

To Plant Reforms, Azeris Need Stable Soil©

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Azerbaijan is at a crossroads.

Sunday's parliamentary elections were less than perfect but marked an improvement over previous votes. The priority now is to prevent the country from slipping into violence -- still a possibility -- and to ensure Azerbaijan's transition toward lasting democracy, stability and economic prosperity. If successful, Azerbaijan could serve as a proponent of reforms in Central Asia and even in the Middle East. Much is at stake for Azerbaijan as well as the European Union, Russia, the U.S. and the wider region.

If stability in Azerbaijan deteriorates, any resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem would be postponed indefinitely. This would be truly unfortunate given how close we have come to solving the conflict.

Azerbaijan sits at the center of the Caspian Basin, which some believe holds the richest gas and oil fields after the Middle East and Russia. Instability in Azerbaijan could complicate the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, thus depriving the global economy of one million barrels of oil per day. The viability of the BTC pipeline is particularly important for Europe's energy diversity.

The government in Baku has a historic opportunity to capitalize on Azerbaijan's energy resources just as global oil prices are at record levels. Azerbaijan will soon be awash with extra money, which it could use to improve its infrastructure, invest in human resources and build alternative sectors of the economy. But long-term economic progress will remain elusive unless supported by rigorous political reforms, stability and overall security.

I say this because I fear that there are forces in Azerbaijan who would prefer violence over stability just to promote their narrow, selfish interests. The international community must make sure that the channels of communication between the opposition and the government, as well as within the government, remain open. I believe that dialogue facilitation by an external party in the upcoming days and weeks could be useful.

Moreover, this is the time for President Ilham Aliyev -- with whom I've discussed reforms on two occasions this year -- to press on with political and economic liberalization. To his credit, he has done much already. The power of the government will be strengthened if the legitimacy of the nation's political process is broadened. This can be best assured through reforms.

At the same time it is important to remember that change is a process. We have to keep in mind that reforms also entail capacity-building and infrastructure adjustments. In the case of Azerbaijan, I'm confident that this change will be achieved rapidly and reforms will be promoted decisively. But nothing will happen overnight. And yet, without stability, it's pointless to speak of reforms at all.

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