations working on 'sensitive' issues, like democratization and human rights worse than, for example, youth organizations and social service providers.⁸⁶

EVEN THOUGH MOST of the harsh laws are still in place, recent years have seen some developments in the civil society sector.

The Agency for State Support to NGOs, replacing the Council of State Support to NGOs in 2021, will be implementing new grant-making regulations adopted by the Council of Ministers. The establishment of the Agency appears to be an instance of authoritarian upgrading as it seeks to improve the state's support of and relationship with civil society. Notably, its portfolio includes some new approaches, such as the development of cooperation mechanisms between the state, private sector, and NGOs. However, just like in the political arena, it is clear that the re-vitalization of the sector is expected to take place under strict control. All 11 advisory board members (eight NGO representatives and three public officials) are directly appointed by the President.⁸⁷

There are a growing number of initiatives that “enjoy protected status” and “benefit from privileged relations with powerful political actors”, but potentially “lack meaningful autonomy” similar to semi-official NGOs in the Middle East.⁸⁸ One well known example is Yarat (Create) Contemporary Art Space, a non-profit art organization creating “a hub for artistic practice, research and thinking in the Caucasus,”⁸⁹ that Goyushov and Huseynlu say “is directly connected to the ruling family,” and as such provides attractive opportunities in terms of career openings, “material incentives and glamour” for Azerbaijani youth with “elitist desires”.⁹⁰ Var Yox is a more recent example – an art and cultural platform founded by local artists in 2018, which describes its mission as displaying “the artworks of Azerbaijani artists both in national and international arenas, to archive the innovations in the art and culture spheres by combining social and art activism.” Var Yox is working with many international donors to this end, but the fact that at least one of its projects was funded by Pasha Holding and Pasha Travel – both connected to the ‘reformers’ (e.g., the Pashayevs) and that the Ministry of Culture has commissioned some of its work has led observers to doubt the group's independence. The link to the Pashayevs is another interesting parallel to the Middle East, as first ladies in this region are often the founders and sponsors of ‘semi-official’ organizations.⁹¹ Notably, the Azerbaijani First Lady is also head of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, a charitable organization that has become a huge donor, supporting projects in the fields of education, culture, education, science, technology, environment, and sports, both nationally and internationally.⁹²

As the new legislation made it even more difficult to register NGOs, this also led to an upswing in grassroots youth activism. Many of the young activists do not operate within a strict organizational structure which, according to one respondent, shows “a clear division between the civil society organizations, represented by ‘dinosaurs’ – who started their organizations in the 1990s/beginning of 2000, mainly relying on grants provided by international organizations” and these new informal initiatives that are more fluid and often organized around different causes.⁹³

The latter are operating largely without funding; their activities can be seen as value, or issue based rather than donor driven. One interesting example is the new generation of feminist activists who, since they emerged on the scene in 2016, are seen as the most active part of civil society,⁹⁴ having “a much bolder approach to advocacy in comparison to the previous generation of women's rights activists.”⁹⁵ In particular, they have focused their activities on gender-based violence as, according to one activist, this was an issue that “could engage a lot of people – even those who do not support LGBT rights.”⁹⁶ As a result, violence against women is now largely acknowledged as a problem, both by the public and the government, which even adopted the first ever “National Action Plan for Combating Domestic Violence” for 2020–2023.⁹⁷

THIS WAVE of grassroots activism was made possible by the authorities increasingly targeting those who were working on issues considered explicitly ‘political’, while topics such as culture, ecology and gender equality that the new activists focused on were considered more or less ‘unthreatening’.⁹⁸ Yet, if

activists organize unsanctioned public protests or try to mobilize a certain community for their cause, this is seen as crossing the “boundary between the social and the political, the ‘safe’ and the ‘dangerous’” and could have consequences.⁹⁹ As explained by one respondent: “these groups are trying to find ways to operate safely within the limits. It is still difficult to work, there is no guarantee that, for example, your finances will not be scrutinized. Because of this, people try not to officially register

their activity, because even if they do everything correctly and have no political agenda, they still might end up in trouble. Being transparent might cause problems”.¹⁰⁰

The media sector: Modernization, cooptation, and independents

The crackdown on civil society also became a major turning point for the independent media in Azerbaijan. Media actors lost most of their financial support and came under enormous pressure – many left the country or were forced to live in fear of persecution. The removal of Mehdiyev and Hasanov was seen as a positive sign and in the years that followed, many respondents described the approach towards independent media actors as ‘softer’. The pressure was not as intense, and most journalists arrested during the crackdown were released.¹⁰¹ However, the 2021 presidential decree ‘On the deepening of reforms in the field of media’ seemingly triggered a new phase. In February 2022, the President approved a controversial law drafted by the newly established Media Development Agency. Although, according to the government, the new legislation “intends to bring this area in line with international standards, modernize the country's media legislation as well as improve the professionalism of journalists”,

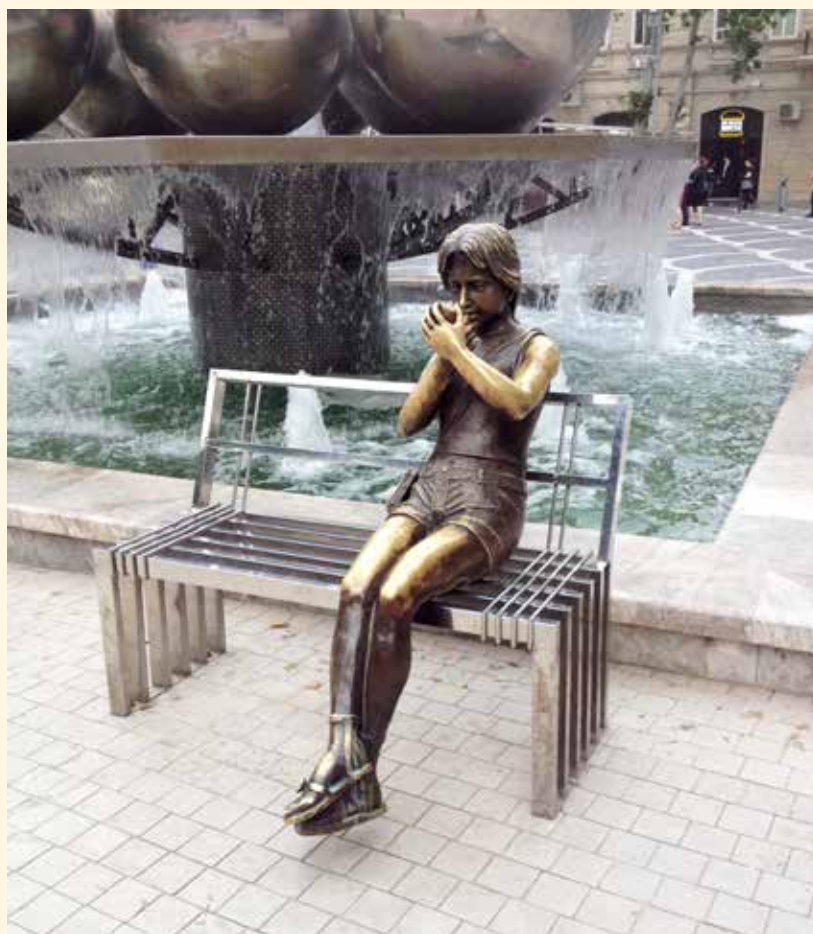
“THE CRACKDOWN RESULTED IN A SERIES OF LEGAL AMENDMENTS THAT SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASED THE SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY.”

many experts and journalists are concerned that the law will further impede freedom of expression and media freedom by adding even more regulation and restrictions to the field.¹⁰²

THE LAW IS LIKELY a reaction to the changing dynamics in the media landscape that has resulted from the merge of news media and social platforms over the past decade. These days, quite a wide range of digital information is produced that challenges or goes beyond the established Azerbaijani state narrative. It is difficult to officially register a newspaper or TV channel, but starting something online – a YouTube channel, Facebook page, TikTok or Instagram account – is easy, and some online actors have quite large audiences. Many of the new initiatives are started in and operated from abroad, but have staff in Azerbaijan, which perhaps explains the new law that requires media outlet owners and publishers to be residents in the country, and the increasingly strict requirements for registering as a journalist.¹⁰³

For some time, the authorities have already been walking a fine line between keeping the internet as open as possible and using it to strengthen their position, while controlling the content and users.¹⁰⁴ To this end, establishing online ‘media diversity’ has also become part of the authoritarian upgrading process. Many respondents from the media and information sector talked about the regime creating and supporting initiatives on social media to compete with independent actors in this arena. In this context, quite a few specifically mentioned the popular Facebook page ‘Bele bele ishler’ [roughly translated as ‘Just like that’],¹⁰⁵ which publishes short videos about interesting people and topics. One journalist said that the page was interesting “because it had access to many archives. In the beginning, it was difficult to say ‘who’ the people behind it were but then they started showing their true colors.”¹⁰⁶ Another journalist explained that pages like this may be producing high-quality content, but “when some sort of crisis occurs, they will broadcast the government’s perspective as needed.”¹⁰⁷

It was also noted that existing popular channels with many subscribers were increasingly being ‘bought’ in order to ensure they did not start spreading anti-regime material. One journalist even described how his team was approached by state actors who offered to buy their platforms for USD 1.00 per subscriber.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, a civil society activist described how pro-regime actors attempted to recruit him as a ‘young expert in the field’ to their ‘reform project’ by arguing that they needed him on their side “against the old guard, the Soviet people”.¹⁰⁹ Those who agree to join pretend to be independent but settle on not criticizing state policies. They are rewarded by receiving better access



Statue of a girl sitting on a bench applying lipstick, Fountain Square, Baku. PHOTO: SOFIE BEDFORD

to material and audiences, as well as more safety and stability for their initiatives, although sometimes this process is not so friendly and includes blackmailing and other types of pressure.¹¹⁰ In this environment, one journalist concluded that “it is difficult to understand what is real and what is not”.¹¹¹

The respondents described the print and broadcast media as being fully controlled by the regime and in dire need of modernization. Thus, authoritarian upgrading in this sector strives to provide the public with better quality information, while also developing strategies to control and manage public access to social media and other new communication technologies.¹¹² The modernization of the TV sector appears to be aimed at bringing the Azerbaijani media closer to the “Western concept of professional journalism” by introducing new technologies, state-of-the-art formats, a wide range of broadcasts and publications, attractive visuals, more professionally developed scripts, as well as seemingly diverse points of view, similar to what has taken place in Russia.¹¹³ ITV – Ictimai TV [Public Television]¹¹⁴ was cited as one example of a channel that became more professional with an outlook that resembles international news media. Its content also changed. New issues are now being discussed with people with ‘alternative views,’ who never used to be invited to appear

on mainstream TV programs.¹¹⁵ In this respect, the reform of the media is closely intertwined with the parallel process of reforming the political landscape as it is often representatives of REAL who are featured to show that ‘critical’ voices are in fact being heard.¹¹⁶

Still, as is common in this type of context, major media assets are controlled by patronage networks, characterized by their close links to the regime. Their lack of editorial independence from state control is quite obvious.¹¹⁷ “Pro-government outlets are producing good quality material but are deceiving the people. They make you miss the independent values. As a person who lived in the Soviet era I can say that this looks like the Soviet way of providing information,” one respondent sums up.¹¹⁸ There is also a general understanding that TV is still a powerful media, although people mainly like to watch ‘light’ content such as soap operas and talk shows. However, according to one journalist, it is the authorities that shape the ‘depoliticized’ audience. “They say that people like these nonsense shows and that is why we produce them. But that’s not true. ASN TV was a debate channel, and it was one of the most popular channels in the country before it was closed down,” she explained. The audience adjusts to what is available.¹¹⁹

IN SUM, THE REGIME is giving the media and information sector a facelift while also trying to ensure it is dominated by pro-regime views, or at least voices that are ‘under control.’ At the same time it is interesting to note how the dynamics in the field are changing. Previously independent media was not only characterized by being critical towards the authoritarian regime, but also by being pro-opposition, or linked to the political opposition. This is no longer the case. Even though on one level there is solidarity among all actors who want change, many actors in the new generation of independent online media see the ‘opposition’ as irrelevant and untrustworthy and do not want to be linked to them. Consequently, they are fighting the opposition label and seeking to be ‘truly’ independent.¹²⁰ But this is no easy task. “If you interview the opposition, the government says you *are* the opposition. If you interview the government, the opposition says you are ‘pro-government.’ All politicized groups, whether it is the ruling party or the opposition, have the same approach towards the independent media: you are either with us, or against us!” as one journalist complains.¹²¹

State-religion relations: ‘Upgrading’ old narratives to a new project

Religion is not included in Heydemann’s conceptualization per se, but developments in Azerbaijan do reflect an ongoing process to ‘upgrade’ the relations between state and society in this field. One historical factor that has shaped state-society relations in the country is the decision after independence that

Azerbaijan would, on the one hand, leave the atheist politics of the Soviet Union behind, and on the other, remain strictly secular, e.g., that religion would not influence either politics or social practices. Islam became a key part of the national ideology and integral to the new Azerbaijani identity.¹²² Since the early 2000s the perceived threat from foreign representatives of Islam with ‘political ambitions’ has been important in domestic politics. It has justified control of religious communities, education, and literature, as well as the harsh repression of certain groups and activities.¹²³ In recent years the regime has incorporated old narratives into a new project by developing and promoting ‘Traditional Islam’ [Ənənəvi İslam] – a national religious principle and practice to counteract the spread of ‘foreign’ Islam among the population. In the words of a representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the author and main implementor of this project, “traditional Islam acts as a shield to protect against foreign powers and influences, like an antivirus.”¹²⁴

Traditional Islam (TI) is juxtaposed against non-traditional Islam – influenced by foreign actors and described as potentially dangerous and ‘political.’ TI is incorporating local traditions and customs and will therefore help to preserve the Azerbaijani national identity and protect the secular nature of the Azerbaijani state. It is also non-sectarian as it embraces the historically peaceful coexistence between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims in Azerbaijan. Under the banner of TI, secular authorities in Azerbaijan are actively striving to establish an alternative mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative, controlled and institutionalized by the state.¹²⁵ Unity Prayers, officially led by representatives of Shi’a and Sunni communities, are one example of what TI looks like in practice.¹²⁶

The fact that the new Heydar Mosque – named after the former president – where the first Unity Prayers were held, caters neither to the Shi’a nor the Sunni community exclusively, further illustrates how TI is institutionalized. Surprisingly, the Heydar Mosque is subordinate not to the highest religious authority in Azerbaijan, the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), as is customary, but to the Baku City Executive Committee.¹²⁷ Similarly, the fact that the SCWRA is taking over some of the responsibilities of the CMB highlights the regime’s intentions to re-establish ownership of religious issues.

Until 2018, the CMB ran the only official higher Islamic education facility with authority to educate imams for the country’s mosques – the Islamic University of Baku. Although the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief still stipulates that the CMB is responsible for all Islamic education, the state has clearly taken over responsibility for the training of religious cadres. The new Azerbaijan Institute of Theology (AIT)¹²⁸ was established by presidential decree in 2014. It is directly administered by the SCWRA which, after a change in law in March 2022, also took over re-

“THE RESPONDENTS DESCRIBED THE PRINT AND BROADCAST MEDIA AS BEING FULLY CONTROLLED BY THE REGIME AND IN DIRE NEED OF MODERNIZATION.”

sponsibility for appointing imams, a task previously conducted by the CMB.¹²⁹ As early as 2018, the imams' salaries have been paid through the Foundation for Propagation of National Values, allocated from the state budget, and administered by the SCWRA.¹³⁰ The Islamic University of Baku had long struggled with a poor reputation and is regarded as not being attractive enough to prospective students with good grades. Out of the University's four branches, only one still operates, in Zagatala in the north-western part of Azerbaijan. According to some sources, the approximately 300 students are being taught at the Sunni Hanafi school of Islam, thus leaving the Shia majority without access to higher education.¹³¹

THE INCREASING influence of the SCWRA demonstrates that the regime wants more control in order to ensure the quality of religious education and leadership. The CMB also was seen as struggling to appoint imams to all of the country's mosques.¹³² Overall, it has little authority and quite a bad reputation among the wider population,¹³³ as does the head of the CMB, *Sheikh-ül-Islam* Hajji Allahshukur Pashazade, who has held this position since 1980. All this makes the CMB a particularly suitable target for measures that symbolize renewal and modernization. That being said, the CMB leadership has always been loyal to the regime and, also in the case of TI, one representative agreed that "the best model [for state-religion relations] is when the process of increasing religiosity is controlled by the state. I used to think that religion needed to be free, but I later saw that there is a need for state interference, without it being exaggerated. The state must at least provide people with proper knowledge about religion; it must educate those who can teach religion".¹³⁴

The lack of a local and well-educated Islamic elite has been an issue in Azerbaijan since independence. After independence, most textbooks and the majority of the *ulama* came from abroad and young people went abroad to study religion.¹³⁵ TI is perceived as a way to finally end this. It is clear that the control of education is seen as highly important in this regard. Thus, the AIT is a distinctive feature of the TI project as it will regulate the content of education to avoid the negative impact of foreign influences on an increasingly religious population. The provision of high quality education locally is seen as 'vaccinating' the system against dangerous foreign ideology that is otherwise guaranteed to penetrate the ranks of believers. "Anyone who is educated abroad will work against this state. This is historically proven. We need to educate the people ourselves," the SCWRA representative explained.¹³⁶

Still, increasing the quality of religious education is not the only objective. As described by the SCWRA, TI as an ideology will reinforce a strong connection between the state and Islamic expression. The AIT will be breeding a new religious elite – a

local cadre that is "intellectual, Muslim and Azerbaijani at the same time." As imams "prepared by the state for the state" they are expected to understand the "concerns of the state and be ready to support it".¹³⁸ Their mission is to represent an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative that does not question state policies or the regime. This embodiment of a perceived collective loyalty through the "creation of a religious person who takes the state's values as his own and who is loyal"¹³⁹ provides a significant representation of the 'normalization' of authoritarianism. As the new generation will spread TI wherever they are appointed, this will make Muslim believers more streamlined in Azerbaijan, more in line with the state image of TI.¹⁴⁰ "If the state manages to create the specialists it is planning to create, then yes, the religious society will be more homogenous," a CMB representative agrees.¹⁴¹

Concluding discussion

Developments in the political, civil, media, and religious sectors in Azerbaijan reflect an ongoing 'upgrade' of the authoritarian regime, showcasing its adaptability, willingness to embrace change and modernization, as well as its "user-friendliness."¹⁴²

Notably, this process is not taking place merely to 'upgrade,' but – especially in regards to more general reforms in the public sector – is also associated with the political economy of the regime – striving to optimize the state of affairs and reduce the cost of government operations.¹⁴³ Additionally, authoritarian upgrading measures should not simply be seen as attempts to create a democratic façade as they significantly impact the stabilization and preservation of authoritarian rule.¹⁴⁴ Allowing controlled diversity and promoting reforms, renewal and professionalism in the sectors

discussed (and others¹⁴⁵) aims to bring quality into authoritarianism, to illustrate to the public that even if it is not democratic, Azerbaijan can still be a modern society. These measures also strive to ensure that the principles and values of the regime permeate the public discourse which contributes to the 'normalization' of authoritarianism. This process has been enhanced by the second Karabakh war. Azerbaijan's victory greatly increased the popularity of the President, seen as the strong man who enabled the liberation of the occupied territories. As his regime gains legitimacy, the already marginalized opposition is losing further ground and its focus on the need for democracy is likely perceived as being even more redundant.

At the same time, as mentioned in the first part of the article, research suggests that authoritarian upgrading could actually push a country in the 'right direction' unintentionally, for example by 'accidentally' empowering sections of society.¹⁴⁶ The 2020 election provides some insights along this line of thinking. On the one hand, the outcome of the election clearly shows that any

“THE CONSCIOUS ATTEMPTS TO ENGAGE THE YOUNGER GENERATION ACROSS MULTIPLE SECTORS IN AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING INDICATE THAT THEY ARE BOTH A TARGET AND A TOOL IN THIS PROCESS.”

political change that did take place was still controlled from the top to serve a specific purpose. On the other hand, the increased political participation resulting from the reform agenda's 'controlled openness' provides a silver lining as it indicates that politics in Azerbaijan is not 'dead'. The campaign not only revealed the existence of a range of political ideas, it also highlighted the presence of a large body of volunteers committed to the political process and supporting their candidates. In light of this, one potential benefit of managed pluralism could be to decouple civic and political participation from the overarching pro-regime-anti-regime dichotomy.

While the authorities have a habit of labeling anyone criticizing the system as 'oppositional,' any journalist, politician or activist who publicly engages with someone regarded as a representative of the regime, or even abstaining from being politically active or openly critical of the government, is immediately suspected by the 'opposition-minded' of being 'pro-government' or 'being supported by' the authorities. This dichotomy forces anyone who wants to be active in society to 'pick a side'.¹⁴⁷ "In Azerbaijan it is always black or white – either you are with us or against us," as one respondent complained. "We were saying that methods [for change] need to be more flexible; that in a context such as Azerbaijan, vociferously complaining that the president is corrupt and that we need to change the system does not work. Yet, the radical [opposition] strategies prevailed".¹⁴⁸ If managed pluralism can make civic and political participation more attractive and accessible by providing room for maneuver, this is a step forward. Visible political participation is crucial for countering de-politicization by 'rehabilitating' politics and making it a natural part of life.

Nevertheless, one main feature of authoritarian upgrading is that it takes place within the framework imposed by the regime. If you want to work without obstacles or limitations in any of the sectors scrutinized in this article, you must follow certain (mainly unwritten) rules. Otherwise, you may be 'eliminated' and not allowed to exercise your profession at all. So, while authoritarian upgrading enables actors to operate somewhat more independently, there are clearly 'red lines' that cannot be crossed. In politics you stay clear of the 'radical opposition'; in civil society you do not take your activism to the street; in the media you avoid criticizing the presidential family; and in the religious sector you stick to the state-endorsed Islamic narrative. The dark side of this process is that it builds on the further marginalization and exclusion of critical voices, while those who play by the rules can lead a 'good' life. In this sense, the regime guides the perception of political opportunities and manages to normalize authoritarianism by making it not merely the most attractive, but the only imaginable vision for the future.

TO CONCLUDE, the conscious attempts to engage the younger generation across multiple sectors in authoritarian upgrading indicate that they are both a target and a tool in this process. Their inclusion in the presidential administration, the parliament, civil society, the media landscape, and religious institutions is an effective way to give the regime a facelift – to prove that the system

is no longer only represented by old men who refuse to change. The appointment of a female Vice President – a role model for many young women, could also be seen in this light. In this sense, authoritarian upgrading strives to make Azerbaijan more attractive to youth both inside and outside the country in order to prevent brain drain and dissent. It remains to be seen if it is working. ✖

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