

# Seven Baku rules

## How (not) to have elections

7 Feb 2024

(Written and published *before* the official elections results were announced.  
Which, as these rules indicate, should not be a problem for our readers)



Citizen Ilham votes in presidential elections 2018.

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The Vice-President votes: Mehriban Aliyeva, wife of Ilham, during elections in February 2020.



### **Different kinds of elections**

There are competitive and fair elections, like the parliamentary elections that took place in the Netherlands in November 2023, where some 10.5 million went to the poll.

There are competitive and unfair elections, like the parliamentary and local elections that took place in Serbia in December 2023, where some 3.5 million people went to the polls. There, international election observers concluded that “the ruling party’s systemic advantages created unjust conditions.”<sup>1</sup>

There are competitive elections for life, like those of a pope. A conclave, where the college of cardinals gathers, votes in secret until there is a winner. The number of participants in the last election was 115. Once chosen by a two-thirds majority, a pope does not need to win re-election.

And then there are presidential elections in Azerbaijan. These are uncompetitive. Although a presidential term in Azerbaijan is seven years, the experience of elections since 1993 suggests that once a president is elected, it is de facto for life.

Today, on 7 February 2024, presidential elections are taking place in Azerbaijan. People are going to the polls across the country, elections observers from all over the world observe, and in the end the results will be announced. As we write this short guide to the elections and their result, the outcome has not been announced yet. As you read this, it will have been. Elsewhere, this would be inconvenient. Not here.

We write this text before the results of the presidential elections are known and venture a guess: Ilham Aliyev, the incumbent, is likely to win re-re-election with more than 80 percent of the vote. Other candidates are likely to each gain between 1 and 3 percent. This, at least, is what the “Baku rules for presidential elections” would suggest.

We identified seven such rules, based on recent experiences, to interpret events today in Azerbaijan. Let us look at them one by one.

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<sup>1</sup> OSCE, [International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Serbia – Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Preliminary Conclusions](#), 17 December 2023.

### **Baku rule one: There are many “candidates.”**

Let us look at the last two presidential elections: in 2018 and in 2024. In April 2018, there were seven men competing to come second behind Ilham Aliyev. In February 2024, there were six men. Some of them are the same.

#### *The Glorious Seven, Presidential Election 2018<sup>2</sup>*



#### *The Glorious Six, Presidential Elections 2024<sup>3</sup>*



### **Baku rule two: Gudret always stands**

One of these six candidates, Gudret, has been standing in presidential elections already five times: in 2003, 2008, 2013, 2018 and now in 2024. The fact that he never won more than 3 percent has not discouraged him so far.

There is also a positive trend for him: In 2003 he got 0.5 percent of the vote. In 2018 it was 3 percent. Will 2024 be better? Perhaps, though Gudret should not get his hopes too high, because ...

#### *Gudret's scores<sup>4</sup>*

	percent
2003	0.50
2008	2.28
2013	1.99
2018	3.02

<sup>2</sup> From the left: Gudret (Hasanguliyev), Zahid (Oruc), Razi (Nurullayev), Serdar (Memmedov), Hafiz (Haciyev), Araz (Alizade), Ferec (Guliyev). [Prezident 9 Oktyabr 2013](#), [Prezident 11 Aprel 2018](#).

<sup>3</sup> From the left: Gudret, Zahid, Razi, Fazil (Mustafa), Elsad (Musayev), Fuad (Aliyev). [Prezident 7 Fevral 2024 – Namizedlerin ireli surulmesi ve gaydiyyati ile bagli malumat](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Prezident 15 Oktyabr 2008](#), [Prezident 9 Oktyabr 2013](#), [Prezident 11 Aprel 2018](#).

### **Baku rule three: There is a glass ceiling for candidates not called Aliyev**

... the trend in recent elections has been that no candidate who is not called an Aliyev gets a lot of votes. In 1998, the runner-up won almost 12 percent. In 2003 it was almost 14 percent.

Since then, a lower glass ceiling held. In 2008, the runner-up won 3 percent. In 2013 5.5 percent. And in 2018 3 percent. What will it be in 2024? Will the two-digit ceiling be broken again?



Father and son: “The National Salvation Day is a glorious and bright page in the history of our statehood.

### **Baku rule four: an Aliyev always wins**

This is the most obvious and predictable rule about presidential elections in Azerbaijan. See below the results in all presidential elections since an Aliyev – first father Haydar, then son Ilham – competed. Their worst result was 77 percent, when an inexperienced Ilham stood for the first time in 2003. Since then, getting above 80 percent has been the rule.

<i>Rule four<sup>5</sup></i>				
	<i>Aliyev</i>	<i>percent</i>	<i>Not-Aliyev</i>	<i>percent</i>
1993	Haydar	98.80	Ebilov	1.01
1998	Haydar	77.80	Etibar	11.80
2003	Ilham	76.84	Isa	13.97
2008	Ilham	88.73	Iqbal	2.86
2013	Ilham	84.54	Cemil	5.53
2018	Ilham	86.02	Zahid	3.12

<sup>5</sup> 1993: Ebilov Karrar, [presidential election results 1993](#). 1998: Etibar Məmmədov, Wikipedia, [presidential election results 1998](#). 2003: İsa Qəmbər, [presidential election results 2003](#) 2008: Iqbal Aga-Zade, [Prezident 15 Oktyabr 2008](#). 2013: Cemil Həsənli, [Prezident 9 Oktyabr 2013](#). 2018: Zahid Oruc, [Prezident 11 April 2018](#).

### **Baku rule five: there is no campaign**

There are debates. In these debates, different candidates can express their appreciation of the achievements of the incumbent president.

In 2024, all candidates not-called Aliyev take part in debates on Azerbaijan's public broadcaster ITV, starting from 15 January. During the first of these debates, on 15 January 2024, Zahid expressed his views forcefully:

“It is the first time in our history that the winner on the battlefield is also the leader of our country! But let me add we are all winners here, opposition and government... without distinction.

If our historic leaders were alive today, from Neriman Nerimanov (first president of the Soviet Azerbaijan) to our Great Leader Haydar Aliyev, they would vote on 7 February, for Azerbaijan's integrity, and for our victory to be permanent!”<sup>6</sup>

The tone in these debates is friendly. Participants do not talk about human rights, torture or corruption allegations. There is genuine appreciation of being already led by a great leader. There is some debate also on what to spend (a lot of) money on in the future. A favourite topic is recent military victories. In the debate on 17 January, Razi noted:

“Yes, the people of Azerbaijan won a great victory. All our problems were related to Karabakh. Despite all difficulties, we created a solid state, a powerful state. And we liberated Karabakh! Now it's time to channel billions worth investments to improve our citizens' lives.”<sup>7</sup>

Gudret, candidate since 2003, promised a big constitutional reform on 19 January. It remains to be seen if this leads to him getting more than 3 percent of the vote this time:

“If I am elected, I will form a national unity government in Azerbaijan to implement radical reforms. Within one year, a new Constitution will be adopted, and we will hold parliamentary elections...

We are an oriental minded people. We don't have democratic traditions in our country. The multi-party system has not been fully functioning until now. For these reasons, instead of the presidential system, we consider a parliamentary republic model as the right choice for Azerbaijan, where the president will only have ceremonial and limited responsibilities and will be elected for five years by the parliament.”<sup>8</sup>

What is also interesting: the sitting president does not show up to these debates. He sends someone else to represent him.

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<sup>6</sup> Youtube channel of Ictimai TV, [“Prezidentliye namizedlerin azerbaycanin suverenliyinin berpa edilmesi movzusunda debati”](#) 15 January 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Youtube channel of Ictimai TV, [“Prezidentliye namizedler Ictimai TV'de – Seckiler”](#) 17 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Youtube channel of Ictimai TV, [“Prezidentliye namizedler sosial siyaset, tehsil ve sehiyye movzusunda muzakire aparir”](#) 19 January 2024.

### **Baku rule six: election day is calm while many come to vote**

As none of the non-Aliyev candidates seem to want to become president, and as the outcome is widely anticipated as given, election day passes without too much excitement. There are international election observers, who come from all over the world to this celebration of democracy. They are left to remark on the fact that presidential elections have been “technically well organized.”

Also a positive: there is usually a high turn-out, above 70 percent.

#### *Presidential Elections Turnout, 1993-2018<sup>9</sup>*

1993	97.60
1998	78.92
2003	61.79
2008	77.74
2013	75.20
2018	74.24

### **Baku rule seven: at election times jails fill up with critics**

*Correlation is not causation*, so we cannot say with certainty that there is any linkage between the fact that (early) presidential elections are taking place in February 2024 and that the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan has more than doubled recently.

It could be a coincidence. But it is interesting.

A former political prisoner, [human rights defender Leyla Yunus](#), lives in the Netherlands today where she maintains with others the best list of political prisoners. It is updated regularly, and widely used also in debates in the Council of Europe. Here is [the recent trend](#):

#### *Yunus lists of political prisoners*

Month	Year	Nr. Prisoners
February	2023	93
April	2023	<b>182</b>
July	2023	<b>202</b>
October	2023	<b>235</b>
December	2023	<b>254</b>

However, those in jail in Azerbaijan do not lose their right to vote for Ilham Aliyev. His results turn out to be even better among inmates in the penitentiary system than among the rest of the population.

This might be called the eighth Baku rule.

<sup>9</sup> For 1993 turnout, Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz, Christof Hartmann, [Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook: Volume I: Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia](#), OUP Oxford, November 2001, p. 364. For 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013 and 2018 turnout, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, [Election turnouts for Azerbaijani Presidency](#).