

Oscar-Winning 'Burnt by the Sun' Filmmaker to Challenge Azeri President in Vote

By [The Moscow Times](#)

July 03, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Azerbaijan's embattled opposition named an Oscar-winning screenwriter on Tuesday as its candidate to challenge President Ilham Aliyev's decade-long rule in an October election.

Rustam Ibragimbekov's huge popularity will go some way to open up the election race in the oil and gas-producing former Soviet republic, but analysts said Aliyev was still expected to win.

Ibragimbekov co-wrote "Burnt by the Sun," which tells the story of a Soviet army officer and his family during the Stalinist purge and won the Oscar for best foreign-language film in 1994.

"This is a big responsibility and I'm ready to take it and to go this way until the end," Ibragimbekov said by telephone from Moscow.

He said he would give up his Russian citizenship to stand in his home country.

Ibragimbekov will represent the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF), an umbrella group of Aliyev's main opponents. It still needs to register his name with election authorities.

Living standards have risen in mainly Muslim Azerbaijan since independence in 1991, but it has faced criticism over its human rights record under Aliyev and his father Heydar, who ruled before him.

Protests against Aliyev, who received 88.73 percent of the votes in a 2008 election, are usually swiftly quashed by police. That vote was criticized by Western monitors and boycotted by opposition groups.

The country of 9 million people located between Iran and Russia has been courted by the West because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

Aliyev's New Azerbaijan party, which officially named him as their candidate last month, poured scorn on the opposition's chances in the upcoming vote.

"Our candidate will get the majority of votes," said Mubariz Gurbanly, a member of New Azerbaijan Party's political council.

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