

Resentment Runs Deep in Azeri Town Hit by Rioting

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A demonstrator who supported the riots in Ismailli being detained in Baku.

ISMAILLI, Azerbaijan — The charred remains of a hotel are the only overt sign of rioting that swept this small Azeri town last week, but the resentment that fueled the violence is hard to miss.

The Ismailli riot was quashed as quickly by police as other protests in the country but sent a warning to President Ilham Aliyev: Patience is wearing thin with the huge wealth gap a decade after he succeeded his long-ruling father.

Ismailli, with its dreary single-story Soviet-era buildings, shows no sign of benefiting from the vast oil and natural gas riches that have helped transform parts of the capital, Baku, into a showcase of shimmering glass and metal where luxury cars cruise next to the Caspian Sea.

Residents of the town of 15,000, about 200 kilometers northwest of Baku, complain of

corruption across the tightly controlled country of 9 million, an overbearing government and a lack of jobs, money and prospects.

They said that Thursday's rioting was spontaneous, caused by anger over what one called the "unacceptable behavior of rich guys from the capital" suspected of involvement in a car accident, but that passions were fed by deep-seated resentment.

"Their behavior was just the last straw and became a reason for the disturbances," said Mamed, a 50-year-old who declined to give his full name.

Samir, a 26-year-old market stall holder, said: "The people in the leadership of our country care only about their own interests and forget about ordinary people like us."

Squeezed between Iran and Russia, mainly-Muslim Azerbaijan is a transit hub for U.S. troops based in Afghanistan, a role its critics say limits Western powers' willingness to sanction Baku over human rights abuses and concerns about democracy.

Azerbaijan also supplies energy to Europe, and Western oil firms involved in bringing Caspian oil through the Caucasus country would be concerned by any widespread violence and instability. But few would expect that to happen now, months before a presidential election due in October.

"I don't believe that this situation can spread to other regions because there is no basis for that," Ali Akhmedov, deputy chairman of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party, said at a meeting with residents on Friday.

"And it's not linked to this being an election year. There are just some destructive forces inside the country who are interested in the destabilization of the situation, but they are weak."

Barely Making Ends Meet

The Chirag Hotel was a target of the rioters because it was owned by the driver involved in the car accident. His wealth and brash behavior had long upset the locals, some residents said.

All that is left of the hotel now is some burned black walls. It was set ablaze by a crowd of 3,000 after a mass brawl that started after the owner drove his car into an electricity pole and was suspected of being drunk.

Overt displays of wealth, common among the lucky few who have struck it rich across the former Soviet Union, breed discontent among those at the other end of the scale who are just struggling to make ends meet.

"Our main problem is unemployment. There are no jobs at all, and local government does not do anything to help us," said a 57-year-old woman who identified herself only as Elmira.

She has made her living at the local fruit and vegetable market since the closure of the tobacco factory where she used to work.

Her state pension is 200 manats (\$250), 80 manats of which she pays for electricity and other

public services. Her disabled husband receives a minimum pension of 70 manats, and her two sons are unemployed.

Samir, the market stall holder, said he used to work in a shop in Baku but returned to his native town two years ago after losing his job in the capital.

“I earn about 300 manats each month, but how can you live on this money with wife and a child?” he said.

Aliyev Dynasty

Aliyev was assured of the presidency by being nominated as the ruling party’s candidate by his father, Heidar, in 2003. Heidar Aliyev had ruled Azerbaijan as Communist Party chief in Soviet times and returned as president in 1993, two years after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Ilham Aliyev is expected to win a presidential election in October, but despite the lack of an obvious alternative, he is sure to do his utmost to prevent protests from spreading.

Young Azeri opposition activists posted a message on Facebook calling for a protest in Baku on Friday in support of Ismaili residents but later postponed it until Saturday without giving a reason.

Mass protests are rare and are usually quashed quickly by police in Azerbaijan. Riot police quickly dispersed a protest in March in the town of Quba, 170 kilometers north of Baku, after several hundred residents demanded the resignation of its mayor.

Local authorities and officials who arrived in Ismaili from Baku met with residents Friday to try to keep a lid on discontent.

Nizami Alekperov, the local governor, dismissed calls for his resignation during last week’s protests and made light of the rioting.

“Such incidents spoil the image of our region, which is becoming an attractive tourist destination,” he said.

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