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Azerbaijan's Parliament Election 2020: A Strategic Orientation for Massive Reforms

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Serious "persuasion" and "implementation" of various ongoing socio-economic, administrative, and judicial reforms in Azerbaijan has forced its parliament with majority vote to dismiss itself on December 2, 2019. Subsequently, on 5 December, following an appeal of the parliament and after the consent of the Constitutional

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Court, the President H.E. Ilham Aliyev announced early parliamentary elections to be held on 9 February 2020. Being prominent regional expert of Azerbaijan & CIS I term it a "catalyst" for wider ongoing political process and will contribute to defining the future of the South Caucasus during which the will of the people will be triumphed during the upcoming parliament election.

Sub-Saharan Africa is now seriously attempting to "liberalize political system" and "reinvigorate economies" with stabilization and structural adjustment programs. There are two distinctive schools of taught about this complex and complicated phenomenon. According to one school of taught, political liberalization and economic performance should be pursued simultaneously. On the contrary, good governance ought to be implemented and supported to economic liberalization.

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In this connection, "prudent economic management" of Latin American democracies has strengthened the concept of "politico-economic combination" for achieving desired goals of socio-economic prosperity, diversification of economy and qualitative life. Now the Republic of Azerbaijan has also decided to adopt all "economic accelerators" to achieve the targets of "Strategic Road Map" of its president through inclusion of more educated, young, dynamic, versatile, honest and hardworking "new parliamentarians" through snap parliament election to be held on February 9, 2020.

Moreover, the Republic of Azerbaijan is one of the "oldest democracies of the world" since 1919. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) even secured the "voting right of women", minorities and ethnic groups etc. Due to its "grand democratic initiatives", the ADR became an ideal example of democracy in the region and beyond. The ADR consolidated its position as the "first democracy" in the whole "Islamic World (IW)". So despite so called western media propaganda about authoritarian rule, Azerbaijan has been following democratic norms in its true spirits even before 19th century.

Over the past decade there have been significant moves both towards economic reform essentially involving a greater role for the market and a lesser role for the state and political reform, with important steps taken towards democratic forms of government. In some areas political change preceded economic reform as in much of

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eastern Europe, while elsewhere economic and political reform have gone hand in hand. Now being "pioneer democratic country" in the Islamic World and the region alike, Azerbaijan has "unequivocal desire" to streamline the emerging flaws and widening gaps between "good governance" and "economic reforms", structural adjustments, economic accelerators, supply-demand push factors, timing attributes and last but not least, "unclutching" the system from "undue delays", bureaucratic hurdles, blackmailing and formation of cronies through holding of snap parliament election in the country. It is a giant step towards functional political arena wherein two disciplines of human productivity and survival must be "convergent".

Azerbaijan is a "civilized country" having all modern "democratic entities and enterprises". There is no room for obstructive roles in blocking reforms because ongoing reforms "guarantee" further economic diversification, higher GDPs, GNPs, inflows of FDIs, FPIs, joint ventures (JVs), FTAs and greater economic freedom and regional connectivity. For which good governance is must to gear-up the country towards greater "economic sustainability", growth of renewables, easiness of doing

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business, implementation of people and business friendly investment policies and "elimination" of all "blackmailing hotspots" through new real "political start-ups" and meaningful, transparent, accountable and interactive "chain processes" in the country.

The dawn of "Artificial Intelligence (AI)" has institutionalized the "concept of technocracy" in the "reigns of state". So, Azerbaijan's recent decision of holding a snap parliament election should be seen in this context. It will "definitely" encourage new young people to take part in the upcoming elections in the country with new "ideas", "methodologies", "apparatus" and "means" to pursue and implement ongoing economic reforms. Moreover, it will further accelerate these ongoing reforms and cover all branches of state power, there is an urgent need to improve, increase efficiency, and renew the Azerbaijani parliament's activity so that it is "consistent" with the country's dynamic development and comprehensive reform strategy.

Reforms are taking place in every sphere of the country. Numerous "restructuring" has been implemented in different sectors of its macro-economy which will obviously pay its dividends in the days to come. Being prominent regional expert of Azerbaijan & CIS, **I am confident that in the coming days a new structure of the cabinet of ministers will be confirmed. In the near future parliament will be reorganized through a legitimate political transition.** In my opinion a process of rejuvenation is

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ongoing on in Azerbaijan because it needs to give young cadres the possibility to show their capabilities. Young Azerbaijanis see new possibilities to, if not win office, at least create some additional space for political discussions and participation in the country. Till today, more than 1850 candidates including independent have been registered with Azerbaijan Central Election Commission (ACEC).

In Azerbaijan during the past two years, many high-ranking officials have resigned, and there is slightly more space and openness for civil society and opposition parties. This has raised expectations among the civil society, youth and educated community that some independent candidates may be merged as winners.

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, parliamentary elections are primarily regulated by the Constitution and the Election Code as commonly functionalized in the modern world of today. The elections will be administered by three levels of commissions,

comprising the Central Election Commission (CEC), 125 Constituency Election Commissions (ConECs) and some 5,575 Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). The CEC is appointed by the parliament. For all commissions, one third of members should represent each the parliamentary majority, minority, and independent deputies. The Central Election Commission (CEC) and its subordinate entities are completely free, independent and impartial in their functions and executions.

In Azerbaijan, all citizens who are 18 or older by Election Day have the right to vote, except those recognized as incapable by a court decision. The CEC maintains an integrated nationwide voter list. According to the CEC, there are currently some 5.2 million registered voters. According to its constitution members of the parliament are elected by a simple majority from 125 single-mandate constituencies for a five-year term.

Eligible voters who are at least 25 years of age, without dual citizenship or obligations before other states, and without a prior conviction for a serious crime, can stand for parliament. Candidates can be self-nominated as well as nominated by a political party, a coalition of parties, or a group of voters.

The campaign starts 23 days prior to Election Day and last until 24 hours before Election Day. Campaign events can be held only at specifically assigned venues throughout the country, indoor and outdoor, determined by municipal authorities, upon the request of ConECs. The campaign is expected to be conducted through

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meetings with citizens, but also by disseminating printed materials, as well as through social media and the Internet. Campaign finance legislation does not envisage direct public funding of the campaign, sets limits for private donations and expenditures and obliges candidates to report on their campaign finances. The CEC is tasked with overseeing the campaign finance.

Although freedoms of expression and the media, and the right of access to information are guaranteed by the Constitution, defamation remains a criminal offence, also applicable to the online content, with a penalty of up to two years in prison. Television is widely considered to be the main source of political information, while the use of social media and the Internet for this purpose continues to increase. Decisions of election commissions can be appealed by broad range of electoral stakeholders to the higher election commission and further to the courts of appeals and to the Supreme Court as the last instance. Decisions and actions of the CEC can be appealed to the Baku Court of Appeal and, in turn, to the Supreme Court. Every candidate and every political party has the equal right of electoral integrity and justice which upholds total transparency, free and fair election in the country. Political means embodied with peace and harmony is the hallmark of Azerbaijan democracy having a vibrant political system and dynamic parliament.

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Azerbaijan has a presidential system with the executive branch exercising wide authority relative to the parliament. The president appoints and chairs the Cabinet of Ministers, and appoints the executive authorities at central and regional level, as well as the Vice Presidents. The president also proposes the judges of the Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Economic Court and other courts, as well as the Prosecutor General to be appointed by the parliament. Having all said, it also upholds concepts of separation of power & checks and balances in its political system.

In the outgoing parliament the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) held 65 out of 125 seats. Twelve more seats were held by parties that formally constituted the parliamentary opposition but largely supported YAP, and 38 seats were held by members elected as independent candidates, who usually voted in line with the ruling party. Women are underrepresented in public life, holding 20 seats in the

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outgoing parliament, 2 out of 15 posts of a chairperson of state committees and no ministerial posts.

Despite all "falsified" media news of the West, government of Azerbaijan has the "strong political will" to organize elections in "free" and "fair" atmosphere, and expressed their readiness for full cooperation with all the international monitoring agencies for upcoming parliament elections in the country. Being pioneer of "secular democracy" in the region as well in the whole Islamic World, Azerbaijan does not have any "restrictive political environment" that "curtails" fundamental rights and freedoms, which are "pre-requisites" for genuine democratic elections. Every election is important and has multiplier effects due to which Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan has been pursuing an independent role, authority, execution and last but not least, administration to hold fair, free and transparent election in the country.

Azerbaijan maintains a "multi-party" political system where every party has an "equal playing field" to nominate its candidates and contest election too. It has positive and contributory pluralism in the country which represents in the shape of largest political parties in the region. Even more than 18 political parties have now been registered with CEC till toady for the upcoming parliament election.

As many as 19 political parties have nominated their candidates for the early parliamentary elections to be held in Azerbaijan February 9, 2020. Names of

registered political parties are :-the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), the Umid (Hope) Party, the Civic Solidarity Party of Azerbaijan, the Great Creation Party, the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, the National Revival Movement Party, the National Independence Party, the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, the Great Azerbaijan Party, the United Azerbaijan Party, Ana Veten (Motherland) Party, Takamul Party, Musavat Party, Azerbaijan Social Welfare Party, Vahdat Party, Party for Democratic Reforms, Azerbaijan Liberal Democratic Party, Azerbaijan Democratic Enlightenment Party, Modern Musavat Party and Citizen and Development Parties.

Members of the parliament (MPs) are elected by a "simple majority" from 125 single-mandate constituencies for a five-year term. The Election Code stipulates that the number of voters registered in each constituency should not deviate by more than 5 per cent, and in exceptional circumstances by no more than 10 per cent from the average number of voters per constituency.

The election administration is "well-resourced" and prepares the election efficiently. On Election Day, international observers will have the freedom to monitor the parliament election which will ultimately "disavow" widespread alleged acquisitions of the western media about so called lack of transparency, and numerous serious irregularities, such as ballot box stuffing. **It has no substance and concrete evidence.** Azerbaijan's election commission is an independent and transparent organ

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of the state which has one the most advanced system of surveillance in the region for holding of elections at any level.

Unlike in presidential elections, voters who are abroad on election day are not entitled to vote. Voter registration is based on extracts of local residency data provided to the CEC who maintains an integrated nationwide voter list. Voter lists are updated by the PECs annually on 30 May and again no later than 25 days before the election day. For these elections, the extracts from voter lists will be posted for public scrutiny from 5 January at PECs, and the CEC plans to finalize voter lists by 15 January. From this date until and including on election day, voters can be added to supplementary voter lists at the PECs upon presenting a proof of residency. Citizens are able to check their registration at any time through the CEC website, by telephone, or in person at the PECs.

Candidate registration started on 6 December and will last until 10 January 2020. Each prospective candidate must submit at least 450 valid supporting signatures of voters registered in the constituency to their respective ConEC, which are tasked to examine the signatures and other nominating documents. Unlike in presidential elections,

voters can sign to support more than one candidate in the constituency of their residence. By law, the campaign period starts 23 days prior to Election Day and lasts until 24 hours before the Election Day.

The Election Code regulates campaign finance and provides that parties and candidates can fund their campaigns from their own resources and donations from individuals and legal entities. There is no public funding of the election campaign. Candidates are obliged to open a dedicated bank account for all campaign finance transactions. Parties and blocs of parties that register more than 60 candidates may establish a unified campaign account for all candidates. Each candidate can spend maximum AZN 500,000 (some EUR 265,000), with contribution limits set at AZN 3,000 for individuals, and AZN 50,000 for legal entities.18 Foreign, state, charitable and anonymous donations are prohibited.

In March 2017, the Law on Information, Information Provision and Protection of Information was amended, granting right to the Ministry of Transportation, Communications and High Technologies to block websites of media outlets because of their content, without prior court decision.

The Election Code regulates the conduct of media during elections, obliging the public broadcaster and state-funded newspapers to create equal conditions for candidates. It further provides that political parties and blocs with candidates in at

least 60 constituencies are eligible for three hours per week of free airtime on the public broadcaster and free space in state-funded newspapers. This time will be equally divided among registered candidates and will be used either for debates among them or for their individual presentations.

Being prominent regional expert of Azerbaijan & CIS it is expected that snap parliamentary elections will likely launch a new democratic era in Azerbaijan, giving the voters a further possibility to advance the reform process, It is a positive step as it could help modernize Azerbaijan's legislative branch and speed the course of economic reforms.

I evaluate this development as the **Parliament's response to the reform agenda led by the President of the Azerbaijani Republic, Ilham Aliyev.** The ambitious reforms ahead of Azerbaijan can only be put in place by a new generation of dynamic, modern and well-educated experts.

In this new era, where socio-economic dynamism takes centre stage in Central Asia and the Caucasus, "outdated bureaucracies", "government functionaries" and "entrenched power structures" dating back to the Soviet time are no longer "sustainable". The dreams of greater socio-economic prosperity, greater regional connectivity, massive diversification, emergence of listening state, responsive parliamentarians, dawn of zero-tolerance towards corruption and further economic

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liberalization **all depend upon inclusion of new blood in political system to dismantle personal cartels and cronies in the country.**

Snap parliament election is the "absolute denial" of so called western propagated version of authoritarianism because desired change is meant through a "standardized political transition". In order to achieve all targets of the Strategic Road Map Azerbaijan must have institutions to better respond to its population's need, a clean slate with a new political mindset is also needed. It suggests the retirement of powerful clans, government officials, octogenarians and septuagenarians and their replacement with younger generations through a democratic means by holding a fair and free election in the country. It provides a golden opportunity to young people of Azerbaijan to take part in the upcoming election for their better future.

Ilham Aliyev initiated some important measures to speed-up the system of governance by major government reshuffling which led to the promotion of a younger generation to ministerial and administrative positions. Having studied at prestigious universities, such as Harvard and Sorbonne, a new generation of young politicians, who were by no means tied to the previous Soviet Union structures, started to have a strong presence in the echelons of power. It is hoped that after successful conduction of parliament election there will be new Azerbaijan on the horizon. Some days ago a prominent economist and policy maker namely Ali Asadov

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was appointed as the new prime minister in a major government shake-up, including the replacement of two deputy prime ministers as well as several government and presidential staff.

The 81 year old chief of the presidential administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev, was replaced by the 44 year old Duke University alumnus Samir Nuriyev. The head of the public and political department of the presidential administration, Ali Hasanov, was also fired from his position some days ago in response to citizen's demands for the opening up of the media space and strengthening civil society.

Structural change opens new window of opportunities but it is always very hard to achieve and sustain even in the modern democracies of the world and Azerbaijan is not a exemption. Two divergent forces work at length to change the center of gravity and political power. Even main stakeholders within the political system present hard resistance because their political survival heavily depends upon status-quo. Economic reforms come in the line of fire and easy prey to political predators because politicians who blackmail or denigrate others cast a shadow over the reform process and the informal power politics, including monopolies of various oligarchs, curb foreign

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investments. So, upcoming snap election would create a diminishing effect to political cliff-hangers in Azerbaijan which badly needs new ideas, passions, human traits and political systems to create a push-forward demo in the sphere of economic reforms. Azerbaijan urgently requires fair competition, healthy business environment and elimination of corruption in order to form a "listening state" through a valid political mean that is why snap parliament election has been announced in the country.

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