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Our Man in Baku: [FINAL Edition]

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▣ Abstract (summary)

American diplomats and oil executives portray Mr. [ILHAM ALIYEV] as an urbane pro-Westerner and a secret moderate who plans to liberalize the police state he inherited from his dad. This account strikes Azerbaijanis as ludicrous. Only 42 years old, Mr. Aliyev is renowned in Baku as a playboy with a bad gambling habit. During his tenure at the state oil company, Azerbaijan was rated the sixth most corrupt nation in the world by Transparency International. An indictment unsealed in the Southern District of New York charges that millions of dollars in bribes were channeled to top Azeri officials in 1997 as part of a scheme to privatize the oil company, of which Mr. Aliyev was then vice president. Since his "election," Mr. Aliyev has reappointed his father's key ministers and promised to pursue the same policies -- including, apparently, ruthless suppression of the peaceful and pro-democracy opposition.

▣ Full Text

ILHAM ALIYEV was inaugurated as president of the oil-rich Muslim country of Azerbaijan three months ago after an election condemned by international observers as blatantly fraudulent. When members of the opposition tried to protest, they were brutally beaten by police. There followed a massive, nationwide crackdown in which more than 1,000 people were arrested, including opposition leaders, activists from nongovernmental organizations, journalists and election officials who objected to the fraud. More than 100 remain in prison, including most of the senior opposition activists. A new report by Human Rights Watch documents numerous cases of torture, including severe beatings, electric shock, and threats of rape against the opposition leaders. Mr. Aliyev, who succeeded his strongman father, meanwhile has been consolidating dictatorial powers: Most recently he was named director of Azerbaijani radio and television.

Azerbaijan, in short, might look like a good place for President Bush to start implementing his frequently declared policy of "spreading freedom" to the world -- and in particular the greater Middle East. Instead he is doing the opposite. The president and his top aides have embraced Mr. Aliyev, excused his fraud and ignored his human rights violations -- not to mention reliable reports of his personal corruption. The administration waived congressional restrictions to grant Azerbaijan \$3 million in military aid and is winding up to give still more. The Pentagon is talking with Azeri officials about the possible use of bases for U.S. operations. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

visited Baku last month to confer with Mr. Aliyev. When asked about the electoral fraud, he replied: "The United States has a relationship with this country. We value it." Said Mr. Aliyev proudly: "The United States is a strategic partner."

Pentagon officials argue that Azerbaijan is vital to the war on terrorism. Among other things, they contend Azerbaijani help is needed to stop terrorists from traveling across the Caspian Sea. But a more obvious source of President Bush's policy is oil. Over the last decade Mr. Aliyev and his father granted billions in contracts to such companies as BP-Amoco, ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil. He also has supported a \$3 billion pipeline that is to carry oil from the Caspian to a port in Turkey. According to Mr. Aliyev, Mr. Bush once pronounced him an honorary citizen of Texas in appreciation of his support for American oil companies. When he was installed by his dying father as prime minister last August, the president quickly sent him a congratulatory letter.

American diplomats and oil executives portray Mr. Aliyev as an urbane pro-Westerner and a secret moderate who plans to liberalize the police state he inherited from his dad. This account strikes Azerbaijanis as ludicrous. Only 42 years old, Mr. Aliyev is renowned in Baku as a playboy with a bad gambling habit. During his tenure at the state oil company, Azerbaijan was rated the sixth most corrupt nation in the world by Transparency International. An indictment unsealed in the Southern District of New York charges that millions of dollars in bribes were channeled to top Azeri officials in 1997 as part of a scheme to privatize the oil company, of which Mr. Aliyev was then vice president. Since his "election," Mr. Aliyev has reappointed his father's key ministers and promised to pursue the same policies -- including, apparently, ruthless suppression of the peaceful and pro-democracy opposition.

It's clearly expedient for Mr. Bush to back Mr. Aliyev, just as for decades U.S. governments found their interest in propping up dictators in the Persian Gulf. But Mr. Bush himself has said -- in one of his several major speeches about democracy -- that such policies were mistaken. "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe," the president said two months ago. "In the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty." It may take the United States decades to overcome the legacy of embracing corrupt dictators in the Arab world. The least Mr. Bush can do is avoid repeating the mistake in the new oil states of the Caucasus and Central Asia -- beginning in Azerbaijan.

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