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By [Andy Heil](#)

In Azerbaijan, A Leader Of Aliyev's Old Guard Lashes Out. Is It Just His 'Last Role' For The Regime?

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Ramiz Mehdiyev was a key figure in ensuring that Ilham Aliyev would succeed his terminally ill father as the country's leader.

A public rift has widened between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's dynamic administration and one of its longest-serving and most powerful former figures.

The gray cardinal who midwifed Aliyev to power as his autocratic father lay dying in 2003, Ramiz Mehdiyev, posted on a state-backed website an attack on "our authorities and the media" -- which is nearly all state-controlled in Azerbaijan -- for allegedly harming the country.

The 82-year-old's outburst followed the leak of embarrassing videos of his son-in-law in handcuffs after a lavish wedding reception hosted by Mehdiyev that flouted the anti-pandemic measures weighing so heavily on ordinary Azerbaijanis.

Mehdiyev's public attack marks a conspicuous challenge to Aliyev's yearlong push to replace some of the regime's old guard with new faces to usher in fresh economic and managerial thinking.

But the spat has also spawned questions as to how, in a country so tightly controlled by formal and informal structures from the president, the posts have been allowed to continue -- and speculation about what's in it for both sides.

"Azerbaijan is facing the biggest political, economic, and social crisis it's faced probably since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first part of the Nagorno-Karabakh war [in the late 1980s]," said Paul Stronski, a senior fellow in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program.

He pointed to a double whammy of low oil prices and the economic and political aspects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Stronski also warned that Baku risks further marginalization amid evolving perceptions of European energy security and the threat to the West from extremism that was "the glue of the relationship 10 years ago."

"And when you are a regime in crisis, very often you turn back to your old ways."

Old Face, New Drama

Ditching powerful veterans of the past two presidents' inner circles, while rare, is not unprecedented.

Ali Hasanov was one of the regime's most strident ideologues and an assistant to the president before he was gradually sidelined and then abruptly sacked during Ilham Aliyev's late-2019 political flurry.

Hasanov [pledged to remain an "Aliyevist"](#) but lost control of major business holdings and is still under investigation over alleged corruption as he remains in Turkey for purported "health" reasons.

Close watchers of Azerbaijan suggest that they are unconvinced of Mehdiyev's sincerity until some of his considerable assets and past actions are given similar scrutiny.

Mehdiyev is an unlikely poster child for reform or opposition to the Aliyev regime.

"Under his supervision, this regime over the last half century used every textbook human rights violation," Alex Raufoglu, a cofounder of the Virginia-based Eurasia Media Institute and Azerbaijan specialist for Amnesty USA, told RFE/RL of Mehdiyev. "He understands at this age that there is no exit door for him. So he just is playing his last role for the regime."

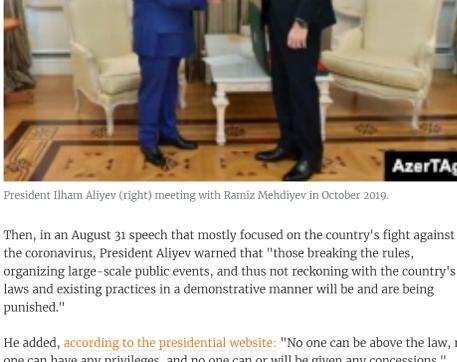
After burnishing his Soviet political and academic careers, Mehdiyev joined the late Heidar Aliyev's inner circle in 1994. Less than a decade later, he was a leader of the coterie that ensured that Ilham Aliyev would succeed his terminally ill father.

He had led the presidential administration ever since, amassing considerable wealth, until his dismissal in October 2019.

Mehdiyev was allowed to stay on as head of the national Academy of Sciences and, until this month, was allowed to keep his chairmanship of a commission that picks who should receive presidential pardons.

So it came as a shock to many Azerbaijanis when 15-day jail sentences were ordered for the bride and groom's fathers after images of a wedding hosted by Mehdiyev for his granddaughter appeared to show guests ignoring anti-COVID-19 measures.

Still more shockingly, state-friendly TV stations showed images of Mehdiyev's son-in-law (also named Ilham Aliyev) and the groom's father, a State Security Service commander, in handcuffs.



President Ilham Aliyev (right) meeting with Ramiz Mehdiyev in October 2019.

Then, in an August 31 speech that mostly focused on the country's fight against the coronavirus, President Aliyev warned that "those breaking the rules, organizing large-scale public events, and thus not reckoning with the country's laws and existing practices in a demonstrative manner will be and are being punished."

He added, [according to the presidential website](#): "No one can be above the law, no one can have any privileges, and no one can or will be given any concessions."

Mehdiyev responded to the public humiliation in statements he posted to the Academy of Sciences' official website.

While tiptoeing cautiously to avoid direct criticism of Aliyev himself, Mehdiyev blamed "gangsters" who are "no friends of the state" for spinning "fairy tales" to damage him and to cover up their own wrongdoing.

He also sought to associate himself with the country's beleaguered and fractious opposition, which faced decades of persecution under Mehdiyev's tenure and has since faced suggestions by Aliyev that it is a "fifth column" working to undermine the state.

Whose Opposition Is It?

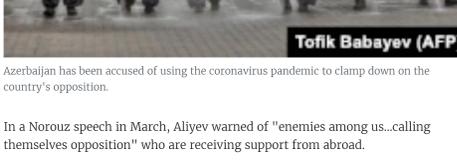
[Critics including The Washington Post](#) have accused Baku of using the coronavirus pandemic to try to "finish off" the genuine political opposition within Azerbaijan.

Authorities there have reportedly stepped up the jailing of political opponents.

One of them, opposition Yasavat Party and senior National Council of Democratic Forces politician Tofiq Yaqublu, has launched a hunger strike in detention this month. He is protesting his conviction and sentencing earlier this month to more than four years in prison for alleged "hooliganism" following a fender-bender in Baku that he and his [defenders say was a setup](#).

A [newly leaked memo](#) by ousted senior Facebook data scientist Sophie Zhang alleges that Aliyev's ruling New Azerbaijan Party was using "thousands of inauthentic" accounts and other assets last year "to harass the opposition en masse."

As they have continued the persecution of avowed critics, Aliyev and senior officials have publicly dismissed the Popular Front and other traditional opponents as part of a "radical opposition."



Azerbaijan has been accused of using the coronavirus pandemic to clamp down on the country's opposition.

In a Norouz speech in March, Aliyev warned of "enemies among us...calling themselves opposition" who are receiving support from abroad.

He described them as a "fifth column" seeking "to destroy Azerbaijan."

Raufoglu alleges Aliyev is pursuing what he calls an "Erdogan strategy" reflecting Turkish President Recep Tayyan Erdogan's brutal crackdown on perceived opponents and tens of thousands of arrests following a 2015 coup whose origins are murky.

That could leave room for a new political foil for Aliyev's administration in the form of what officials there have taken to referring to as the "dialogue opposition."

Aliyev gave an uncharacteristically warm welcome recently to a budding and seemingly less confrontational opposition group.

When a senior Aliyev representative met with the head of the newly registered Republican Alternative Party (ReAL), Ilgar Mammadov, earlier this month, he was said to have [passed along a congratulatory message from the president](#).

"Mehdiyev is trying to willingly link himself to the opposition -- that role he's trying to do, and by doing it he is doing his last service for the regime," Raufoglu said. "And then you are trying to create an environment where the actual opposition, the most dangerous opposition, seems to be Mehdiyev, both in the international eyes and also back at home."

Talk Of Reform, But...

In a key speech in October, when his regime still stinging from a steep currency devaluation in 2015 and falling oil and gas prices, Aliyev outlined a way forward for his notoriously insular regime.

While touting the appointment of a longtime loyalist as prime minister, he hinted at a generational rift between long-serving officials and an undefined new guard by calling for "personnel reforms" and a desire for "qualified young people."

Aliyev took aim at "some people who are in power today [who] also oppose reforms." He suggested that his reform plans "affect their personal interests" and accused those unspecified individuals of "trying to interfere with our work in every way."

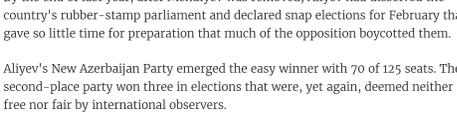
He added: "Anyone who follows this path will work, of course. And those who oppose this and try to covertly hinder our work, then, of course, we can't go any further with such people."

Less than a week later, two deputy prime ministers -- with resumes stretching back to the Soviet Union -- and a handful of other senior loyalists were sacked.

Two days after that, Mehdiyev was out as head of the presidential administration.

There have been appointments of new faces -- many of them with familial or other connections to the ruling elite, and some of them English-speaking and Western-educated -- and many distractions, but few signs of systemic reform.

"I'm always a little bit skeptical. This is a government that has, in theory, been pro-Western, you know, since the 1990s, and sort of saw the West as a key economic partner," said Stronski, a former State Department analyst on Azerbaijan and director for Russia and Central Asia on the U.S. National Security Council staff. "I would always hear from the apologists in the United States, 'There are elements around Aliyev, namely Mehdiyev, who are doing bad things and thwarting this relationship.'"



By the end of last year, after Mehdiyev was removed, Aliyev had dissolved the country's rubber-stamp parliament and declared snap elections for February that gave so little time for preparation that much of the opposition boycotted them.

Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party emerged the easy winner with 70 of 125 seats. The second-place party won three in elections that were, yet again, deemed neither free nor fair by international observers.

Later this year, [KGB officers stormed the offices](#) of local officials and arrested several district heads over alleged embezzlement and other corruption amid anti-pandemic measures.

The [meticulously planned and widely trumpeted](#) operations appeared aimed at demonstrating to the public the central government's resolve to crack down on such abuses.

But critics cite examples of more large-scale corruption within the central government going unpunished.

Azerbaijani officials have also maintained their tight grip on the state-dominated media sector and are among the global leaders in jailing journalists. The country is 168th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' [annual press-freedom rankings](#).

More Like 'Dynasty'

Mehdiyev's generation of regime stalwarts appears to have come under increasing pressure after constitutional changes were rammed through in a dubious referendum in 2016.

Those changes gave Aliyev what [critics said was "unchecked power"](#) and created a first vice president's post to take over in the event of an emergency while curbing Mehdiyev's authority.

Aliyev named first lady Mehriban Aliyeva first vice president in a move decried by critics as a preemptive move toward succession and a blow to hopes of democratic gains in Azerbaijan.

Her formal rise also set off speculation of high-stakes jockeying for power, influence, and profit between the so-called old guard and the entrenched interests of Aliyeva and the rest of the extended first family, often dubbed the Pashayev clan.

While it is unclear whether the push-and-shove of pro-Aliyev elements quarreling among themselves is anything like a real-life Game of Thrones, Mehdiyev's actions do seem to signal a split -- however small -- among the ruling elite.

"When you look at the broader picture and want to follow what exactly is going on in Azerbaijan right now, then we have to comprehend a single word: passing the presidency from husband to wife, what some people are calling 'saving the regime,'" Raufoglu said.

"We can't just sit and wait for another 30-40 years with the idea of, you know, getting the 'good guy' and chasing the 'bad guys' in Azerbaijan," he added. "There is no good guy in Aliyev's regime."

 **Andy Heil**
Andy Heil is a Prague-based senior correspondent covering the Balkans, the Transcaucasus, and science and the environment. Before joining RFE/RL in 2001, he was a longtime reporter and editor of business, economic, and political news in Central Europe, including for Reuters, Respekt, Acquisitions Monthly, the Christian Science Monitor, and Tyden.

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