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ISTANBUL KENT UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
BRANCH



WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES UNDER
RESTRICTIVE POLITICAL SYSTEMS?

MASTER'S THESIS

ISMAYIL AKHUNDOV

İSTANBUL – 2025

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ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

The defense date of the thesis titled “What Is the Contribution Of Political Parties Under Restrictive Political Systems?” prepared by Ismayil Akhundov was made on 19.06.2025 and it was accepted as the Master’s Thesis of the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the Graduate Education Institute of Istanbul Kent University by unanimous vote by the jury given below.

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DECLARATION

I declare that scientific ethics rules have been followed in writing this thesis, that in case of utilization of the works of others, references have been made in accordance with scientific norms, that no falsification has been made in the data used, and that no part of the thesis has been presented as another thesis study at this university or another university.

ISMAYIL AKHUNDOV

24.06.2025

PREFACE

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my advisor, Asst. Prof. Dr. Hande RAMAZANOĞULLARI, whose academic guidance and sincere encouragement were instrumental throughout the entire thesis process. Her dedication, constructive criticism, and constant support helped me stay focused and committed to my research goals. I also wish to acknowledge the jury members, whose insightful suggestions during the defense significantly enriched the final form of this study. In addition, I am thankful to all my professors and close ones who offered feedback and motivation during the final revisions. Above all, I am especially grateful to my father, Ilgar Akhundov, whose moral support and belief in my potential gave me strength in the most challenging moments.

ISMAYIL AKHUNDOV

24.06.2025

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ABSTRACT

Istanbul Kent University Postgraduate Education Institute

What Is the Contribution Of Political Parties Under Restrictive Political Systems?

Ismayil AKHUNDOV

Master's Thesis

Department Of Political Science and International Relations

Advisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Hande RAMAZANOĞULLARI

June 2025-

This thesis examines the role of political parties, particularly the opposition, under authoritarian regimes. The research primarily focuses on analyzing the reasons why opposition parties choose to participate in elections within such regimes. The study is specifically based on the case of Azerbaijan. Opposition forces often enter elections with the hope that their participation will contribute to society and influence the process of democratization. The thesis explores in detail various strategies used to marginalize the opposition from political processes and to restrict them through a controlled and artificial competitive environment. Ultimately, the study evaluates whether the participation of opposition parties in elections plays a positive role. This research contributes to understanding the role of the opposition in elections and assesses the extent to which it can be functional within authoritarian systems.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Opposition Parties, Elections, Electoral Participation, REAL Party.

ÖZET

İstanbul Kent Üniversitesi Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü
Kısıtlayıcı Politik Sistemlerde Siyasi Partilerin Katkısı

Nedir?

İsmail AHUNDOV

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

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Danışman: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Hande RAMAZANOĞULLARI

Haziran 2025-

Bu tez, otoriter rejimler altında siyasi partilerin, özellikle muhalefetin rolünü incelemektedir. Araştırma, öncelikle muhalefet partilerinin bu tür rejimlerde seçimlere katılma nedenlerini analiz etmeye odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, özellikle Azerbaycan örneği üzerinden yürütülmüştür. Muhalif güçler genellikle seçimlere, katılımlarının topluma katkı sağlayacağı ve demokratikleşme sürecini etkileyebileceği umuduyla girmektedirler. Tezde, muhalefetin siyasi süreçlerden dışlanması ve kontrollü, yapay bir rekabet ortamı ile sınırlandırılması için kullanılan çeşitli stratejiler ayrıntılı olarak ele alınmıştır. Sonuç olarak, muhalefet partilerinin seçimlere katılımının olumlu bir rol oynayıp oynamadığı değerlendirilmiştir. Bu araştırma, muhalefetin seçimlerdeki rolünü anlamaya katkı sağlamış ve otoriter sistemler içinde bu rolün ne ölçüde işlevsel olabileceğini değerlendirmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Otoriterlik, Muhalefet Partileri, Seçimler, Seçmen Katılımı, REAL Partisi.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigates why opposition parties participate in elections under authoritarian regimes. Even though elections are often falsified in such regimes, some opposition parties still have reasons and motivations to participate. Nevertheless, elections in authoritarian regimes are often rigged and their outcomes predetermined, many opposition parties continue to participate in these processes. Even when the results do not bring about genuine political change, opposition involvement in elections remains a key component of their broader strategic approach. Moreover, although the primary aim of authoritarian regimes is to weaken the role of the opposition and suppress its potential, these parties often use elections as a rare platform to demonstrate their political presence and resilience. This contradiction gives rise to a compelling question: If elections do not result in real change, why do opposition parties still choose to participate in elections? This research seeks to explore and answer that question. While this research primarily focuses on the motivations behind the opposition's participation in elections, it also briefly considers the involvement of authoritarian regimes in the electoral process, as this helps to contextualize the opposition's actions within a broader political framework. Although electoral processes in authoritarian regimes have the potential to influence political change, the topic remains insufficiently studied. Based on the findings of this study understanding why opposition parties take part in these manipulated elections helps to better grasp their strategic opportunities, the foundations of regime legitimacy, and the prospects for democratization. The findings also suggest emphasizes the importance of opposition parties' participation in these elections. Opposition parties often view elections as an opportunity to advocate for political reform. The research specifically focuses on the significance of opposition parties' participation, and how this involvement can impact the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and potentially lead to democratic changes. Also, the study referencing significant theories helps to understand the reason why opposition parties participate in elections in non-democratic regimes. First, the electoral authoritarianism theory explains that even though the elections are manipulated the participation of the opposition impacts the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes (Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2015). Democratic transition theory states that electoral participation and the political awakening of society can weaken the regime and ultimately lead to democratic changes. Coalition-building highlights the importance of opposition parties uniting to act as a

single force in elections (Gandhi, 2015). Another important theory is liberalization and democratization as a concept that emphasizes the participation of opposition parties in elections can enable liberal changes and democratic improvements in authoritarian regimes. Finally, the theory of hope and democratic change emphasizes not only the participation of opposition parties but also the potential for democratic transformation (Croissant & Hellmann, 2018). To better understand how elections foster public trust and democratic legitimacy, it is necessary to examine the theoretical foundations of electoral democracy, which constitutes the conceptual basis of this research. Elections are fundamental to democratic systems, providing a platform for political competition and ensuring public participation in governance (Joseph, 2021). Electoral democracy balances the political will of the people with the electoral process, emphasizing accountability through free and fair elections (Pettit, 2000). Public trust in election outcomes is crucial for the legitimacy of democratic governance, as fair elections foster stronger connections between the state and its citizens (Debela et al., 2020). The research will begin by presenting the theoretical framework, exploring the key theories that explain why opposition parties continue to participate in elections despite manipulation in authoritarian regimes. After establishing these theoretical foundations, the focus will shift to the situation in Azerbaijan following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The study will investigate whether the elections held in Azerbaijan have been democratic or non-democratic. The next step will involve analyzing the role of the opposition REAL Party's participation in these elections within the Azerbaijani context, evaluating its impact on the regime's legitimacy and considering whether it has contributed to potential democratic changes. Finally, the findings from all these analyses will be brought together and summarized in a comprehensive evaluation. This research is based on a qualitative methodology. Data was primarily collected through interviews conducted using open-ended questions. During the interviews, participants were asked about the participation of the REAL Party in elections in Azerbaijan and the possible reasons behind this involvement. The purpose of the interview is to understand how opposition participation may influence the legitimacy of the regime and affect democratic processes. The study aims to understand the reasons behind opposition parties' participation in elections under authoritarian regimes and its impact on the legitimacy of these regimes. It will also explore how the participation of opposition parties in elections can influence potential democratic changes, explaining the strategic role this involvement plays within the

Azerbaijani context. The findings of the study will demonstrate that opposition participation in elections is not merely a form of resistance against the regimes, but also a means of advocating for political reforms, raising political awareness in society, and ultimately contributing to democratic transformation.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative research method. The main objective is to explore the role of opposition parties under authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on their participation in elections. To achieve this, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals holding diverse perspectives. In this research, interviews were conducted with three respondents who were selected using the purposeful sampling method. This method was chosen because it allows for the selection of participants who have specific knowledge or experience related to the research topic. The respondents were chosen based on their expertise in the field of politics and their direct involvement in opposition activities under authoritarian regimes. The interviews were conducted with Ilgar Mammadov, the former leader of the REAL Party, and Natig Jafarli, the current leader of the REAL Party, along with a member of the party. These individuals were selected due to their knowledge of opposition party dynamics within authoritarian contexts. The interviews were conducted online depending on the availability of the participants and their location. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Before the interviews, consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical compliance. The interviews followed an open-ended question format, allowing for flexibility and in-depth responses. This format enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences, opinions, and observations while ensuring consistency in the core questions across all interviews.

Literature review

History reveals that leaders in many states governed with an authoritarian regime for a considerable time. In such regimes, restrictions on democratic institutions, violations of basic human rights in society, repression, weakening of the role of opposition parties, and many other similar phenomena are found. In these forms of governance, there are many shortages, and the regime is forced to limit the activity of any individual, political party, group, or organization. Although the authoritarian system creates restrictions, small contributions can

arguably lead to positive societal change. As a result, this study will consider the role of political parties in authoritarian governance systems, issues arising in elections, and relations between the opposition and the government. Since elections are rigged in authoritarian regimes, in many cases state leaders use political manipulation. One of good examples of the form of an authoritarian regime is the example of Jordan in the presidential elections after the Arab Spring. For example, during the Arab Spring in Jordan, the government tried to reduce popular protest by creating an Independent Electoral Commission to convince that the election would be transparent and democratic. The goal of the Jordanian government was to make people believe in themselves and minimize the level of protest by "softening" the system. However, nothing changed permanently, people continued to be victims of this system, being deceived by the game of the government (Williamson, 2021). In authoritarian regimes, there are systems of single-party or multi-party variants. Despite the strict regime in some states, the multi-party system remains. According to 2002 research, among authoritarian regimes, countries that establish a multi-party system are 72% (Oğuz, 2019). This figure is noteworthy as it provides an alternative option for society to vote for different parties. Even though in authoritarian regimes there are many cases of falsification of elections, however, when opposition parties participate in the selection, falsifying the results becomes relatively difficult due to the multi-party system. As alternative choices increase, the political attitudes of society begin to shift. In most cases, although the elections are held multi-party, the results of the elections are known in advance, however, the government must hold elections to demonstrate democracy. There are many questions about how authoritarian governments manage elections. The clearest example of these can be the inhibition of the campaigns of the pre-election opposition system of authoritarianism shows how the government deceives society and exhibit hostile and repressive behavior. In authoritarian regimes, government harm is not only addressed to society but also to opposition parties. In many cases, arrest of party members, violence, and even in more stringent systems, obstacles are created for opposition parties to meet with their voters. In this case, society's confidence in the opposition is also decreasing because society thinks that the position of the opposition is gradually weakening compared to the government. Another negative nuance is that sometimes the existing opposition political parties in parliament do not play a role and this leads to a decrease in the authority of political parties. Related research shows that one of the alternative methods for a political party is its

association with other opposition parties so that it can maintain its power. "Fragmented oppositions appear to diminish not only political competition but may also undermine popular support for democracy," claims a study on the European integration process in ten democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. That is, the population may lose confidence in the opposition (Helms, 2022). However, political misunderstandings of political parties may arise. Parties often face conflicts due to ideological disagreements or opportunistic competition. Ideological conflicts are more noticeable because they are based on competition for political ideas (Musil, 2024). Before discussing the role of political parties under authoritarian regimes, it is important to understand how such regimes often seize and maintain control over electoral processes. Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet state in the South Caucasus, is frequently cited in the literature as a case of authoritarian consolidation. Following the controversial transfer of power from Heydar Aliyev to his son Ilham Aliyev in 2003, the country has faced widespread allegations of electoral manipulation across presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. Opposition efforts to challenge the results led to public demonstrations, which were met with police intervention. This reflects a broader trend in authoritarian systems where state coercive apparatuses are used to suppress dissent and reinforce regime control (Nuriyev, 2005). Authoritarian regimes have often manipulated elections to maintain their hold on power, and Azerbaijan provides a notable example. For years, a form of diplomacy known as "caviar diplomacy" has been practiced in Europe and beyond, repeatedly employed by Ilham Aliyev's government. This strategy aimed to cultivate a favorable international image of Azerbaijan by offering European deputies and politicians' gifts such as gold, caviar, and other valuables. Consequently, during parliamentary and presidential elections, the Azerbaijani government invited European politicians as observers, persuading them through these diplomatic means that the elections were transparent and democratic. This practice reveals how authoritarian regimes can entrench themselves by undermining genuine democratic processes. Over time, however, evidence emerged showing that some diplomats had been compromised, exposing the limits and ethical problems of such diplomacy. One of these incidents took place within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. During the discussions at the PACE, there were noticeable disagreements regarding the elections in Azerbaijan. The Estonian rapporteur, Andres Herkel, took a critical stance, highlighting the failure of democratic institutions and the elections not meeting the Council of Europe's

standards. On the other hand, British MP Michael Hancock emphasized the country's economic development and the more equitable distribution of wealth, trying to soften the criticisms about the elections. Hancock was also skeptical of the negative forecasts made about the elections beforehand, questioning the objectivity of the monitoring bodies. These debates reflect how Azerbaijani elections are viewed differently within the Council of Europe and show that concerns about meeting democratic standards persist. Such approaches are sometimes described as "dry diplomacy," meaning serious problems are overlooked or softened to maintain diplomatic relations. Critics argue this does not fully represent reality and ends up covering up democratic shortcomings (European Stability Initiative, 2012).

CHAPTER 1: THE THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

1.1. What is an Authoritarian Regime?

Over the centuries, the organization of political power in societies has varied, and one of these forms of governance is authoritarianism. Professor of political science Erica Frantz describes authoritarianism in very simple terms: If a leader does not come to power through democratic means, if elections are rigged, or if elections are conducted in a manner that is detached from the political will of the people, the regime is considered authoritarian. For example, Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba is one of the most prominent examples of this. Furthermore, if a leader initially comes to power through democratic means but later transitions the country into a non-democratic system (where fundamental human rights are violated), that regime is also classified as authoritarian (Frantz, 2018a). In other words, an authoritarian regime is a system of governance where the ruling authority infringes upon citizens' political rights and freedoms, and high-ranking individuals are appointed to political or other positions of power (Salvemini, 1947). The American political scientist Samuel Huntington, who studied authoritarian regimes distinguished the definition of authoritarian regimes from that of democratic regimes. While Huntington viewed the existence of free and fair elections as the fundamental symbol of democracy, he characterized authoritarian regimes as restrictive and repressive (Brown et al., 2024). One of the most prominent characteristics of authoritarian regimes is the implementation of repression. Both scholarly research and political experience have demonstrated that if an authoritarian leader or dictator wishes to maintain power, they are compelled to employ a policy of repression. This is because, through this method, the authoritarian leader can extend both their power and the duration of their rule. Recent studies indicate that the more repressive a regime is, the longer it tends to endure. Thus, in authoritarian regimes, state power becomes centralized, and political freedoms are restricted. The main objective of such regimes is to maintain power. So, what mechanisms do authoritarian leaders use to achieve this goal? The most important method is elections. The primary reason authoritarian leaders utilize elections is to capture public attention and garner popular support.

Elections serve as a crucial mechanism for maintaining power (Lindstaedt, 2020). However, what function do elections play in authoritarian regimes? In the next section, I am

going to analyze why elections are important in authoritarian regimes based on scholarly research.

1.2. The Theory of Electoral Democracy

Elections are essential to democratic systems, acting as a platform where political entities or individuals vie for public office, ensuring a level playing field for all candidates. To maintain credibility, it is crucial that the election process is managed impartially, guaranteeing a fair competition (Joseph, 2021). In the political context, the concepts of election and electoral democracy are closely linked. To understand the subtleties of electoral democracy, it can be defined as follows: elections and the people are always in a delicate balance, and their political weight must remain consistently balanced. Only under these circumstances can we observe the presence of electoral democracy in a society. At the core of electoral democracy is the political will of the people, which is expressed through their participation in elections and the final decisions they make. This implies that, while there may be competition during elections, the ultimate decision rests with the people. Electoral democracy is ensured by the temporary placement of a candidate chosen by the people into office. This arrangement makes elected officials more accountable, as they must respond to the will of the people. In this system, the political will of the people directs the government and its actions, compelling elected, officials to meet the public's demands. This approach forms the basis of electoral democracy and representation, emphasizing the power of the electorate (Pettit, 2000). One of the core components of electoral democracy is public trust. In this process, voters must have faith in the election results and believe that these outcomes accurately reflect their will. This trust is crucial for ensuring the legitimacy of the election and for maintaining the integrity of the democratic system, as it assures that the government is a true representation of the people's desires. The question of whether electoral democracy is essential for fostering public trust remains a topic of active discussion. Proponents of electoral democracy argue that it plays a significant role in building public trust, as the conduct of free and fair elections leads to a government that accurately reflects the will of the majority, embodying the core principle of democratic governance. Conversely, some scholars contend that there is a lack of substantial evidence demonstrating that electoral democracy effectively contributes to the development of public trust. This study posits that electoral democracy does indeed foster

public trust in governmental institutions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis emerges: the quality of democratic elections has a positive and significant influence on public trust. The proper conduct of democratic elections enhances public trust in the government, allowing for a stronger connection within society. This ensures the will of the voters is realized, ultimately helping to make the state more reliable (Debela et al., 2020). Therefore, elections play a key role in fostering trust within society and help establish stronger connections between the state and its citizens. In my research, I consider electoral democracy to be a crucial principle. However, when examining how this principle is applied in authoritarian regimes, it becomes evident that the system is distorted, and elections are exploited in ways that diverge from the core goals of democracy. In authoritarian regimes, elections transform from a means of ensuring the will of the people influences the government to a tool used to strengthen the position of the ruling power. In such regimes, the electoral process generally loses its characteristics of being free and fair, becoming merely a mechanism for legitimizing the authority of the ruling government. Consequently, this distorts the fundamental purpose of elections in a democracy, which is to accurately reflect the will of the people. To gain a deeper understanding of this theoretical framework, it will be useful to refer to the next section. In this part, I will explore the nature and characteristics of authoritarian regimes, how they influence electoral systems, and how elections in such regimes are distorted from democratic principles. Additionally, I will discuss how these regimes exploit elections to strengthen their power.

1.3. What is the Meaning of Elections in Authoritarian Regimes for the Government?

Throughout history, elections have been carried out as a fundamental component of democracy. However, it is also possible to observe that elections are held in countries governed by autocratic regimes. Although these elections take place in non-democratic conditions, authoritarian leaders prefer them. These elections do not weaken their power; on the contrary, they can further strengthen it. The question arises: In authoritarian regimes, even though the selection of authoritarian leaders is not carried out through democratic processes, why do leaders still require elections? Despite these elections being held in non-democratic conditions, what is the purpose of elections for an authoritarian leader? Scholars argue that the primary reason authoritarian leaders prefer elections is to remain in power and safeguard their

authority. Researchers claim that the purpose of authoritarian leaders participating in elections is not to demonstrate democracy, but rather to protect their power from potential threats from citizens and opposition groups. They emphasize that for authoritarian leaders, participation in elections is seen as the only way to mitigate these threats and maintain their political strength. Researchers state that another reason authoritarian leaders prefer elections is that elections allow them to appoint their political elites to various positions within the regime. Through this process, authoritarian rulers attempt to co-opt elites by offering them political and material benefits in exchange for their loyalty. Once the leader secures victory in the elections, the newly formed political elite begins to serve the regime, ensuring its stability. In this context, elections serve as a mechanism for distributing "rewards" to political elites, binding them to the leader. Moreover, after the elections, the leader relies on the power of these elites to maintain legitimacy and strengthen authoritarian rule. The conduct of elections in authoritarian regimes serves not only to ensure the legitimacy of the ruling power but also to weaken the opposition. At first glance, this approach may be difficult to understand, but it finds its logic in the details. Through elections, authoritarian leaders provide certain candidates and parties opposed to the regime with an opportunity to participate in the political arena. However, rather than completely suppressing opposition forces, they integrate them into the system by offering certain political and material rewards, thus turning them into allies. This approach constitutes the co-optation method, which is one of the most used tactics by authoritarian leaders. Elections also allow autocrats to fragment the opposition. Opposition parties and candidates who decide to participate in the elections are more likely to take advantage of the political and material incentives offered by the government, rather than directly confronting the regime. Finally, one of the most important reasons why authoritarian leaders participate in elections is to maintain their legitimacy. By taking part in elections, an authoritarian leader gains legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The leader demonstrates that they were elected through a democratic process, without any political pressure, and have secured the support of the people. This, in turn, preserves the legitimacy of their rule over the years and allows them to showcase that they were elected through legal means (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). For many years, researchers' interest has focused solely on this topic. But how do authoritarian regimes truly consolidate their power? The literature suggests that through elections, authoritarian regimes manage to survive, and by using

elections, they gain political power and legitimacy, thereby maintaining their rule. However, Samuel Huntington, refers to elections held under authoritarian regimes as a "halfway house that cannot stand," suggesting that even if the government is authoritarian and prioritizes elections, there is still a chance to end its rule. As a result, it can be understood that when an authoritarian system is strongly institutionalized, it has the potential to maintain its power through elections (Gandhi, 2015). Authoritarian regimes hold elections for various purposes, a pattern that has been observed multiple times in history, particularly after the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. According to Levitsky and Way's research, the interest of authoritarian leaders in elections is not only focused on domestic politics but also on gaining international legitimacy. Similarly, as outlined by Schedler, one of the reasons an authoritarian regime might hold elections is to create a foundation for maintaining power through the most civilian means possible (Croissant & Hellmann, 2018). As I mentioned earlier, the primary reason authoritarian regimes prioritize elections is to preserve their legitimacy. However, I would like to delve deeper into this topic and explain the significance of authoritarian regimes' legitimacy strategies. The literature indicates that authoritarian regimes mainly engage in elections to legitimize their rule. Even though authoritarian regimes may secure their control through elections, this period remains fraught with risks, prompting an increased focus on their legitimacy strategies. Legitimacy, in this case, provides an alternative approach for maintaining power. During election periods, despite the escalation of repression and heightened pressure on opposition, even if the authoritarian regime wins the election, it seeks to demonstrate that its authority remains legitimate, despite the harsh measures taken. In other words, the regime effectively safeguards its position. Through this approach, the regime perceives its internal policies as both lawful and morally justified, projecting this image to the public. This text indicates that, although authoritarian regimes use harsh measures during election periods, they attempt to present their power as legal and morally justified. This approach aims to preserve their position and demonstrate the legitimacy of their rule (Patane, 2019). The common characteristic of authoritarian leaders is that they strive to stay in power for as long as they can (Frantz, 2018b). In this context, I am going to define the concept of the authoritarian system and why the regime prioritizes elections. Elections are a tool for the authoritarian system, allowing the regime to maintain its power through the election mechanism. There is a simple logic here: by holding elections, the

regime demonstrates to the people that the state is governed in a democratic manner and shows that it is always ready for elections. The main goal here is to gain the trust of the people. Through the election call, the regime emphasizes the importance of elections for maintaining power (Ezrow, 2018). The analysis reveals that the primary goal of authoritarian regimes in holding elections is to preserve their power. Elections emerge as a crucial mechanism for gaining both domestic and international legitimacy, as well as for retaining political elites on their side. Moreover, regimes aim to weaken the opposition, integrate them into the system, and continue their governance through this method. As a result, for authoritarian regimes, elections serve not only the purpose of gaining democratic legitimacy but also function as a strategic tool to strengthen their power and ensure long-term stability.

1.4. Why Do Opposition Parties Participate in Elections Under Authoritarian Regimes?

After understanding why, the government participates in elections under authoritarian regimes, it is important to clarify the reasons behind the opposition's participation in elections. At first glance, everything may seem clear: the state X is governed under an authoritarian regime, fundamental human rights and freedoms are violated, and most importantly, the government secures its power through electoral fraud. On the other hand, the opposition continues its struggle and emphasizes the importance of participating in elections in a non-democratic environment.

This raises the question: why does the opposition consider it essential to participate in elections? Authoritarian regimes will not easily relinquish power and are ready to take any step necessary to preserve their legitimacy. So, what motivates the opposition? In this case, why does the opposition continue to strive for democratic change? In this section, I will explore the reasons behind the opposition's participation in elections. According to researchers Bunce and Wolchik, one of the main motivations for the opposition's participation in elections is to bring about the end of the authoritarian government. They argue that when opposition forces unite, they can through certain political strategies, bring an end to the authoritarian regime even before the election takes place. From this perspective, it becomes clear that one of the reasons for the opposition's participation in elections is to weaken the authoritarian government and transform the non-democratic environment. One of the key issues that the opposition focuses on and believes in under authoritarian regimes is coalition-building.

Howard and Roessler argue that when opposition parties come together before the elections and combine their forces, they are more likely to achieve positive results. The main goal of the opposition in forming a coalition is generally to gain more votes in elections, to fight against the authoritarian regime, or to push for more democratic reforms. Such coalitions ensure that instead of several opposition parties struggling individually, they unite their forces to confront the regime as a stronger opponent. Building an electoral coalition increases their chances of success in the elections and, consequently, provides more opportunities to exert pressure on the authoritarian government. In authoritarian regimes, the opposition's participation in elections is a demonstration of its power. When the opposition takes part in elections, it showcases its political strength and will to both society and the government. By participating in elections, the opposition signals its commitment to democratic values and principles. At the end, if the opposition wins, this is considered a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, which increases the motivation for the opposition to participate in elections for this very reason (Gandhi, 2015). Being in the opposition also means being prepared for repression and political pressures imposed by the regime. Therefore, it is essential for the opposition to always be prepared for potential negative political events. In this section, I am going to discuss the path the opposition takes during the election campaign period. The opposition's participation in elections can be framed as an indicator of their political will. However, how does the opposition demonstrate its political will during the election period? Let's examine the details: One of the most decisive stages of an election is the campaign period. Election campaigns are always under the scrutiny of the regime, as there is a high likelihood of the opposition strengthening its role during this period. As I mentioned earlier, with the opposition's potential for strengthening, authoritarian regimes are ready to apply all forms of political repression. The regime's readiness to implement harsh political repression further intensifies the opposition's determination to strengthen. By political repression, I mean actions such as the detention of candidates, the government's application of torture, and the removal of candidates from the election. Scholarly literature shows that by participating in elections and withstanding repression, the opposition proves that the government fears the elections, which, in turn, leads the regime to intensify its pressures on the opposition. Opposition forces are aware that they are on a difficult and challenging path of political responsibility. However, they always have reasons for participating in elections under authoritarian regimes. It becomes

clear that the opposition's participation in elections is not only about demonstrating its strength but also about protecting the values of electoral democracy by running candidates and exposing the true nature of the regime through its struggle against the pressures and repressions imposed by the government during the election period. Therefore, stating that election campaigns are among the periods favored by the opposition preserves the academic truth (Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2015). Scholars do not only focus on the thesis of the opposition's participation in elections but also discuss the changes the opposition could bring about through this participation. From a pragmatic perspective, even in authoritarian regimes, the government allows the opposition to participate in elections, which is a positive development. For this reason, Howard and Roessler argue that the opposition's interest in participating in elections and their ability to do so can lead to significant changes towards liberalization. The researchers' labeling of the opposition's participation in elections as a "liberalizing turning point" can be linked to the expansion of political freedoms and the promotion of the protection of fundamental democratic principles and rights. For example, in an authoritarian regime, the increasing influence of the opposition and changes in elections, if there is widespread social support and political will in society, may lead to a shift towards a more democratic orientation of the regime. Morse, in his research, views the opposition's participation in elections as a form of political struggle. According to him, politics is a type of political battle between the existing regime and the opposition, and in this struggle, one side emerges victorious. Morse's approach emphasizes the opposition's participation in elections as a means of representing democracy and freedoms, which are seen as values in authoritarian regimes. The opposition conveys this value to society through elections, spreading the political message about the importance of democracy. In authoritarian regimes, the key factor is the hope of the people. Edgel's assessment of the opposition's participation in elections can be summarized as follows: He suggests that if parties in a non-democratic regime are allowed to participate in elections, it means there is still hope. But how can we understand this hope? According to the researcher, elections, particularly multi- party systems, are essential tools for ensuring and defending the continuity of democratic systems. In other words, elections generate ongoing hope for both the opposition and the people. It is well-known that the repressive actions of regimes are merciless, yet even in such circumstances, the opposition's participation in elections increases hope for democratic change (Croissant & Hellmann, 2018).

The opposition's participation in elections always generates hope. I believe that participating in elections is a part of political struggle and simultaneously a symbol of political change. As noted by researchers, the participation of the opposition in elections creates a sense of certainty in society. This involves efforts to weaken the ruling power, promote democratic values, and fight against the regime during the election campaign. Moreover, this process allows society to maintain hope and encourages political change despite the pressure and persecution imposed by authoritarian regimes.

1.5. How Do Authoritarian Regimes Use Electoral Democracy?

In the political sphere, elections are conducted through two main methods: those held under authoritarian regimes and those held in democratic systems. In such regimes, despite the widespread falsification of elections, opposition parties still participate in the election process. However, their participation does not change the outcome. Even if opposition parties win, their victories are not officially recognized. The manipulation of election results is not limited to falsification; the regime also engages in various closed political practices to ensure the results align with its interests. For instance, the number of votes in ballot boxes can be altered, or opposition parties may face difficulties in the period leading up to the election. According to Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, regimes where the ruling party holds total dominance win elections by large margins, thereby securing their power with certainty. In these regimes, election results are often predetermined, and the opposition has little to no impact, making the role of participating parties minimal. On the other hand, more competitive authoritarian regimes differ slightly. In these regimes, opposition forces have more opportunities to engage in the political arena. Despite the various obstacles created by the government, the opposition competes in the elections, making significant challenges and, to some extent, gaining the ability to assert themselves. This enables opposition parties to be more active in the electoral process, potentially engaging with a broader electorate and continuing the struggle against the ruling government (Donno, 2013). In Azerbaijan, similar instances of election fraud have also occurred. The parliamentary elections held on September 1, 2024, were conducted in a restrictive manner by the government, completely lacking political pluralism. Serious violations were observed during the election, and during the vote count, there were questions about whether the election results were accurate, which did not meet OSCE's commitments for

democratic elections. Specifically, violations observed in the elections included allowing voters to cast their votes without presenting identification cards, the presence of very similar signatures in the voter lists, unauthorized individuals monitoring the number of voters, and multiple ballots being thrown into the ballot box at the same time. The OSCE's report on the elections specifically includes figures in its findings. Serious violations were observed in the election process, including allowing voters to vote without showing their ID cards (17 cases), similar signatures being recorded in voter lists (56 cases), unauthorized individuals interfering with voter registration (32 cases), and multiple ballots being thrown into the ballot box (26 cases). These issues raised concerns about the transparency and fairness of the election process. According to observations at polling stations, many important procedures were not fully followed during the opening ceremonies. For example, in 28 polling stations, the total number of ballots was not properly checked. In 43 polling stations, the number of ballots was either not announced or not recorded in the election commission's protocols. Additionally, in 28 polling stations, there was no check to confirm whether the stamps from the Central Election Commission (MnSK) had been pre-applied to the ballots. Another issue was that the serial numbers of the seals on the election boxes were neither announced nor recorded in any of the polling station protocols. These issues raise concerns about the transparency and fairness of the election process and cast doubt on the efficiency of the election system (Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, 2024).

1.6. How Do Authoritarian Regimes Maintain Elections?

Elections are the most powerful tool of authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the election process is considered one of the most critical and important stages for authoritarian regimes. This raises the question: how do authoritarian regimes maintain elections? Many researchers, including Levitsky and Way, have contributed to this field. According to their concept, non-democratic regimes are categorized into two groups: closed regimes and electoral regimes. In electoral regimes, authoritarian governments allow opposition and other parties to participate in elections.

Opposition parties can take part in elections without any issues in nominating their candidates. However, the results of these elections are manipulated, and the participation of the opposition remains conditional (yielding no substantial outcome). Unlike electoral

regimes, the political environment in closed regimes is far more restricted. The main feature of closed regimes is the complete suppression of electoral freedom. Such regimes are not open to any political competition, and even if elections are held, their outcomes are predetermined and known to the public beforehand. This raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the government.

Researchers further divide electoral regimes into two subcategories: hegemonic and competitive. Studies show that these categories are determined based on the political governance structure of the countries. When examining the details, identifying which category a country belongs to is not particularly difficult. For instance, Indonesia, Mexico, and Uganda in the late 1990s were considered competitive regimes, whereas Egypt under Hosni Mubarak was more hegemonic.

Iran and Singapore also fall under the hegemonic category, sharing similar characteristics with Egypt. More closed regimes, where elections and pluralism are entirely eradicated, include countries like North Korea and Saudi Arabia. In authoritarian regimes, elections are used as a tool to maintain their legitimacy; however, the results of these elections are often manipulated or entirely predetermined. This leads to a significant violation of democratic values (Shirah, 2016).

1.7. Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Hold Elections?

One of the fundamental ways to ensure democracy is through elections. However, in non-democratic societies, we see elections taking place in authoritarian regimes. In this context, the goal of the authoritarian regime is not to conduct democratic elections, but rather to use the election process to achieve its authoritarian objectives. According to research conducted by Leventoglu, Edmund J. Malesky, and (Undes) Wen, authoritarian leaders utilize elections for some distinct purposes. The five of these purposes are as follows:

1. Research indicates that one reason dictators hold elections is to assess the public's loyalty and trust in the government. Through elections, authoritarian regimes can gauge the potential support for themselves among the populace. This process helps the authoritarian leader identify the potential influence of individuals who might oppose his rule. Another reason is to evaluate the strength of opposition parties and groups. By doing so, the regime can ascertain the level of power held by these opposing forces.

2. Secondly, the regime holds elections to send a political signal to alternative candidates. It means that the regime demonstrates its strength and resilience, showing that it can maintain control through the election process. On election day, the regime bears greater political responsibility. By deploying many supporters to various regions, it can influence the voting outcomes in its favor. As a result, the public may lose faith in the opposition based on the election results, allowing the regime to protect its political power.

3. According to theorists, another objective of authoritarian leaders in holding elections is to draw in various segments of the population, including even opposing forces, to their side. This strategy aims to weaken the opposition's power and preemptively neutralize any potential dissent. Thus, this approach serves as an additional reason for authoritarian leaders to conduct elections.

4. Authoritarian leaders strive to maintain their power as much as possible. They view elections as a primary tool to minimize the role of potential protests and demonstrations in the future, aiming to silence the public. In doing so, these leaders effectively safeguard their rule.

5. Finally, one of the strategies authoritarian leaders employ to ensure the longevity of their rule is to gain political legitimacy, which they also favor. This means that the leader's victory is perceived as genuine and legitimate. By doing this, it becomes easier for them to demonstrate that they won elections in accordance with the law and to show this to the society. Winning elections sends the message to the public that "I am loved", thereby justifying their rule (Leventoglu et al., 2023).

Authoritarian regimes utilize elections not only to legitimize their power but also to attract various segments of society to their side. This aims to weaken opposition power and prevent potential dissent movements. Through elections, the regime also provides a platform to resolve disputes among internal elites, which is crucial for maintaining political stability. Thus, authoritarian leaders view the election process as an effective tool to weaken independent political struggles and maintain their control.

CHAPTER 2: ALIYEV'S REGIME IN AZERBAIJAN: VOTER TURNOUT AND OBSERVATIONS

2.1. Azerbaijan's Democratic Image in Aliyev's Speeches

In this section, I am going to analyze the statements made by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, regarding how he presents his country as "free" and "democratic," based on his interview with the BBC. Specifically, I will focus on how Aliyev discusses freedom of speech, the right to assemble, and political activity during the interview. This will help better understand the political image that Aliyev and the Azerbaijani state, under his leadership, present to the international community. The alignment of some expressions in the interviews with the country's political reality will also be taken into consideration. Ilham Aliyev's interview with the BBC took place in November 2020, during the Second Karabakh War. The main purpose of this interview was to learn about Azerbaijan's proposals regarding the Karabakh conflict and to discuss the progress of the war. However, as the interview progressed, the topic shifted away from the Karabakh conflict and focused on human rights and democracy issues in Azerbaijan.

The BBC journalist asked Ilham Aliyev why there is no free media or opposition in Azerbaijan.

The journalist mentioned that many independent sources have reported that political activity in Azerbaijan is severely limited. In response, Ilham Aliyev completely denied this question, emphasizing that there is freedom of the press, opposition, non-governmental organizations, freedom of speech, and political activity in Azerbaijan. In the following section, I am going to compare the approaches of Ilham Aliyev and the OSCE on this topic, analyzing how political activity and the electoral process are portrayed (TRT World, 2020).

2.2. Contradictions and Realities: Aliyev's Statements on Political Processes

Some international reports analyzing Azerbaijan's electoral process, the participation of the opposition, and the credibility of election results particularly those from the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) raise serious concerns about the

potential restriction of opposition participation and possible manipulation of election outcomes. These reports emphasize that a free and fair environment does not exist within Azerbaijan's electoral system.

In contrast, Ilham Aliyev and the Azerbaijani government assert that there is free political activity in the country, that the opposition is given space to operate, and that the electoral process is transparent and democratic. Aliyev's statements stand in stark contrast to the critical evaluations in OSCE reports, creating a significant contradiction between the official narrative and the political realities reflected in international assessments.

In his interview with the BBC, Ilham Aliyev stated that the political opposition in Azerbaijan operates freely, and that political competition exists. However, there is a significant contradiction between these statements and the political events that took place in 2013, an issue that will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapters. Specifically, prior to the presidential elections in that period, the arrest of one of the opposition leaders, Ilgar Mammadov, raised serious questions about the transparency of Azerbaijan's electoral and political processes. Ilham Aliyev claims that there is a free political environment in Azerbaijan and that the opposition is given the freedom to operate. However, the opposition parties' decision to boycott the 2018 presidential elections stands in stark contrast to this statement. The election boycott highlights the absence of a free and fair electoral environment in the country and the limitations placed on the opposition's ability to participate politically. The opposition's decision to boycott, due to political pressures and restrictions on political participation, calls into question the extent to which the Azerbaijani government's claims of a "free environment" align with reality. This comparison underscores a significant contrast between Ilham Aliyev's statements and the political realities in Azerbaijan, raising doubts about the transparency and fairness of the political processes in the country. Ilham Aliyev's statements, when compared to international assessments of Azerbaijan, reflect some elements characteristic of authoritarian regimes. While Aliyev claims that Azerbaijan is a "free and democratic" society, the critical evaluations by international organizations, including the OSCE, regarding elections and political freedoms sharply contradict this narrative. Election fraud, the persecution of opposition members, and the limitation of political pluralism raise significant concerns about the transparency and fairness of the political processes in Azerbaijan. This discrepancy highlights a significant gap between Aliyev's statements and the

reality of the political situation in the country. The manipulation and suppression of opposition typical of authoritarian regimes are also evident in Azerbaijan's political landscape, hindering the country's progress towards genuine democracy.

2.3. A Comparative Analysis of Authoritarian Governance in the Azerbaijan SSR and Contemporary Azerbaijan

From 1920 to 1991, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was a state governed by authoritarian principles within the structure of the Soviet Union. In this system, political power was fully concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party, while human rights, freedoms, and political liberties were severely restricted. Today, the political system operating under the leadership of Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan bears certain resemblances to the former Soviet governance. Similarities can be observed particularly in the treatment of political opponents, the control over media, and the centralization of power. This brief analysis aims to compare the Soviet period and modern Azerbaijani regime through the lens of authoritarian governance, highlighting both structural similarities and key differences between the two.

To compare the Aliyev regime with the Soviet regime, it is important to first understand the events that took place during the Soviet era and the political governance model there.

Historically, we see that under one of the most rigid and repressive leaders of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, a totalitarian regime was established. One of the key characteristics of totalitarianism is the complete control the state exerts over all sphere's politics, economy, society, and culture and the drastic reduction of individual freedoms. During Stalin's era, this control was maintained by strengthening the police regime in the country. To preserve his power and maintain his absolute decision-making authority, Stalin used the secret police the KGB to carry out governance. He elevated these institutions above the Communist Party and state bodies, making them more powerful and dominant. The secret police were directly subordinated to Stalin, and, under his orders, thousands of people were imprisoned, exiled, or executed under the label of "enemy of the people." The primary purpose of this structure was not merely to fight crime, but to suppress any discontent, criticism, or alternative thinking against the regime (Juviler & Zawadzka, 1978). When looking at modern Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev, political rights have been violated. For

example, the pressure on the opposition has been ongoing for years, serving as one of the initial examples of such violations. At the same time, the violation of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly has become one of the most prominent issues in recent years (Ergun, 2010). When examining the realities of modern Azerbaijan, it becomes evident that certain aspects of Ilham Aliyev's rule resemble the governance tactics of the Soviet era, particularly those of the Stalinist regime. Stalin relied heavily on secret police organizations primarily the KGB to maintain his power and exert complete control over society. These institutions were used to silence political opponents, create an atmosphere of fear, and suppress any voice raised against the regime. A similar approach can be observed during Ilham Aliyev's rule. The weakening of opposition parties, the restriction of freedom of assembly and expression, and the transformation of law enforcement bodies into political instruments are manifestations of this policy. From this perspective, it can be argued that although Ilham Aliyev formally preserves the appearance of democratic institutions, in practice he draws from Soviet-style governance models. The centralization of power, the systematic weakening of dissenting voices, the limitation of civil society, and the control of the media are all characteristics typical of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, and they allow for clear parallels to be drawn with the Stalin era. For a deeper understanding of the subject and to establish systematic parallels between the two distinct periods, the following table presents a comparison based on key elements of governance:

Table 1
Tools of Authoritarian Control in the USSR and Modern Azerbaijan.

| Aspect | Soviet Era (Azerbaijan SSR) | Ilham Aliyev's Era |
|---|--|---|
| Party control | The Communist Party (CP) holds complete control over the government. | The New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) holds complete control over the government. |
| Freedom of Speech | Severely restricted, with censorship and suppression of opposition. | Limited, but the state maintains control over media and public discussions. |
| Pressure on the Opposition | Severe pressure and persecution of the opposition, political prisoners. | Pressure on the opposition, violence, and restriction of political participation. |
| Media Control | Completely under control, the opposition's ability to disseminate information is fully restricted. | The state has control over the media, and independent media is limited. |
| Free Atmosphere in Society | Reign of fear and terror: People's political thoughts are suppressed, and persecution is widespread. | The state's tactics in dealing with the opposition create a climate of fear. |
| Secret Police and Pressure Organizations | The KGB and other secret police agencies were the main political tool of the state. | Law enforcement agencies are used as a political tool. |

Source: Juviler, P. H., & Zawadzka, H. J. (1978). Détente and Soviet Domestic Politics.

Source: Ergun, A. (2010). Post-Soviet political transformation in Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/ui/v7i26/f_0019854_16924.pdf

This comparison reveals that many similar governance approaches have been applied in both the Soviet era and in independent Azerbaijan. In both periods, the authorities prioritized the centralization of power and exerted significant pressure on the opposition. Freedom of assembly and expression was restricted in both cases, civil society weakened, and the ruling power maintained full control over the media. I observe that the repressive tactics used during the Soviet era have, to some extent, continued in modern Azerbaijan. It is evident that Ilham Aliyev's administration employs similar methods to suppress the opposition and weaken political rivals, much like in the Soviet period. For this reason, the use of law enforcement agencies as political tools, tight media control, and ongoing pressure on opposition forces highlight striking similarities between the current political climate in Azerbaijan and the practices of the Soviet era. This creates significant barriers to the development of an independent Azerbaijan and makes the struggle for democracy even more challenging.

2.4. The Participation Rate of the Population in Elections in Azerbaijan and the Attendance of International Observers

Over the past 25 years, Azerbaijan's electoral history has shown interesting dynamics in terms of both voter turnout and the presence of international observers. During this period, presidential and parliamentary elections have been monitored by various international organizations; however, consistency in transparency and voter participation has not been observed.

Table 2
Overview of National Elections in Azerbaijan: 1998-2024

| Election Year | Date | International Observers | Voter Turnout | Source |
|---------------|-----------------|--|---|---------------------|
| Presidential | 11 October 1998 | ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) | 77% (Based on official results, concerns about accuracy reported) | OSCE |
| Presidential | 15 October 2003 | ODIHR, OSCE | 71.23% | OSCE |
| Parliamentary | 6 November 2005 | 2,000 international observers (OSCE, CIS) | 40.47% | IPU |
| Presidential | 15 October 2008 | IEOM, ODIHR, OSCE | No official data available | European Parliament |
| Parliamentary | 7 November 2010 | OSCE | 50.14% | OSCE |
| Presidential | 9 October 2013 | ODIHR, OSCE | No official data available | OSCE, ODIHR |
| Parliamentary | 1 November 2015 | OSCE, IPU | 55.7% | IPU Parline |
| Presidential | 11 April 2018 | 894 international observers | No official data available | ODIHR |
| Parliamentary | 9 February 2020 | 883 international observers | 46.8% | OSCE |
| Presidential | 7 February 2024 | 297 international observers | No official data available | OSCE |

Source: OSCE. (1998). Presidential Election in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/d/14328.pdf>

Source: OSCE. (2003). Presidential Election in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/d/13467.pdf>

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2005). Parliamentary Elections. Retrieved from: http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2019_05.htm

Source: European Union. (2008). Presidential Elections. Retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212673/Azerbaijan-presidential-elections_13-October-2008_European-Parliament-report.pdf

Source: OSCE. (2008). Presidential Elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/5/75073.pdf>

Source: OSCE. (2013). Presidential Elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/0/110015.pdf>

Source: IPU Parline. (2015). Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/AZ/AZ-LC01/election/AZ-LC01-E20151101/>

Source: ODIHR. (2018). Presidential Elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/388580_1.pdf

Source: OSCE. (2020). Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/0/445759_0.pdf

Source: OSCE. (2024). Presidential Elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Retrieved from: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/586281_0.pdf

It is noteworthy that since the 1998 presidential election, official voter turnout figures have been reported as relatively high, with 77% in 1998 and 71.23% in 2003. However, both elections faced serious criticism from the OSCE and ODIHR regarding the credibility of these figures (OSCE, 1998), (OSCE/ODIHR, 2003a). From 2008 onwards, an interesting trend emerged. In all subsequent presidential elections, including those held in 2008, 2013, 2018 and most recently in 2024, either no official voter turnout data was released, or the data was not available from credible sources (Isler Beguin, 2008a), (OSCE/ODIHR, 2013), (OSCE, 2018) (OSCE, 2025). This lack of transparency inevitably raises concerns among observers and researchers about the integrity of the electoral process, and the reduction in available data

over time could be viewed as a step backward in terms of democratic accountability. At the same time, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of international observers. For instance, while 894 international observers were present in 2018, this number dropped to 297 in 2024. A similar pattern is visible in the parliamentary elections, where voter turnout has not followed a steady upward trajectory. In 2005, participation was only 40.47%, whereas in 2010 and 2015 it increased to 50.14% and 55.7% respectively (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006), (OSCE & ODIHR, 2011), (IPU Parline, 2016).

However, this upward trend did not continue, and in the 2020 elections, voter turnout fell again to 46.8% (OSCE, 2020). These fluctuations suggest that public engagement is not only fragile, but also heavily shaped by short-term political and social factors and that a stable participation pattern has yet to be established. When it comes to international observation, the contrast is also notable. From 2,000 observers in 2005 to 883 in 2020, a sharp decline is evident (IPU, 2005; OSCE, 2020). This may reflect both decreasing international interest and the influence of domestic conditions on the election environment. In authoritarian regimes, electoral fraud is a widespread practice. In these systems, election results are often manipulated, which contradicts the fundamental principles of democracy. The lack of transparency in the election process, fraud, and illegal interventions allow for the falsification of election outcomes. Although international organizations issue various reports on these issues, effective measures to address them are often not implemented. For instance, election observers sometimes face government pressure and other obstacles that prevent them from carrying out their work properly. Despite repeated warnings in international reports about lack of transparency and electoral fraud, authoritarian regimes appear determined to preserve their grip on power at the expense of democratic principles. This situation remains unchanged, as authoritarian governments prioritize maintaining their power over ensuring fair and legal elections.

CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

3.1. A Brief Introduction to Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

According to the international rankings, Azerbaijan is recognized as one of the countries where political freedoms are limited. The expansion of authoritarianism in Azerbaijan is largely tied to President Ilham Aliyev, who assumed power in 2003. Since then, his administration has imposed numerous political restrictions. For instance, the opposition has faced significant pressure, with their activities being severely limited, which has become a common trend. Another significant issue arising from the authoritarian rule is the growing corruption within the government, which has intensified over time. In addition to violating human rights and freedoms, the government has stripped citizens of their basic rights. Fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly have been consistently undermined. In Azerbaijan's political history, electoral fraud and voting in a politically restricted environment have been central issues. These occurrences have been observed multiple times by international monitors, who have expressed their views regarding manipulating elections. Additionally, one of the main pieces of evidence for electoral fraud was the boycott of elections by political parties whose activities had been restricted in Azerbaijan. According to the statements of political parties, participating in the elections did not offer them any advantage due to the lack of a free electoral environment. Other fact is that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers reported that in the 2024 presidential elections in Azerbaijan, the seven opposition candidates were not legitimate, as they did not express any critical views against the president or his policies during their campaigns. Consequently, OSCE stated that the election was manipulated. Currently, authoritarianism remains strong in Azerbaijan. Under Ilham Aliyev's leadership, political and civil freedoms have been restricted, corruption has spread, and political opposition has been suppressed. The 2024 presidential elections further illustrated the weakening of the regime's legitimacy and the difficulty of implementing democratic changes in the country. International observers highlighted the restricted electoral environment and the lack of genuine competition. In such a context, it seems unlikely that Azerbaijan will move away from authoritarianism and make progress toward democracy. In conclusion, as fundamental human rights are restricted in Azerbaijan, it is essential to examine these

concepts to understand what they entail and how such systems function in authoritarian countries (Freedom House, 2024).

3.2. Political freedoms

Political freedoms in a broad sense, refer to the collection of individuals' rights to express themselves, think freely, practice their religion, and gather with others (European Union, n.d.). Freedom of speech and media, fundamental concepts of political freedoms, are integral to democracy. The existence of these freedoms is essential for democracy to thrive both theoretically and practically. When these freedoms are present, citizens can express their dissenting views against the government without fear, as they have their basic human rights. This ensures that political freedoms provide a foundation for the independent functioning of law. In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, the system differs significantly. The main goal of such regimes is to limit human rights, such as freedom of speech and press, which helps prolong their power. In authoritarian systems, there is no tolerance for criticism, and the government finances and controls the media outlets they maintain under their control. In these regimes, the role of the opposition diminishes as it brings to light issues that could undermine the government's autocratic rule. In this case, authoritarian regimes, in their efforts to maintain power, further tighten control, which leads to the severe erosion of democratic values. As a result, political freedoms virtually disappear, and the regime becomes increasingly closed off (Samilo, 2024). Political freedoms can be explained within the framework of the rule of law. Freedom primarily refers to individuals being free from external influences and restrictions. The rule of law is a fundamental element in the establishment and formation of a state. If the rule of law is properly implemented in a state, it is possible to find all forms of political freedoms. This is because the rule of law serves as the main factor in the correct application of political rights in society. In such cases, the state becomes accountable before the law, ensuring the protection of political freedoms. These ideas are based on the concept of *Rechtsstaat* (Neumann, 1953). In 2023, Azerbaijan continued to face enduring human rights issues, with the government imposing significant restrictions on the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Although there were some advancements related to a high-profile torture case, incidents of torture and mistreatment in both police custody and detention facilities remained prevalent. The brutal suppression of two distinct grassroots protests

regarding environmental concerns demonstrated the authorities' intolerance for the public's legitimate expressions of concern, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the government's inadequate measures to protect environmental interests (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

3.3. Individual Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (Beitz, 2003). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights consists of 30 articles, each expressing fundamental human rights (United Nations, 2018). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when viewed not only from a political perspective but also from theoretical and legal angles, shows that we are all born equal and there are no legal differences among us; all our rights are equal. This is based on Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The second article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that discrimination based on people's political views is not allowed, meaning that everyone is free to make their political choices (United Nations, n.d.). However, in authoritarian regimes, individuals are subjected to discrimination based on their political opinions, which is considered a violation of fundamental human rights. In this situation, along with the people, opposition parties also face various challenges in their political activities and in participating in the election process. According to Article 1 of the law on the freedom of assembly in the Republic of Azerbaijan, it states: "Everyone has the right to free assembly with others, which is ensured by the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the international agreements to which the Republic of Azerbaijan is a party. The state ensures the implementation of the right to free assembly and takes appropriate measures for the peaceful and unarmed conduct of gatherings organized in accordance with this law" (Republic of Azerbaijan Legislative System, 1998). However, the implementation of this law is not permitted. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, there are several instances where the right to freedom of assembly has been restricted. For example, on October 19, 2019, a rally organized by the National Council encountered numerous restrictions. In order to prevent people from attending the rally, the authorities temporarily suspended the operation of metro stations. The main reason for this action was to block the route for those heading to the protest. During the rally, Ali Karimli, the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, was subjected to violence by the police and detained. After this incident, Freedom House expressed its concern about the

rally held in Azerbaijan. Based on Freedom House's statement, it is reported that preventing the rally is a violation of Azerbaijan's laws. The most evident example of this is the violence against the rally participants, including the violation of fundamental human rights (Freedom House, 2019b). One of the main issues of human rights is the safety and security of individuals. People should not be subjected to repression or pressure due to their differing political views. This contradicts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as stated in Article 5. However, contrary to this law, it is often observed that individuals are subjected to repression and political pressure. The concept of political repression is rooted in the fact that a government, unable to tolerate critical views from the opposition, employs measures to undermine their power and restrict their political activities as a form of strict policy. In authoritarian regimes, those in power implement such measures to prolong the longevity of their rule. As a result, the number of political prisoners increases, human rights and freedoms are severely violated, and repression against the opposition expands. This is considered one of the most severe forms of political repression (United Nations, 1948). This situation can be seen in many authoritarian regimes. Azerbaijan is not an exception when it comes to the implementation of repressive measures. In the country, instances of political repression include arrests against dissenting views, restrictions on freedom of expression, and violations of citizens' rights. In particular, the illegal imprisonment of individuals who criticize the government stands out as one of the most evident examples of this situation. The imprisonment of individuals subjected to political repression in Azerbaijan is an example of the government's implementation of harsh measures and violations of rights against the opposition. Political repression in Azerbaijan has significantly increased since 2024. This rise reflects the government's intolerance towards independent views. As a result, the number of people arrested is growing. The emergence of independent opinions leads to the punishment of academics and opposition activists based on their political views. Young professionals, especially doctoral students, are penalized for their political activities. In the second half of 2024, well-known individuals like Bahruz Samadov and Iqbal Abilov lost their freedom for harshly criticizing the government. They were unjustly imprisoned under certain provisions of the criminal code. Additionally, former diplomat Emin Ibrahimov, economist Farid Mehralizade, and opposition activist Tofiq Yaqublu are also victims of these arrests. These individuals have tried to express their views in society. Academic Gubad Ibadoglu has been

placed under house arrest for defending his rights. He is recognized as the founder of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Movement and engages in discussions on political matters. Such pressures not only lead to violations of rights but also impact the country's political environment. The measures taken by the government aim to obstruct democratic development. Consequently, the gross violation of rights and freedoms raises questions about the well-being of the people (Human Rights Watch, 2025).



CHAPTER 4: ELECTORAL HISTORY OF AZERBAIJAN

4.1. The Collapse of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan's First Presidential Term (1991)

In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of the independence movement in Azerbaijan and led the country into a new political phase. This period is also characterized by the holding of the first presidential elections in Azerbaijan's history, representing a crucial stage in determining the legal foundations for the country's recognition as an independent state. In October 1991, the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of Azerbaijan laid the official foundation for the birth of an independent state. This decision marked a significant milestone in Azerbaijan's history and occurred in parallel with the collapse of the Soviet Union. On August 30, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted the Constitutional Act on the Restoration of the State Independence of Azerbaijan, officially restoring the country's independence. This decision became a crucial legal step, ensuring Azerbaijan's recognition as an independent state in the international sphere. The Constitutional Act on the State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan states: "On May 28, 1918, the Azerbaijan National Council adopted the Declaration of Independence, restoring the long-standing traditions of Azerbaijan's statehood and laying the foundation for an independent state. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) implemented its foreign and domestic policies through institutions such as a parliament, government, and other independent state structures. However, in 1920, Soviet Russia forcibly ended Azerbaijan's independence and annexed the country once again. In 1991, Azerbaijan restored its state independence, which was recognized as the continuation of the principles of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Thus, Azerbaijan was recognized as an independent state in the international arena" (Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1991).

The first presidential elections in the history of Azerbaijan were held on September 8, 1991. The winner of these elections was Ayaz Mutellibov, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. Ayaz Mutellibov won the election with 98.5% of the votes and became the first president of independent Azerbaijan (Radio Liberty, 2013). However, even though Ayaz Mutellibov was the president, there was no peace in Azerbaijan, as constant political dissatisfaction and the lack of stability were escalating the current situation (Hille, 2010). These events had a negative impact on Ayaz Mutalibov's presidency.

As a result, he resigned from the presidency in 1992. There were several key political reasons for Ayaz Mutalibov's resignation. He was unable to maintain political stability in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and his failures in the ongoing battles, along with Azerbaijan's military and political weakness compared to Armenia, led to sharp criticism from the public. Citizens united to demand the president's resignation and a change in leadership. As a result, Ayaz Mutalibov submitted his resignation in the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan, saying, "I do not want to shed the blood of my people" (Deseret News, 1992). In these circumstances, the leader of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, Abulfaz Elchibey, expressed his opinion on the events, stating that Ayaz Mutalibov was unable to fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to him, failing to defend the land and the people, and violating his oath (Goldberg, 1992). These events demonstrate the significant changes that took place in Azerbaijan's political life following Ayaz Mutalibov's presidency. His resignation came because of political instability in the country and failures in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This situation also reflected the unmet expectations of the Azerbaijani people and their desire for stronger leadership. Consequently, Azerbaijan's future political direction and relations began to take on a new shape.

4.2. Abulfaz Elchibey's Democratic Government (1992)

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan there was no specific political movement or organization except the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan. The prominent figure of the Turkic world, always standing by his people and supporting Azerbaijan's independence, Abulfaz Elchibey founded the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party on June 16, 1989. Abulfaz Elchibey always emphasized the importance of the political freedom and asserted that democracy would prevail in Azerbaijan. Since the party was founded on the values of democracy, the primary issue was ensuring that political struggle took place in a multi-party system rather than a single-party one. These ideas were clearly reflected in the program of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party. Recognizing these values, the people of Azerbaijan elected Abulfaz Elchibey as the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on June 7, 1992. He came to power together with his party. This election, as it was the result of the free choice of the Azerbaijani Turks, carried significant importance for the history of Azerbaijan (Sert, 2020). In the history of Azerbaijan, democratic elections were held for the first time in 1992, and

because of these elections, Abulfaz Elchibey was elected president by the will of the people. This was an important step for Azerbaijan, as it allowed people to express their will through free voting. During his one-year presidency, Elchibey took significant steps to ensure economic freedom and improve the social welfare of the population. One of his main goals was to establish democracy, and for this, he took a series of important political actions (Abdurahmanlı, 2024). Abulfaz Elchibey, as the leader of the APF, was nominated as the movement's single candidate in the 1992 presidential elections. He won the election with 54% of the vote, becoming the new leader of the country. His victory was significant not only for Azerbaijan's independence but also for political changes in the post-Soviet space. Elchibey was seen as the first elected leader in the region to openly oppose communism and defend democratic principles. During the APF's rule, important steps were taken towards forming democratic institutions, but this process could not continue fully. Various internal and external factors, including the Nagorno-Karabakh war, economic difficulties, and the influence of political opponents, hindered the full implementation of reforms. Nevertheless, the APF period remains an important stage in Azerbaijan's transition to democracy, as it was the first time that power was formed based on the people's choice. In 1992-1993, Azerbaijan, under the APF, became one of the first post-Soviet countries to attempt a transition to democracy. However, while this process was more successful in the Baltic states, internal political struggles and regional conflicts in Azerbaijan interrupted democratic transformation. Despite this, the APF period set a precedent for Azerbaijan moving away from authoritarianism. Even though the APF's rule was short, its influence lasted for a long time. During this time, political activity in society increased, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were established, and the first examples of independent media emerged. However, due to unstable political conditions and the inability of the government to consolidate power, the country switched to a different governance model in 1993. This shows that for democracy to be sustainable, political will is important, but social and economic stability is also crucial (Ozturk, 2013). Elchibey's victory in the 1992 presidential elections holds significant importance as it marked Azerbaijan's first democratic elections. This event allowed for the first steps toward transitioning from an authoritarian regime to democracy in the country. During this period, the prominence of the people will signify a crucial stage in Azerbaijan's political life. This election became an important milestone in Azerbaijan's journey toward democracy.

4.3. Heydar Aliyev's Governance (1993)

The 1993 presidential elections had a significant impact on Heydar Aliyev's rise to power in Azerbaijan. These elections were held under the influence of political tensions and conflicts of the time. The political atmosphere of that period also gave rise to various opinions regarding the transparency and fairness of the election results. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was one of the most contentious and sensitive issues in Azerbaijan's history. During that period, the war and gaps in the frontlines disrupted political stability in the country, leading to widespread unrest. After Azerbaijan gained its independence, Heydar Aliyev became the leader of the New Azerbaijan Party in 1993 (New Azerbaijan Party, n.d.). With the end of Elchibey's presidency, the power in Azerbaijan was consolidated under the control of the New Azerbaijan Party. As Elchibey left Baku and moved to his hometown, Keleki village, in Nakhchivan, the National Parliament transferred all his powers to Heydar Aliyev. As a result, in the presidential elections held on October 3, 1993, Heydar Aliyev was elected as the President of Azerbaijan, receiving 99% of the votes (Karimov, 2007). The instability allowed rebellious forces within Azerbaijan to expand their influence. In 1993, as these forces advanced toward Baku, President Abulfaz Elchibey was forced to leave the capital. His removal from office created a political vacuum, which Heydar Aliyev filled by assuming the presidency (Blakkisrud, 1999). Heydar Aliyev, who served for many years in various strategic positions, including as a member of the Soviet Union's Politburo and head of Azerbaijan's security agencies, took advantage of the political instability and power vacuum in the country to seize the position of interim president in 1993. In the presidential elections of October 1993, he significantly limited political competition, allowing only officially recognized opposition, and thus sought to strengthen his political position. Aliyev, drawing inspiration from the Soviet era, made statements claiming broad support in the elections. After the elections, he consolidated power by taking control of the parliament, mass media outlets, and security services, centralizing state governance in his hands. He used this power to secure his political dominance and suppress the activities of opposition parties. Furthermore, he imposed strict restrictions on independent media and trade unions, aiming to weaken democratic institutions (Democracy Web Comparative Studies in Freedom, 2024).

4.4. Heydar Aliyev's Second Election as President (1998)

The next presidential elections in the history of the Republic of Azerbaijan took place on October 11, 1998. These elections could have marked a new beginning for Azerbaijan's political future. However, their outcome raised serious concerns. Restrictions on competition and lack of transparency harmed election integrity. Reports from the OSCE and the U.S. Department of State confirmed that the 1998 elections did not meet democratic standards. According to the report by the U.S. Department of State any local and international observers performed their duties during the 1998 presidential election to assess the conditions under which the elections were held. Six candidates competed for the presidency. In Azerbaijan's case, opposition parties decided to boycott the election in 1998. On October 11, 1998, multiple election violations were recorded, making it a controversial moment in Azerbaijan's electoral history. One of the most common electoral violations globally is the simultaneous stuffing of multiple ballots into election boxes, and the results of the final vote raised questions about whether these elections were conducted in a democratic manner. The same incident was repeated in these elections as well. The most concerning issue was the increasing restrictions placed on OSCE observers during the vote counting process, which decreased the transparency of the elections. According to the Central

Election Commission, Heydar Aliyev won with 76% of the votes (Rubin, 1998). The 1998 Presidential Elections in Azerbaijan faced legal violations, which were noted not only by the U.S. Department of State but also by the OSCE. The OSCE paid special attention to these elections by sending 148 observers to Baku. As a result, they observed 643 polling stations and recorded various irregularities. The OSCE enhanced the credibility of its report by quantifying the violations in percentage terms. For example, the presence of unauthorized individuals in polling stations was recorded at 16%, while procedural violations in the ballot papers were observed at a rate of 11.2%. One of the most crucial stages of the elections, the counting of votes, revealed discrepancies between the number of signatures on the voter lists and the number of ballots in the ballot boxes. Furthermore, observers recorded clear evidence of ballot stuffing in at least seven polling stations. Overall, significant legal violations occurred during both the voting and counting phases of the election process, raising doubts about the fairness of the elections (OSCE, 1998). Both the OSCE and the U.S. Department of State documented significant irregularities in the 1998 presidential elections, highlighting

concerns about transparency and fairness. Electoral fraud observed during the voting and vote-counting processes, restrictions imposed on observers, and the illegal stuffing of ballots into ballot boxes cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election results. All these factors raised serious questions about the fairness of Heydar Aliyev's re-election as president.

4.5. Presidential Elections (2003)

Five years after 1998, the next presidential elections in Azerbaijan were held in October 2003. These elections could have marked the beginning of a new era for the country, but the results of this election did not differ from the previous ones. The 2003 elections did not differ significantly from the 1998 elections in terms of their overall scenario. However, one notable aspect stood out. Reports of violence against individuals following the presidential elections, as well as arrests based on political beliefs, raised serious concerns. According to a report issued by the U.S. Department of State after the elections, these persecutions were criticized, and concerns were expressed regarding the political processes unfolding in Azerbaijan. In addition to the violations of political freedoms, electoral fraud also emerged as a significant concern. According to the U.S. Department of State's statement, the electoral process did not meet international standards in several aspects. The report highlighted instances of voter intimidation on election day and the illegal stuffing of ballot boxes, which raised questions about the credibility and legitimacy of the election results (Ereli, 2003). Research indicates that although the 2003 elections were similar to the 1998 elections in terms of basic procedures, the observed legal violations and politically motivated persecutions revealed the weaknesses of the country's democratic institutions. These violations resulted in the restriction of voters' rights and the marginalization of opposition candidates, ultimately contributing to the consolidation of political power. Such circumstances underscore the urgent need for reforms to ensure that future elections are conducted in a transparent and fair manner. The OSCE prepared a final report on the transparency and fairness of the presidential elections held in Azerbaijan, similar to the report from 1998. Upon reviewing the report, it is noted that the most widespread frauds in the elections included the mass stuffing of ballot boxes, the use of pre-filled ballots, ballots without serial numbers, issuing ballots to individuals not registered in the voter lists, and multiple voting instances. These issues seriously undermine the integrity and transparency of the elections. According to

the results of the Central Election Commission (CEC), the results of the presidential elections held in Azerbaijan are as follows:

1. Ilham Aliyev – 1,860,346 votes (76.84%)
2. Isa Gambar – 338,145 votes (13.97%)
3. Lala Shovket Hadjiyeva – 87,523 votes (3.62%)

After these results were confirmed by the CEC, the candidate who received the most votes were Ilham Aliyev, securing 76.84% of the total votes. His closest rival, Isa Gambar, a representative of opposition parties, garnered 13.97% of the votes and placed second. In third place was Lala Shovket Hadjiyeva, another opposition-supported candidate, with 3.62% of the votes. Other candidates received significantly fewer votes and had the lowest results. The final election results sparked various controversies and criticisms, particularly due to serious concerns about observed fraudulent activities during the election process. The 2003 presidential elections further demonstrated the weakness of democratic processes in Azerbaijan, the inequality of the political environment, and the widespread occurrence of electoral fraud. The pressures and violations that occurred after the elections led to the strengthening of the ruling power while further weakening the opposition (OSCE/ODIHR, 2003).

4.6. Ilham Aliyev's Second Rise to Power (2008)

As indicated in the previous paragraphs, the 1998 and 2003 elections in Azerbaijan were marked not only by electoral violations but also by increasing pressure on the opposition, media manipulation, and continued political repression. During these years, the Azerbaijani government's interference with electoral freedom became significantly stronger. In recent years, the intensification of pressure on the opposition has created serious obstacles for the existence of a free opposition within the country. This situation led to a reduction in the role of political parties during elections, and their diminished influence prevented political changes from taking place. Although it is crucial for opposition parties and other forces to participate in political competition to gain political advantage during elections, the lack of these freedoms played a significant role in this process. The media continued to be under constant pressure. These events had a negative impact on both the elections and the role of the opposition (Walker, 2012). The 2008 presidential election was notably more subdued

compared to previous elections. In this election, the level of political competition, the organization of pre-election campaigns, and the hosting of political debates on television were all at a lower level. The public's enthusiasm and excitement about the election were not strong. This situation indicated that the opportunities for political competition were limited. As expected, opposition parties boycotted the election, believing that the results would have no real impact. This confirmed the absence of a serious political contest (Isler Beguin, 2008b). Isa Gambar, the leader of the Musavat Party, called the 2008 presidential elections in Azerbaijan a "tragedy" and announced the decision to boycott the election. He emphasized that it was impossible for the elections to be free and fair, due to the lack of human rights and freedoms in Azerbaijan. Gambar stated that this situation rendered the election process invalid, and that the opposition had therefore decided not to participate (Reuters, 2008). Many experts believe even if the opposition forces had not boycotted the election and decided to participate, Ilham Aliyev's chances of victory would still have been high. This viewpoint is mainly based on the fact that the opposition had failed to gain sufficient political support in the elections held before 2008, which led to a loss of trust among the public. As a result, the opposition parties were unable to have a significant impact on the electoral process, and this allowed Ilham Aliyev to maintain his hold on power (Nichol, 2008). In this context, it would be appropriate to examine why the opposition boycotted the 2008 presidential election. First, the official campaign period was reduced from 60 days to just 28 days, which raised significant concerns. The shortening of the campaign period created serious obstacles for opposition parties and independent candidates. Naturally, the loss of 32 days limited the candidates' opportunities to meet with voters, reducing the time available for media and television appearances to present themselves to the electorate. This undermined the effectiveness of the campaign and further weakened the opposition's chances of success in the election. The second reason was the restriction of the freedom of assembly. Leading up to the election, opposition parties and independent candidates anticipated facing serious obstacles in organizing rallies, holding open meetings with voters, and spreading their political messages. As a result, they saw boycotting the election as the only viable option. In this context, the opposition concluded that participating in the election would be meaningless and would only serve to legitimize a fraudulent process, leading them to decide to boycott the election (Heinrich et al., 2011). The OSCE, as in previous years, presented its final report on the

elections held in Azerbaijan in 2008. According to the results presented in the report, serious violations were recorded during the opening and voting stages of the election. These violations included the failure to announce and record the serial numbers of election box seals (17%), the failure to account for and cancel unused voter registration certificates (18%), the failure to count ballots and check their stamping (20%), and the failure to announce the number of ballots received and include it in the protocol (28%). As a result, serious questions have arisen regarding the conduct and transparency of the 2008 elections. The violations mentioned in the report presented by the OSCE have cast doubt on the fairness and alignment of the election process with democratic principles (OSCE, 2008).

CHAPTER 5: ELECTIONS AND PERSECUTION: THE CASE OF ILGAR MAMMADOV

5.1. Ilham Aliyev's Third Presidential Election: The arrest of Ilgar Mammadov (2013)

The 2013 Azerbaijani presidential election marked a significant milestone in the country's political life. In this election, Ilham Aliyev was elected president for the third time and continued to remain in power. However, the electoral process, particularly regarding transparency, fairness, and democratic conduct, sparked widespread debates both domestically and internationally. International observers and organizations thoroughly examined the extent to which the elections adhered to democratic principles. Prior to the 2013 presidential elections, the government continued to exert political pressure on opposition forces. One of these pressures was the arrest of Ilgar Mammadov, the leader of the REAL Movement, before the October elections. Ilgar Mammadov is a well-known politician in Azerbaijan and the founder of the Republican Alternative (REAL) Movement. Before the 2013 presidential elections, one of the individuals who attracted the government's attention was Ilgar Mammadov. In 2024, he published the book "The Council of Europe - When Icarus Followed the Flight Instructions" to analyze his arrest in 2012 and 2013, as well as the political processes of that period. A section of the book provides a detailed account of his imprisonment and the significant events of that time. Referring to this book can be useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the events of 2012-2013. Ilgar Mammadov states in his book that in October 2012, the government informed and told him not to run as a candidate in the upcoming presidential elections and not to participate in the elections. After this incident, Ilgar Mammadov received two more warnings, and obstacles were created to prevent his candidacy in the presidential elections. He describes the events as follows: The 2013 presidential elections could have played a crucial role for the REAL Movement. Through this opportunity, the movement could have attracted public attention, positioned itself as a frontrunner, and increased its visibility. Thus, could have allowed it to compete for a mandate in the next parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015. However, events did not unfold as expected, and both Ilgar Mammadov and the movement were unable to achieve their goals before these elections. The government had warned Ilgar Mammadov twice not to participate in the elections. Following this, on February 4, 2013, he was arrested (Mammadov, 2024).

5.2. Ismayilli Event's

During the "Ismayilli events," the arrest of Ilgar Mammadov was, according to the government, the main reason. On January 23, 2013, in the city of Ismayilli, a significant public protest erupted as people took to the streets in response to the local governor's alleged misconduct. The protests were triggered by a car accident that took place on the same day. Reportedly, during the incident, a close associate of the governor, who was intoxicated, attacked a citizen and used inappropriate language, insulting the individual's dignity and honor. Following this, residents of Ismayilli targeted businesses owned by the governor's family and clashed with law enforcement. As a result, citizens demanded the immediate resignation of the governor and took to the streets to prevent such incidents from happening again. The day after the incident, Ilgar Mammadov traveled to Ismayilli to gather information about the events. At the time of his arrival, a peaceful protest was taking place in the city. Reportedly, approximately 20 minutes after Mammadov reached Ismayilli, he was detained by the police and taken to the station. The relevant authorities informed him of the situation, issued a warning, and subsequently released him. However, a few days after the Ismayilli events, Mammadov was deprived of his freedom under Article 220.1 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code "organization of or participation in mass riots accompanied by violence, looting, arson, destruction of property, use of firearms and explosives, or armed resistance against authorities" (Amnesty International, 2013). Mammadov's lawyer stated that no evidence had been presented to prove his involvement in any criminal act. Additionally, these events took place on January 23 and concluded on the same day. Thus, raises serious questions about the legitimacy of Mammadov's arrest. As summarized in the previous text, it would be appropriate in the next phase to analyze the political motives behind this arrest. Ilgar Mammadov's arrest can be understood in this context in two ways:

1. As Mammadov states in his book, prior to the October 2013 elections, the government openly communicated that Mammadov should withdraw from the presidential race. However, analyzing Mammadov's perspective, it becomes evident that he was eager to participate in the elections, as his goal was to increase the influence of his movement and gain political strength for the REAL movement in order to secure a mandate in the 2015 parliamentary elections. However, the Ismayilli events also took place, which disrupted both the REAL movement and Mammadov's plans.

2. Following this, the Ismayilli events occurred, and Mammadov is accused and deprived of his freedom, ultimately being excluded from the presidential elections.

When analyzing the events, it becomes clear that Mammadov's arrest was political and aimed at blocking his candidacy in the upcoming elections scheduled for October. The government took various political measures to prevent Mammadov from participating in the elections. As both Mammadov and his lawyers claimed, his arrest was part of political pressure, with no criminal activities involved. Additionally, this event was a move to prevent the rise of the REAL movement and its potential success in future elections. In this context, Mammadov's arrest and the prohibition of his participation in the elections were intended to suppress political opposition and weaken democratic influence, a characteristic feature of authoritarian regimes.

5.3. The Political Imprisonment of Ilgar Mammadov: International Advocacy and Legal Implications

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been engaged in a long-standing campaign against the imprisonment of Azerbaijani political activist Ilgar Mammadov, calling for his release. Mammadov was arrested in 2013 for observing riots in the city of Ismayilli and was falsely charged with inciting mass violence, leading to a seven-year prison sentence. Amnesty International emphasized that Mammadov's detention was politically motivated and that he had been subjected to human rights violations. In its 2014 ruling, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) determined that Mammadov's arrest and conviction violated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and called on Azerbaijan to release him immediately. The Court found that there was no evidence to support the charges against Mammadov and that the true purpose of his detention was to silence and punish him for criticizing the government. Despite this ruling, the Azerbaijani authorities have continuously refused to release Mammadov, disregarding the Court's judgment. As a result, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations condemned Azerbaijan for failing to comply with the ECtHR's ruling and called for the initiation of an infringement procedure under Article 46.4 of the ECHR. Article 46.4 provides a mechanism for holding states accountable when they fail to comply with the Court's judgments. The Committee of Ministers has called on Azerbaijan to apply this procedure and demanded Mammadov's immediate

release. This case highlights the challenges in upholding international law and human rights, as well as the importance of international pressure. It also underscores the serious legal and political consequences of Azerbaijan's failure to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights and international legal principles (Amnesty International & Human Rights Watch, 2017).

5.4. The Article 46 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

Article 46 of the European Convention on Human Rights establishes the obligation of states to comply with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and to take measures in accordance with these judgments. It also requires the adoption of individual and/or general measures within the domestic legal system to remedy violations and their effects. For instance, in the case of Ilgar Mammadov, after the ECtHR found that Azerbaijan had violated Mammadov's rights, the Court stated that the state must not only provide just satisfaction to the applicant but also take additional measures to eliminate the violation and address its consequences. The case of Ilgar Mammadov reflects the issue of the Azerbaijani government's failure to comply with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments and the resulting international pressure. In 2014, the ECHR determined that Mammadov's imprisonment was politically motivated and that the Azerbaijani government would not comply with the court's ruling to release him (European Court of Human Rights, 2014). The court emphasized that the primary purpose of Mammadov's detention was to silence his criticisms of the government. This case is a significant example within the framework of Article 46 of the ECHR, as this article obligates states to comply with the court's decisions and to ensure the rectification of any violations.

5.5. Ilgar Mammadov's Return to Freedom

Ilgar Mammadov's release after more than five years in prison was a manifestation of justice prevailing. A prominent opposition leader and the head of the REAL Party of Azerbaijan, Mammadov was arrested in 2013 for political reasons and had faced condemnation from international organizations. Despite the lengthy court battles and challenges, Ilgar Mammadov was released on August 13, 2018, after serving over five years of his seven-year sentence. This decision garnered significant attention from Europe, particularly from the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, who

praised the ruling. Jagland highlighted that such decisions should not only target political prisoners but also focus on those who have committed real crimes. The release of Mammadov stands as a testament to the importance of human rights and freedoms, reaffirming the value of justice and fairness in such cases. The European Council's support for Mammadov emphasized the significance of adherence to human rights norms and judicial integrity (RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service, 2018b). After being released from prison, Ilgar Mammadov stated in an interview with the "Voice of America" platform that his release was a significant event in Azerbaijan's political history. Ilgar Mammadov, after being released from prison, emphasized in his interview that this event was a rare precedent in Azerbaijan's judicial history. He stated that all his rights had been restored, highlighting the significance of this development (Ferhadoglu, 2020). Analyzing this event in the context of international law and human rights, it becomes evident that the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), under Article 46, had recommended the Azerbaijani government address the issue of political prisoners. In conclusion, Mammadov's release after being imprisoned for five years holds great significance in terms of protecting human rights. Mammadov's release was not merely an individual case but also an example of Azerbaijan facing international pressure regarding human rights and political freedoms. Following Ilgar Mammadov's release, the U.S. Department of State issued its position on the matter. In a statement published on its official website, the Department expressed strong approval of Mammadov's release, emphasizing their recognition of the significance of this decision. The Department's stance serves as a clear indication of its commitment to political freedoms and human rights. This reaction further highlights the U.S. government's sensitivity to issues related to political rights and human dignity, reinforcing its ongoing support for such fundamental values in international relations (Nauert, 2018).

As a result, the arrest of Ilgar Mammadov in 2013 became a significant issue not only within Azerbaijan but also in the international political sphere. His imprisonment was seen as more than just a violation of his personal rights; it raised concerns about the compatibility of Azerbaijan's political climate with democratic principles. Despite spending a long period in prison, Mammadov's continued resistance against the authoritarian regime became a symbol of political opposition. His fight was not only for the restoration of his own rights but also an important step towards changing the political landscape within the country in line with the

objectives of the REAL party, of which he was the leader. In this context, Mammadov's struggle can be viewed on a broader scale. His personal achievements and the successes of his party represent not only a victory for Azerbaijan but also a manifestation of the ongoing global fight for democracy and human rights. His arrest and subsequent release after five years underscored Azerbaijan's obligations to international law and human rights standards. Mammadov's release also marked a significant signal for the country's future democratic development. His struggle was not limited to personal freedom but also highlighted the broader importance of democracy in Azerbaijan's society. Furthermore, Mammadov's journey over the past five years exemplified the wider demand for freedom and justice within the Azerbaijani society. His efforts also reminded the global community of the need for reforms within Azerbaijan's political system.

5.6. Azerbaijan's 2018 Presidential Election: The Scenario of 2013

The 2018 elections did not differ significantly from the 2013 elections. Fraud and cases of unfair conduct of the elections were similar to the 2013 election scenario. In the 2018 presidential elections, the only difference was the change of the date. President Ilham Aliyev announced on February 5 that the elections would be held on April 11, six months earlier than originally planned (Freedom House, 2018). The opposition parties, staying true to their boycott of the elections in 2013, also distanced themselves from these elections. As mentioned in the previous section, according to research, the boycott of the elections positively impacted the ruling party and its leader, making the boycott unsuccessful. Ilham Aliyev was elected President of the Republic of Azerbaijan for the fourth consecutive time (RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service, 2018a). As in previous years, the OSCE evaluated the 2018 presidential elections with its observation mission. It was not surprising that, according to the OSCE's report, the elections were held in an environment far from free competition. During the election process, a situation emerged that harmed one of the fundamental principles of democracy free and fair competition. The opposition candidates did not openly criticize the president, which indicated that the elections were held in an environment far from competitive and free. This situation did not contribute to the transparency and fairness of the elections (Freedom House, 2019a). In summary, no significant difference was observed between the 2013 and 2018 presidential elections in terms of their fundamental nature. Both elections were characterized by a lack of a

free and competitive environment, legal and institutional restrictions, and the absence of opposition participation, as reported by international observers and independent sources. Reports from the OSCE and other international organizations criticized the electoral process for failing to meet democratic election standards. These factors raised questions regarding the legitimacy of the elections and their impact on political pluralism, indicating that the political environment in the country remained unchanged.



CHAPTER 6: REAL PARTY'S FORMATION AND POLITICAL PATH

6.1. The REAL Party and Ilgar Mammadov

This section now shifts focus to the REAL Party, another political organization that holds significant importance in Azerbaijan's political landscape. The Republican Alternative (REAL) was established in 2009 on the initiative of modern-minded, new-generation politicians. One of the main reasons for the party's formation was the public dissatisfaction with the abolition of the constitutional restriction on "a person being elected president more than twice" through a referendum in Azerbaijan. The party believes that this decision created an opportunity for one individual to remain in power for an extended period and undermined the fundamental values of the Republic. The organization adopts an open stance toward modern, free, and democratic political ideas. Republican Alternative states that its goal is to establish the rule of the people, serve the people, and implement serious democratic reforms while preserving democratic values. REAL views the judicial system as a priority issue in the country. The organization's position on this matter is to ensure the proper application of laws, the realization of justice, and to direct these laws to play the right role in the lives of citizens (Republican Alternative (REAL), 2025a). Ilgar Mammadov, as the leader of the Republican Alternative Party, embodies the ideals of a new generation of politicians. His life journey reflects the story of a generation striving to establish a free and just state, create a transparent and competitive system, and build a progressive society. From a young age, Mammadov actively participated in political processes, dedicating himself to addressing societal needs at the expense of personal interests. His accumulated political experience and commitment to his ideals have contributed to the formation of the Republican Alternative Party, supported by a professional and intellectually capable team. He obtained his master's degree in political science and economics from the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary (Republican Alternative (REAL), 2025b).

6.2. The REAL Party and Its Distinctive Features

The party stands out in Azerbaijan's political history with its distinctive characteristics. One such feature is the party's clear articulation of its goals and objectives, signaling its intention to take concrete actions to achieve them. Despite being active within the country for 16 years, REAL has managed to gain political influence and recognition since its

establishment. In contrast, other opposition forces seeking to develop, as well as opposition parties that have been active since the 1990s, have failed to achieve this. This is one of the key factors that differentiates REAL. There are significant differences between the opposition of the 1990s and the 2000s, particularly with the innovative, youthful, and ambitious characteristics of the current opposition. Another distinguishing feature of this movement is the extensive political experience of its founders and current leadership. As mentioned earlier, Ilgar Mammadov, having received his education in Europe, brings considerable expertise in this field. REAL's goal is to establish a consistent and sustainable democratic system that positively impacts the political, social, and other spheres of people's lives. One of the movement's priorities is the establishment of a parliamentary republic rather than a presidential one. Since REAL is the first to pursue this initiative within Azerbaijan's opposition, it is another key aspect that sets it apart. REAL, has never intended to form a political alliance with other opposition parties, even though it does not engage in hostile or overly harsh relations with them. For example, during the 2013 elections, when other opposition forces joined the National Council, REAL refused this proposal. This decision was positively evaluated by REAL supporters. It is important to note that the demographic supporting REAL primarily consists of the middle-aged population in Azerbaijan, which is why representatives of the new generation tend to favor movements like REAL, rather than traditional, old opposition parties. This focus allows REAL to concentrate on engaging with the youth. The year 2013 was politically challenging for both REAL and Ilgar Mammadov. Mammadov sought to be a presidential candidate but had his proposal rejected by the Central Election Commission. This negatively impacted the party's activities. (Sultanova, 2014). In Azerbaijan, elections are a crucial path for political change, and thus, I believe REAL's participation in elections should be supported. The next section will delve into further details regarding REAL Party and its election strategies.

6.3. The Importance of Electoral Participation

Since its establishment, the REAL Party has emphasized the importance of the election system in Azerbaijan, asserting that success can only be achieved through elections and that the level of political participation in society can be raised through the electoral process. This focus on elections is reflected in the party's program. Specifically, the first

section of the program highlights the party's goal to strengthen the distribution of power in both presidential and parliamentary elections. This makes clear that elections are one of the central issues that the party is focused on (Republican Alternative (REAL), 2024). In a 2020 interview with Voice of America, Ilgar Mammadov underlined the critical role of electoral participation in fostering political engagement. He stressed the need to broaden society's scope for political activism and described voting as a fundamental political obligation that must not be overlooked. Mammadov stated that participation in elections is the responsibility of opposition parties and all actors in the political process. The REAL Party prioritizes raising awareness about the importance of electoral participation and increasing political engagement within society. The party leader emphasized that fostering a democratic election culture in Azerbaijan is only possible through active political participation. He emphasized that boycotting elections is not the right approach and that participation in elections is essential. Engaging in the electoral process is the most effective way to influence political change and ensure a democratic environment. According to him, abstaining from elections limits citizens' opportunities to exercise their political rights and use their voting power (Ferhadoglu, 2020).

6.4. A Brief Introduction to the REAL Party's Participation in the 2024 Parliamentary Elections

This part of the thesis examines the REAL Party's decision to participate in parliamentary elections. The REAL Party has sought to promote active public participation in political processes through participation in elections. This approach differs from that of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, which boycotted the 2024 parliamentary elections (Joshua Kucera, 2024). The parliamentary elections held on September 1, 2024, proved to be notably different for opposition parties. Both the Musavat and REAL parties decided to participate in the elections to test their political strength. REAL Party, emphasizing the importance of participation, put forward 12 candidates, (REAL Platform, 2024) while Musavat Party ran with 25 candidates. Based on the election results, REAL Party succeeded in securing one seat in the National Assembly of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Ismayil, 2024). In the parliamentary elections Erkin Qadirli, a member of the REAL Political Committee, represented the party as a candidate from the 16th Yasamal Second Electoral District. The Republican Alternative Party not only participated in these elections but also successfully secured a seat in the National

Assembly (Farhadova, 2024). As stated in the protocol of the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan, Qadirli was elected as a deputy to the National Assembly from this district. (Central Election Commission, 2024). As a result of participating in the elections, the REAL Party became a parliamentary party and secured 1 seat out of 125 in the National Assembly.

6.5. Why Is Boycotting Elections Unsuccessful in Azerbaijan? The Position of the REAL Party

Boycotting the elections can be an alternative political approach, however, it depends on the society. There are 2 huge opposition political parties that Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan and Musavat, they are still boycotting the elections since 2013. The PFAP decided not to participate in the elections held in both 1998 and 2008. The goal of these two parties was to focus public and international attention on themselves by boycotting the elections. However, these calls for a boycott did not yield the expected results. One of the reasons for this is that the boycott demonstrated by opposition parties in Azerbaijan failed to convey a clear political message to society. The PFAP and Musavat did not achieve successful outcomes in this election. The boycott did not attract public interest, nor did it become a serious topic of discussion in the international political sphere. Another issue is that when a party chooses to boycott an election, it typically reinforces this decision by organizing rallies. However, in Azerbaijan's political experience, after the boycott decision, this decision did not gain widespread traction among the public, leading to its failure. These analyses make it clear that the boycott strategy is not successful for Azerbaijani society. The expectations of both parties had a negative impact (Huseynov, 2024). Why does the Azerbaijani opposition prioritize boycotting elections, unlike the REAL Party? Is boycotting truly effective? This topic requires deeper analysis. In his article, Frankel notes that between 1990 and 2009, 171 election boycotts were recorded. With a few exceptions, most of these boycotts did not prove effective. One of the key goals of boycotting is to draw international attention, but in none of these cases did it result in significant international reaction. Another dangerous aspect of boycotts is that they often strengthen the ruling party, as the opposition's boycott decision adds to their political power and increases the chances of election manipulation. A similar event occurred during the 2003 presidential elections in Azerbaijan. The opposition decided to boycott the election, claiming it was not fair. This led to the election of Ilham Aliyev as a

president. Therefore, research shows that boycotts are ineffective, both in Azerbaijan and globally. On the contrary, the participation of parties in elections and the enhancement of political engagement within society should be the central focus (Frankel, 2010). Participation in elections holds a central place in the political vision of the REAL Party. Party leader Ilgar Mammadov believes that boycotting elections is not a viable option. This is a key topic addressed by the REAL Party, which emphasizes the importance of participating in elections. As stated in its program, the REAL Party prioritized the importance of elections and participated in the 2024 parliamentary elections, transforming into a parliamentary party. The election of Erkin Qadirli as the winning candidate from the REAL Party in the National Assembly is not only a success but also a symbol of the party continuing to participate in elections despite the authoritarian environment (*Milli Majlis Members: Erkin Togrul Oglu Gadirli*, n.d.). The research and studies presented indicate that boycotting elections is particularly ineffective in societies like Azerbaijan. The participation of political parties in elections and the enhancement of political engagement within society is crucial, not just in parliamentary elections but also in other electoral processes. A clear example of this is the participation of the REAL Party in the parliamentary elections and their success in securing a mandate. Therefore, participating in elections is vital for advancing the political struggle and taking real steps toward meaningful change.

CHAPTER 7: FINDINGS

On January 8, 2025, an online meeting was held with Ilgar Mammadov, the former leader of the REAL Party. During the meeting, the respondent discussed the history of the formation of the REAL Party, his politically motivated arrest, and the process of his release from prison. One of the key topics of discussion was the importance of participating in elections. The respondent stated: “The REAL Movement started its activities in December 2008. Between 2008 and 2013, we focused on gaining political recognition and support from voters.” However, his arrest on January 1, 2013, significantly hindered the movement’s activities. He explained: “My arrest on January 1, 2013, really weakened the movement. It impacted my leadership and, in turn, the dynamism of the organization.” After his release from prison in August 2018, the respondent shared: “One of the key political priorities for me and the REAL Party after my release was organizing campaigns before elections and promoting participation in them.” He emphasized: “Elections are the main tool for democratic changes in a society. I firmly believe that real changes in society can only come through elections.” Throughout the conversation, the respondent emphasized various positive perspectives on elections. He stated: “Participation in elections opens new and democratic opportunities for both citizens and the opposition. When citizens participate, it increases political engagement, which is vital for any healthy democracy.” He also noted that encouraging opposition to participate in elections was critical, stating: “It is crucial that the opposition participates in elections rather than boycotting them. Boycotting only weakens political engagement and benefits the ruling power.” The respondent also expressed a critical attitude toward the approaches of other opposition parties. He said: “Boycotting elections leads to the political disengagement of society and, ironically, it serves the interests of the ruling power. When people boycott, voter turnout is low, and that creates a perfect environment for electoral fraud.” He continued: “With low voter participation, votes can be easily manipulated, which violates the core principles of electoral democracy.” The respondent also referenced scientific studies to support his stance. He mentioned: “In Matthew Frankel’s article, ‘Threaten but Participate: Why Election Boycotts Are a Bad Idea,’ it is

shown that between 1990 and 2009, 171 election boycotts were analyzed, and the parties that boycotted elections rarely achieved their goals. In most cases, boycotts ended up strengthening the ruling power instead of weakening it.” At the end of the conversation, the respondent briefly discussed his electoral failures. He said: “I participated in elections eight times and lost every time. I was denied participation in five others.” Despite these setbacks, he demonstrated political maturity by resigning from the position of leader of the REAL Party and withdrawing from public politics. He explained: “Although I faced many failures, I realized that it was time to step down and allow new leadership to take the party forward.” The focus of this interview was on elections, participation in elections, and the issue of boycotts. The respondent’s emphasis on the importance of participating in elections, particularly in authoritarian regimes, is highly relevant to the research topic on “the participation of political parties in elections in authoritarian regimes.” As the respondent put it: “Participation in elections creates new opportunities for both the opposition and society. Only through elections can real change happen.” The respondent’s views on electoral participation offer a valuable contribution to the research, especially in terms of how opposition parties in authoritarian regimes should evaluate the results of election boycotts. He concluded: “Participation in elections is the only way to achieve real change. It provides new opportunities for both the opposition and society, and that is why we have always chosen to participate, despite the challenges we face.” Ilgar Mammadov’s interview covers the history of the REAL Party and leadership issues. In the next interview, however, a member of the party discusses their experiences in the 2024 parliamentary elections and the challenges they faced after the elections.

The meeting with the respondent took place on December 7, 2024. The respondent, a member of the REAL Party and a candidate in the September 1, 2024, parliamentary elections, shared detailed insights into the election process, post-election challenges, and the perceived effectiveness of electoral participation under authoritarian conditions. At the beginning of the interview, the respondent described the election process as deeply flawed: “The process was completely manipulated. Votes were not counted accurately, and serious obstacles were created at every stage of the election.” He stressed that such irregularities “undermine the very essence of electoral democracy” and raise doubts about “whether the final results reflect the will of the people.” A major consequence of his candidacy, the respondent revealed, was the

loss of his job in the public sector. “After the elections, I was dismissed from my government position,” he stated. “There were no disciplinary violations or professional failures. This was clearly a political decision, punishment for my affiliation with the opposition and my candidacy.” He argued that this was part of a broader pattern: “This is not just about me. It’s a strategy to intimidate others.

When someone dares to participate in elections, the government makes sure they pay a price.” The respondent connected his experience to systemic repression: “This kind of political retaliation discourages civic participation and silences political minorities. It sends a message that anyone who challenges the ruling power will be excluded and punished.” He continued, “It’s not just a personal attack, it’s an attempt to block the representation of alternative voices in politics.” As the interview progressed, the tone shifted to disillusionment. When asked about his current views on political participation, the respondent said: “I have completely lost faith in elections. I don’t believe they can bring any real change under this regime.” He elaborated, “In authoritarian systems, elections are merely symbolic, they’re held to create the illusion of legitimacy, not to reflect the people’s will.” According to him, “Participating in elections only helps the regime appear democratic. We are just legitimizing a process that’s already decided.”

In reflecting on his withdrawal from political life, he stated: “I no longer want to be part of a process that only serves to decorate authoritarianism with a democratic label. This isn’t a real competition, it’s a performance.” The respondent’s statements illustrate the growing sense of hopelessness among opposition figures in authoritarian regimes, where electoral mechanisms are frequently used to control, rather than empower, political alternatives. The final interview presents the future strategies of the REAL Party’s leader, Natig Jafarli, and outlines the party’s stance on democratic participation.

The interview with Natig Jafarli was conducted on January 7, 2024. At the time, Jafarli was a member of the political committee of the REAL Party. Following the resignation of Ilgar Mammadov, he assumed the leadership of the party in the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections. The interview centered on several key issues, including the REAL Party’s reform agenda, its approach to government dialogue, and its position on political party legislation and electoral participation. Throughout the interview, the respondent emphasized

the party's openness to constructive engagement with the government and its commitment to offering alternative policy proposals. According to him: "We are ready for dialogue, but only if it's genuine and focused on real reforms. One of our proposals is to reduce the Value Added Tax (VAT) rate from 18% to a more reasonable level to ease the burden on citizens and stimulate the economy." As the respondent noted, such proposals not only reflect the party's broader economic vision but also form a core part of its pre-election platform: "These initiatives reflect our political program and show the electorate that we offer practical and implementable solutions." A major focus of the interview was the respondent's critique of recent amendments to the "Law on Political Parties" in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Specifically, the respondent expressed concern over the clause stating that political parties may have their state registration revoked if they fail to nominate candidates in three consecutive municipal or parliamentary elections. He argued: "This is a dangerous provision. It doesn't promote political pluralism—it punishes it. Political participation should be encouraged, not policed." The respondent also reaffirmed the REAL Party's view of electoral participation as a democratic obligation: "For us, participating in elections is not a formality, it's a responsibility. Boycotting elections is not a strategy we support. Legitimacy comes through engagement, not withdrawal." He continued, "Revoking the registration of parties simply because they do not participate in elections undermines the essence of democratic competition and silences alternative voices."

In summary, the interview revealed the REAL Party's dedication to democratic engagement, as demonstrated by both its participation in elections and its efforts to contribute policy alternatives. The respondent's statements reflected a broader political orientation rooted in the defense of pluralism, institutional dialogue, and legal reforms that promote, not restrict, political diversity.



CHAPTER 8: ANALYSIS

This section presents an analysis based on the respondents' answers regarding the reasons why opposition parties participate in elections under authoritarian regimes. The goal of the analysis is to clarify the essence and political objectives of this choice based on each participant's responses.

8.1. Elections Seen as a Key Tool for Democratic Change

According to the results of the interviews, high-level leaders such as Natig Jafarli and Ilgar Mammadov believe that the participation of the opposition in elections under authoritarian regimes is a key tool for achieving democratic change. They argue that elections are the most effective method for regime change and that they are crucial not only for changing the government but also for playing an active role in the political life of society. In other words, the REAL Party prioritizes elections because they view elections as a fundamental component of democracy. Therefore, the respondents' answers suggest that participating in elections is important for the opposition to convey their values to society and increase political activism. Their approach shows that elections serve more to enforce democratic demands than to secure specific outcomes. Since elections in authoritarian regimes are neither transparent nor fair, the opposition attempts to strengthen its influence through them, making elections a powerful tool in their hands. Additionally, they emphasize that elections have the potential to increase public interest in politics and strengthen political engagement. However, as one member of the REAL Party pointed out, after participating in elections, political trust tends to decrease. The party member believes that the elections were ineffective and only strengthened the government's position. This reveals a difference in attitudes within the party regarding elections. The contrast between the idealistic view of the leaders and the practical experience of the ordinary member becomes apparent. This contradiction suggests that trust in elections within the party exists at different levels. Thus, although elections in authoritarian regimes have limited potential to bring about real change in power, they remain an indispensable tool for the opposition to maintain connections with society and keep democratic values at the forefront.

8.2. Aiming to Increase Political Participation and Raise Awareness

Respondents also note that opposition parties participate in elections to increase political participation in society. In one interview, Ilgar Mammadov mentions that participation in elections will increase political activism in society and contribute to the development of democracy. In authoritarian regimes, where society lives under pressure, the level of political participation in elections is minimal. When evaluating the responses of participants, it becomes clear that they see elections to touch upon citizens' lives and raise awareness. They believe that elections are an opportunity for political participation, and missing this opportunity would only serve the interests of the regime. Even after Mammadov was released from prison, the REAL Party's participation in the elections, despite potential manipulation of results, can be seen as a significant political step. In a non-democratic system, even if elections are manipulated, presenting a candidate from the opposition party can still be seen as showing an interest in political participation. However, another respondent from the REAL Party, after participating in the 2024 parliamentary elections, mentions being politically persecuted and losing his job. The candidate emphasized that political participation values should be prioritized over personal interests. Furthermore, after the elections, the respondent's political perspective appears to have completely changed. He argues that elections in authoritarian regimes create conditions for unjust manipulation, ultimately leading to a loss of political trust. This situation reveals while elections may serve as a means for democratic change, they do not bring real change for opposition members. The experience of elections indicates that, in some cases, political interest decreases, and political activity weakens, even if society is initially engaged. This view highlights a significant difference between the party leadership and its members. Thus, while elections in authoritarian regimes are crucial for the opposition to educate society and increase political engagement, there are limitations when it comes to achieving real change and gaining political trust.

8.3. The Ineffectiveness and Harm of Boycotts

The responses regarding the boycott strategy also form an important part of the analysis. In the interviews, it is emphasized that the boycott option legitimizes the electoral process and strengthens the position of the regime. Ilgar Mammadov argues that boycotts create no real change and only strengthen the regime's position. From the analysis, if a party

prioritizes democratic values and participates in elections, then boycotting the elections is unacceptable to them. Even in one interview, Mammadov mentioned that boycotts do not create any real change and only serve to reinforce the regime's power. This perspective aligns with Natig Jafarli's views and demonstrates the party's stance against boycotts in the recent elections. From a scholarly perspective, Mammadov refers to Matthew Frankel's article "Threaten but Participate: Why Election Boycotts Are a Bad Idea," highlighting that between 1990 and 2009, 171 boycotts were ineffective, fully supporting the argument in favor of participation. This position shows that by not participating in elections, the opposition merely legitimizes the regime instead of challenging it. The arguments presented for the necessity of participation in elections reflect the REAL Party's belief that elections are important for conveying democratic values to society and increasing political activism. Boycotts, on the other hand, are seen as reducing the opposition's political influence and strengthening the regime. In this section, the positions of both sides complement each other, as elections in authoritarian regimes are often rigged, leading to a decrease in public interest in voting. Moreover, in such undemocratic environments, boycotting elections negatively impacts the level of political participation in society. For this reason, the party's position is considered reasonable.

However, another member of the REAL Party, mentions that after participating in the elections, no real change was achieved, and the regime's position remained unchanged. This perspective offers a negative evaluation of the experience of participating in elections. The respondent's personal experience led them to view the opposition's involvement in elections as an activity that brings no real results and only serves the regime. This situation shows that there are different opinions and approaches within the party. While the leaders view participating in elections to ensure democratic change, the practical experience of ordinary member reveals that elections do not create real change and fail to make a significant political impact. This highlights the strategic contradiction within the opposition. Whether or not elections are effective depends on both ideological perspectives and practical experiences. In summary, opposition parties' participation in elections under authoritarian regimes aims to promote democratic change and increase political activism in society. However, it is believed that elections do not lead to real changes and only strengthen the government's position. The boycott strategy weakens the opposition's political influence and increases the regime's

legitimacy. Therefore, while elections are a vital tool for democracy, their effectiveness in terms of real outcomes is highly questionable.

Elections are seen as one of the most crucial tools for societal development and democratic transformation. However, within the REAL Party, there are diverse perspectives on this topic. A sharp contrast exists between the leadership's idealistic approach and a party member's more pragmatic, experience-based outlook. These differences reflect not only a clash between theory and practice but also how these views affect people's lives in real terms.

The party leadership views elections as a significant tool for the advancement of democracy and shaping the future of society. They believe elections give people the opportunity to make their voices heard and play a role in building that future. Yet, under current conditions, this is a rather idealistic view. In authoritarian regimes, even when a candidate tries to protect their voice, the regime often distorts or manipulates these voices. Although this perspective is positive and hopeful, it tends to weaken when confronted with harsh realities. When elections lack transparency and are marred by political pressure and obstacles for opposition members, the effectiveness of this view diminishes. In many cases, the leadership's idealism fails to align with actual conditions on the ground. On the other hand, the party member believes that elections have become nothing more than a formal procedure. For them, elections no longer bring about meaningful change and have simply turned into a hollow performance. Influenced by authoritarian practices, they view elections as manipulated processes, where there is no genuine competition. Their election experience shows that the results are predetermined. This leads to a loss of hope and growing distrust. The party member is convinced that participating in elections is now meaningless, as it is impossible to believe in the possibility of real change. The contrast between these two viewpoints highlights the lack of transparency and fairness in the electoral system. While the leadership's idealism may be well-intentioned, it only functions in a truly democratic environment. Since such an environment rarely exists in authoritarian regimes, the idealist stance seems detached from reality. If elections are not free and fair, democracy remains merely formal and symbolic. The party member, grounded in personal experience, is more aware of this reality and believes that elections have become little more than political theatre. These opposing views also underline the urgent need for transparent and fair electoral systems to promote democratic development. While the party leadership's idealism acknowledges the necessity of reforms, the party

member's real-world observations highlight how difficult and time-consuming such reforms can be. Together, these perspectives help us better understand both society's relationship with politics and the actual impact of elections.

Ultimately, both sides are committed to the improvement of democracy, yet they hold different beliefs about how and when this can be achieved. Justice and transparency in the electoral system could serve as the common ground that unites these views and paves the way for a healthier democracy. Both parties have succeeded in expressing their stances by participating in elections.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this research is why opposition parties participate in elections under authoritarian regimes. The main argument of the study is that opposition parties in authoritarian regimes participate in elections to preserve their political presence. Despite the rigging of election results, opposition parties continue to participate to remain visible and active within society. Their involvement serves to maintain hope for greater political strength and influence in the future. In this study, the theoretical aspects of opposition parties' participation in elections under authoritarian regimes will be compared with the practical findings derived from the interviews. Electoral authoritarianism is a concept that refers to elections held in authoritarian regimes primarily to maintain the government's legitimacy and create the appearance of popular support. The theory shows that even though elections are falsified, opposition parties still participate because they hope for future change. Their participation helps them remain visible in society and strengthens their political position. During interviews, representatives of the REAL Party expressed that by taking part in elections, they want to remind society of their continued political presence. They genuinely believe that elections could bring positive changes. The party emphasizes the importance of engagement, but many contradictions are apparent. Research shows that even though the party participates in elections, the results remain unchanged. The party views elections as an opportunity for the opposition, in line with the concept of electoral authoritarianism, and participates accordingly. However, since the electoral process is non-democratic and non-transparent, their efforts do not lead to any political results. As a result, the party's participation has not created any real impact on society. In fact, one party member lost his government job due to his involvement in the elections. Elections in authoritarian regimes serve only the interests of the ruling power. In electoral authoritarianism, the political gains from election participation benefit solely the regime, and these elections only strengthen the regime's legitimacy.

Literature says that the reason opposition parties participate in elections is to create a powerful coalition. The coalition theory states that opposition parties come together to form a strong political bloc thereby becoming more effective in elections, especially in authoritarian regimes. Such a coalition strengthens the political position of the parties before the elections and increases their capacity to resist the legitimization of authoritarianism through elections.

However, the REAL Party didn't participate in any coalition in the recent elections, and it makes it difficult to empirically test this theoretical model. This situation can be explained in two different approaches: First, the party's decision not to join a coalition may be aimed at preserving its independent political image. Secondly, the authoritarian political environment in the country does not provide real conditions for the formation of effective coalitions. There is a lack of any practical foundation for such cooperation. As a result, although coalition theory envisions the coordinated participation of the opposition in elections, the party hasn't experienced the theory yet. However, it doesn't reject the main essence of the theory. Research indicates that the implementation of theories faces difficulties in practice especially in authoritarian regimes with an election context. Among the reasons for these limitations are the lack of inter-party trust and mutual confidence, as well as the obstacles created by the existing political environment. Such situations create a theory-practice gap between theory and reality, highlighting the need for more localized and context-specific models in political science.

Even though the implementation of coalition theory is not applicable to the REAL Party, the Hope and Democratic Change theory appears more promising in this research. This theory emphasizes that opposition participation in elections under authoritarian regimes is not merely a formal act but rather sustains belief and hope in democratic transformation within society. In the case of Azerbaijan, the REAL Party's participation in elections expresses precisely this hope. The party is aware that there is little chance for democratic change and that building a coalition is impossible, yet they approach elections with optimism. In fact, the party even describes the elections as neither democratic nor transparent. However, they still attempt to use the electoral process to communicate their political presence to society, inspire hope, and portray elections as the beginning of democratic reform. This is not merely a competition for mandates, but an effort to change people's mindsets and bring new energy and perspectives into politics. It is also significant that the party does not lose hope despite such conditions. Given the extremely low chances of political change under authoritarian regimes, preserving the party's ambition is a noteworthy factor. Ultimately, this shows that the Hope and Democratic Change theory is not ineffective in practice. Despite the harshness of authoritarian systems, it sheds light on the continued existence of political processes and the possibility of larger transformations in the future. Therefore, the Hope and Democratic

Change theory plays a crucial role in understanding the position of the opposition in countries like Azerbaijan.

Liberalization theory suggests that the participation of opposition groups in elections under authoritarian regimes is not simply a formality, but rather a potential entry point for political transformation. This approach interprets such involvement as a source of hope for expanding political freedoms and reinforcing democratic values within society. In Azerbaijan, however, the reality does not entirely reflect these theoretical expectations. The participation of the REAL Party illustrates an effort to remain present in the political space, yet this occurs under conditions that lack fairness and transparency. The absence of competitive elections and the dominance of regime-controlled institutions severely constrain the prospects for genuine democratic change. While the theory retains some relevance, since continued opposition engagement may still represent a sign of democratic aspiration, the structural limitations of the political system often reduce this impact to a largely symbolic level. As a result, the applicability of liberalization theory in the Azerbaijani context appears limited.

Recommendations:

This study found that the practical application of the discussed theories in Azerbaijan faces certain challenges and does not yield the expected benefits. The participation of the Azerbaijani opposition in elections is mostly formal, highlighting the need to increase electoral transparency and ensure genuine political competition. Therefore, future research on election processes in Azerbaijan and other authoritarian contexts would benefit from focusing on the application of alternative theories. The theories used in this study are primarily designed for ideal democratic environments, and their implementation in non-democratic settings encounters significant obstacles, which weakens their explanatory power. Considering these limitations, it is essential to develop more realistic theoretical models that take into account the specific characteristics and realities of the region. Only in this way can we determine which theory is truly effective and contribute meaningful insights to the field.

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