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Testimony :: Isa Gambar

Former Speaker of Azerbaijan's Parliament - Chairman of Musavat Party

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Chairman of Musavat Party

"Elections, Democratization and Human Rights in Azerbaijan"

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all, Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing which I consider significant for the development of democracy in Azerbaijan as it passes through a difficult and important period. As an Azerbaijani politician, from a moral perspective, it is not easy for me to speak about my country's problems in front of the legislative body of a foreign country. In all likelihood, it is not pleasant for you to constantly hear about the negative state of human rights and lack of democratic progress in countries like mine.

But if we are all convinced that the issue of human rights is not merely a matter of the internal affairs of any given country and that regimes which refuse to guarantee the rights of its citizens to determine their own destiny should not enjoy the trust of the international community, then I believe our presence here is justified and important.

I do not intend to add to the evidence that clearly demonstrates that violations of civil and political rights in my country are commonplace. You have enough information with respect to this from the annual human rights reports of the State Department, OSCE and Human Rights Watch. These reports I believe are objective and well prepared. However, I must stress that these and other reports do not fully disclose the actual scale of human rights violations. Under the current regime, the country is being plunged into a moral, political and economic crisis which could lead to either the triumph of despotism over democracy or a highly destructive social explosion.

On Human Rights

"Give me time," says the head of the present regime to Western leaders, adding that democracy cannot be established overnight. He gains their empathy and thereby more time, but unfortunately this additional time is only being used to further subdue the people of the country to the rule of one person and his family. In the field of democracy and human rights, we are step by step falling to the level of a former Soviet Republic but with a level of corruption which could not have been even imagined during Leonid Brezhnev's time.

Following the recent municipal elections, it became even more apparent that a one-party regime has been established. This regime fully controls all organs of power and only pledges allegiance to itself. The democratic laws on personal and political rights adopted in 1992-93 by the then democratically elected government are now being systematically changed with the aim of restricting our freedoms and replacing the functions of the judiciary with executive authorities.

The values of independence, self-governance and a free market economy, enthusiastically embraced by our society in the early 90s, are now under being questioned. Increasing numbers of people feel less like citizens of our country and more like subjects of a great and unseen Big Brother, like that found in the Orwell's novel.

"There is corruption everywhere" - the leader of the current regime loves to point out time and time again. "There are no free elections anywhere" and "capitalism has always amounted to stealing." These are the main postulates of the ideology enshrined by the current regime, an ideology which unfortunately can, with time, come to dominate the thinking of the people. The warm receptions received by pro-Western dictators on the green lawns of the white houses of the Western world and in the villas of the captains of multinational corporations have also served to bolster this ideology and the hold it has over the people.

On Elections

To justify this almost unlimited authority while still responding to the demands of the international democratic community, the authorities are forced to conduct elections. However, observers from the US, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and elsewhere have stated that all the elections carried out in our country over the past five years have "not met international standards." It is worth pointing out that to our ears, the wording of such statements can be confusing and unclear. To date, we have yet to hear a more precise, direct and clear position coming from the organizations represented by these western observers. In the meantime, the regime has been perfecting new irregularities for the next elections.

As you are well aware, all members of election commissions are appointed by the president and therefore dependent on him. The falsification of elections begins with the process of registering political parties and individual candidates.

Another major point at which elections are falsified takes place during the vote counting process. During the last elections in 1999, new "energy-saving" technologies were applied. Now the authorities do not even take the trouble to deal with falsified electoral bulletins. Local polling commissions send their signed empty protocols to the Central Election Commission (CEC) where they are completed in accord with the desires of the head of the present regime. The courts, totally under the control of the president, refuse to even consider complaints lodged by rejected or defeated candidates. In addition, the president pardons bureaucrats who committed violations of the election laws. By doing so, the bureaucrats are not only not being punished but are exempt from punishment for these violations in the future.

The Musavat Party, the oldest party of the country, declared Azerbaijan independent for the first time, back in 1918. This party, which I represent here, was prohibited by the Central Election Commission from participating in elections in 1995. We have information, that the regime once again intends to ban Musavat from this year's elections - the party is simply too independent and popular to justify the risk.

For Free and Fair Elections

Fortunately, the present regime's efforts to suppress the democratic movement in Azerbaijan have so far failed. Only with the moral support of the international community do the country's democratic forces continue to defend the freedoms and rights gained by the people during the movement for independence in the early 1990s.

Recognizing its responsibility to maintain stability in the country, the democratic opposition has preferred to carry out its struggle within the framework of peaceful actions and protests. The main aim of our struggle for democracy is to first change electoral legislation, in particular, to ensure that electoral commissions are independent and free from outside influence. We will not retreat from our goals because there is no place to retreat to nor is there anybody else who can do this job for us. If the upcoming parliamentary elections are held according to the old scenario, then there will be a deepening crisis in all the spheres of public life mentioned earlier, and we may end up with a destroyed or dying-away country.

A lot has been written about Azerbaijan's natural wealth and strategic geographic location, but I would like to emphasize the strategic importance of Azerbaijani democracy. Peace and stability in the South Caucasus is dependent on the strength and reality of the independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, on the end of aggressive policies in the region, on the resolution of the region's conflicts within the parameters of international principles and on the development of democracy and human rights in these countries.

A democratic Azerbaijan could be an attractive example for other Muslim countries of the former Soviet Union and those of the Middle East which are in the process of searching for the best mode for development. An Azerbaijan where people enjoy freedom of religion and conscience could become a reliable stronghold against religious intolerance and extremism. These challenges can not be answered through enlightened despotism but only through pluralistic democracy.

Let me again return to the elections. We claim that today "resolution of all the problems of Azerbaijan depend on free and fair elections", but they are also important with regard to honest Azerbaijani -American relations. We call on the United States of America and today, in this place, especially on you, who have been elected in free and fair elections to morally support the aspiration of our people to form a government which is accountable to its people. If we will succeed, both of our countries as well as the world at large will be the winners.