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Exit Poll: Azerbaijan's President Wins 3rd Term

By The Moscow Times

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An election official looking on as kids play near a portrait of Heydar Aliyev. **David Mdzinarishvili**

Azerbaijan's president won a third five-year term by a landslide in Wednesday's vote, according to an exit poll, extending decades of dynastic rule in the oil-rich Caspian Sea nation allied with the West.

The poll, which was conducted by the independent Prognosis polling company, showed Ilham Aliyev taking nearly 84 percent of the vote. The poll of 40,500 voters had a margin of error of less than 1 percentage point.

The main opposition candidate, historian Jamil Hasanly, was trailing behind with about 8 percent, followed by eight other contenders.

Hasanly, speaking to reporters earlier in the day, said his supporters had recorded numerous vote violations.

"We have registered cases of ballot stuffing at a number of polling stations," he said. "Regrettably, many government officials are involved in falsification, becoming accomplices of a grave crime."

International rights groups have accused Aliyev of pressuring and harassing government critics, leaving them little breathing space to campaign. The government, however, loosened the reins ahead of the ballot, withdrawing its longtime ban on rallies in the center of the capital.

Aliyev has ruled the ex-Soviet nation of 9 million since 2003, succeeding his father, Heydar Aliyev, who had been at the helm for most of the previous three decades, first as Azerbaijan's Communist Party boss during Soviet times and then as its president.

The younger Aliyev has presented himself as a guarantor of stability, an image with broad appeal in a nation where painful memories are still fresh of the years of turmoil that accompanied the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. A six-year war with neighboring Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh left ethnic Armenian forces in control of Nagorno-Karabakh and neighboring areas in Azerbaijan, and turned 1 million Azerbaijanis into refugees.

The Azerbaijani leader has shown little tolerance for dissent and extended his rule through elections criticized by Western observers. At the same time, he has firmly allied the Muslim nation with the West, helping secure its energy and security interests and offsetting Russia's influence in the strategic Caspian region.

Under Aliyev, Azerbaijan has basked in oil riches that have more than tripled its gross domestic product and helped bolster his popularity. The State Oil Fund that accumulates oil revenues held $34 billion as of the start of the year.

Tatyana Golikova, a Baku resident and Aliyev supporter, said she expected "the continuation of the right policies of our President Ilham Aliyev."

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