



Grim 'Nomad' leaves viewer battle-weary

San Diego Union-Tribune, The (CA) - Friday, April 27, 2007

Author: Stephen Hunter, THE WASHINGTON POST

If Borat were reviewing "Nomad: The Warrior," apparently the most expensive picture ever made in Kazakhstan, he might point out the absence of beautiful prostitutes and the presence of too many damned horses. But he has gone home, so as a poor fill-in for the world's funniest movie critic, let me just say, too many horses, not enough girls.

The film, in its lumbering, committee-directed way (three directors) tells the story of a heroic young 18th-century Kazakh prince (played by charismatic Mexican actor Kuno Becker) who unites his country's three warring tribes and fights off invaders. It was completed a while ago and perhaps is now being released to capitalize on the huge market unearthed by "300" that feeds on prefirearm warfare. The movie offers great quantities of that, notably two one-on-ones in which young Kazakh princes face off against Mongol warriors and settle their hash neatly enough. (One features a through-the-shield beheading. Tony Curtis didn't think of that in "The Black Shield of Falworth.")

But otherwise the film is stilted and lame. Worse, the acting is as grim as the story is primeval, though Becker, as I say, has a great deal of vitality, as does his friend and colleague Erali, played by Jay Hernandez. It also stars Jason Scott Lee -- where has he been? -- and fourth-tier martial arts star Mark Dacascos, barely recognizable in a Mongol haircut that looks like a yarmulke that slipped down his forehead. Kazakhstan, with its miles and miles of undulating plain and distant blue peaks, looks beautiful if a bit dry.

A Weinstein Co. release. Director: Sergei Bodrov, Ivan Passer, Talgat Temenov. Writer: Rustam Ibragimbekov. Cast: Kuno Becker, Jay Hernandez, Jason Scott Lee, Mark Dacascos. Running time: 1 hr., 51 min.

"Nomad: The Warrior"

Rated R

Opens today

*

Caption: 1 PIC

A heroic young 18th-century Kazakh prince (Kuno Becker) unites his country's three warring tribes and fights off invaders in "Nomad: The Warrior." The Weinstein Co.

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'Nomad' is pretty, but powerfully dull

Richmond Times-Dispatch (VA) - Friday, April 27, 2007

Author: DANIEL NEMAN, Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

The problem with epics is that when they go bad they can be epically bad.

"Nomad (The Warrior)" brings epic movies to Kazakhstan, and it turns out that Kazakhs can make movies just as boring as anybody else.

The film looks great. The sweeping photography, rich costumes and gorgeous, stark scenery all lend to the movie's sense of grandeur and importance. But then you get to the story, and all the built-up visual goodwill leaks out.

The film tells of a brave Kazakh warrior who, legend has it, will unify the diverse Kazakh tribes and lead them in a war repelling a great invading army. Through what has now become the unhappily predictable overuse of slow motion, he leads the horse-riding legions deep into the Valley of the Clichés.

Get this: A wise man (Jason Scott Lee) spends his life searching for the child who will fulfill the prophecy. When the child is born, the invading hordes try to kill him, but the wise man rescues him and raises him to be a warrior. The boy grows up with another boy whom he loves like a brother, and both fall in love with the same girl.

Incredibly, the girl drops her handkerchief, which is picked up by the eventual savior, Mansur. The young men go their separate ways, but don't worry: They will meet again, each fulfilling his own destiny.

These destinies are explained by the wise man, in yet another internal monologue: "Like day and night, good and evil must always ride together. One must give his life for the other, in the name of love, so that justice and honor may prevail."

Unfortunately, pretty much all of the writing is like that. Characters think nothing of saying, "I see darkness in your eyes, my son. But if you look into my eyes, you'll see even greater darkness. Our hopes of uniting the Kazakh tribes have collapsed."

Perhaps the problem is the translation. The script was written by Rustam Ibragimbekov, and I'm guessing it wasn't in English.

The film is dubbed into English, with most of the actors apparently speaking Kazakh, but some of the stars are clearly speaking English. Along with Lee, the English speakers include Kuno Becker, who stars as Mansur, and Jay Hernandez, who plays his best friend, Erali.

Becker and Hernandez are both Hispanic, and neither looks remotely Eastern. That fact is distracting, but it is not fatal.

What is fatal is the stultifying direction of Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer, and the barely passable acting.

But the problems all start with Ibragimbekov's script, which ranges somewhere between the simplistic and the childish. It is so bland, so free of complexity or nuance that "Nomad (The Warrior)" becomes an epic bore.

MOVIE REVIEW

NOMAD (THE WARRIOR)

* 1/2 (One and a half stars)

CAST: Kuno Becker, Jay Hernandez

AT: Virginia Center

FYI: Running time: 1:42. Rated R (violence)

Contact staff writer Daniel Neman at dneman@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6408.

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'NOMAD' STICKS TO A BY-THE-BOOK PLOT

Daily Press (Newport News, VA) - Friday, April 27, 2007

Author: Kevin Thomas ; *Special to the Los Angeles Times*

"Nomad: The Warrior" is a throwback to those elaborate but stultifying international productions of several decades ago. This sweeping tale of the mythological unification of Kazakhstan has great scenery, sets and costumes, but writer-producer Rustam Ibragimbekov's script lacks originality.

The direction by Sergei Bodrov and the eminent Czech veteran Ivan Passer is similarly by the book. Not even the action sequences have much punch.

The mystic Kazakh warrior Oraz (a stalwart Jason Scott Lee) tells a sultan that his newborn son has been "chosen by the stars to unite all Kazakhs" and thereby overthrow the oppressive rule of the invader Jungars.

To that end, Oraz raises the son, Mansur (Mexican actor Kuno Becker), and another boy, Erali (Jay Hernandez), as brothers, along with a youth from each of the tribes, to become superb warriors capable of defeating the despotic Jungar ruler (Doskhan Zholzhaxynov).

Although technically superior in every way to those vintage Italian sword-and-sandal epics, "Nomad" in its English-language version suffers from the same stilted, formal dialogue, one-dimensional characterizations and wooden acting. *

Caption: Photo (b&w) "Nomad" suffers from wooden acting.

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'Nomad' epic in look but not in plot, acting

Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA) - Saturday, April 28, 2007

Author: MAL VINCENT

BY mal vincent

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

BETCHA DIDN'T THINK you'd get back to Kazakhstan so quickly. The last (and only) time we were there, moviewise, was when Borat was pushing the virtues, or lack of same, of his sister. Now, surprise, here is the real (no joke) first official Oscar entry from Kazakhstan, the \$40 million multihorse-driven "Nomad:The Warrior."

It's epic in look but not in plot or acting. Give the horse wranglers an Oscar, but send the actors to Siberia (or wherever bad Kazakh actors go). This is similar to one of those Italian sword-and-sandal flicks that used to star Steve Reeves but didn't have a budget this large. Horses dash this way and that, but never seem to be headed anywhere.

There are lots of swords and people who say things like, "You cannot escape your destiny!" It's one of those movies in which Great Khan Galdan (played by the ever-popular Doskhan Zholzhaxynov) screams: "The Cossacks have sent a messenger. Tear him to bits!"

Hey, chill out, Great Khan. He's only a bad actor. The worst he should expect is a bad review.

"Nomad" was filmed in Kazakhstan, bordering Russia and China. It was financed by government money, perhaps in a frantic effort to combat Borat's depiction.

The filming of "Nomad" is actually a good deal more dramatic than the film itself. When the money ran out, the production was shut down half way through, and Czech director Ivan Passer was replaced with Russian Sergei Bodrov. At least two other directors were said to be involved at varied times. It was finished in 2004, but when the Weinsteins acquired it they demanded more battle scenes and the development of a love story.

It's about the 18th century attempt to unify the contentious Kazakh tribes into what became Kazakhstan and offset the baaaad Jungars. The Jungars are Mongolian, and only after a lot of noisy swordplay and brassy music composed by Carlo Siliotto do they surrender.

The script plays like a local Christmas pageant. Oraz (Jason Scott Lee) is on the lookout for the savior of the Cossacks and claims that the stars are right for a new baby who is spared from Great Khan's decree that babes are to be killed. Following his destiny, the babe earns Boy Scout medals in beheading and torture as he grows into manhood, never knowing that he is the chosen one, the son of the sultan.

He has a best friend who grows up as his brother, but they experience trouble when they fall in love with the same girl. The lowly one bows out, which proves that it's good to be the sultan, even if it's not official.

It ain't over until the walled medieval city of Turkestan is stormed and the Kazakhs are united. The battle scenes are of epic proportions, but the actors' mouths never move with what they're saying - indicating that the dubbing job was more hasty than the rest of the film.

Maybe it's best the actors don't really seem to be saying these lines.

"You have the scent of the moon," the warrior tells his beloved.

"Does the moon have a scent?" she retorts.

Maybe not, but this movie does.

Caption: The Weinstein Co. Kuno Becker stars in "Nomad: The Warrior."

Memo: MOVIE REVIEW

"Nomad: The Warrior"

Cast Jason Scott Lee, Kuno Becker, Jay Hernandez, Ayana Yesmagambetova

Director Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer

Screenplay Rustam Ibragimbekov

Music Carlo Siliotto

MPAA rating R (violence)

Mal's rating [C@7db937½

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Azerbaijani Parliament Approves Referendum On Presidential Term Limit

Government Press Releases (USA) - Monday, December 29, 2008

(RFE/RL) -- Azerbaijan's parliament has voted overwhelmingly to hold a referendum early next year to remove the limit on presidential terms, potentially extending four decades of dynastic rule in the oil-rich state.

The parliament voted 100 to 7 to hold a referendum on March 18 on proposed constitutional amendments that would remove the two-term limit on the president.

The move would allow incumbent President Ilham Aliyev to stay in power when his mandate expires in 2013.

Parliament deputy Ali Ahmedov, who is also the executive secretary of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, told parliament that if the constitutional change takes place, it wouldn't harm democracy in the country.

"The number of presidential terms is not a democracy issue," Ahmedov said. "If the president is elected once, twice, or three times, it's not a democracy issue, but a legislative issue."

Last week, the parliament overwhelmingly backed the proposal to lift a ban on a third presidential term. And on December 24, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of the legality of the referendum.

Opposition, NGOs Protest

The proposed amendment has been widely criticized by opposition parties.

Lala-Shovket Gadjiyeva, the leader of Liberal Party, said the vote result in parliament was no surprise. She told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service: "They lead the country to feudalism, and society remains silent."

Civil-society groups have also protested against the proposed constitutional change.

The Republican Alternative issued a statement saying that the constitutional change is against the principles of the republic.

And the Azerbaijani Americans for Democracy movement is collecting signature from Azerbaijanis worldwide to protest the change.

Meanwhile, Rustam Ibrahimbeyov, the Oscar-winning screenplay writer, said he hoped Aliyev would not use the opportunity to run for another term.

But Ilgar Muradov, a popular singer from the president's hometown of Naxcivan, said he hoped for an "eternal presidency" for Aliyev.

Aliyev, who succeed his father Heydar in 2003, won a second five-year term in October in an election boycotted by the opposition and deemed neither free nor fair by international observers.

RFE/RL Azerbaijani Service correspondent Khadija Ismayilova contributed to this report

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Azerbaijani Director Demonized For Comments On National Elite

Government Press Releases (USA) - Tuesday, November 18, 2008

More than last month's utterly predictable presidential ballot, more even than the November 2 meeting in Moscow between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, a recent interview by the acclaimed Moscow-based Azerbaijani writer and film director Rustam Ibragimbekov has galvanized and polarized Azerbaijan's political elite and intelligentsia.

The brief interview was published by pravda.ru in late October. Asked whether the situation in Baku today is "better" than before the demise of the USSR, Ibragimbekov deplored what he termed a "demographic catastrophe" that has completely transformed the city's population. He pointed out that of a population of 1.5 million, approximately half -- mostly Azeris -- have left, and they have been replaced by 2 million newcomers who "are not ready for urban life."

As a result, Ibragimbekov continued, Baku, which used to have its own lifestyle and outlook on life, has become a totally different city, although "a few outposts" of the old mentality still survive. And even more crucially, what he referred to as

the "national elite" has been largely destroyed, and its few surviving representatives sidelined. The very mechanism for sustaining such an elite has been destroyed, Ibragimbekov continued. And in a country without a true national elite, those who rise to positions of power and authority do so not on the basis of their abilities, but thanks to family or regional ties, or financial clout.

Azerbaijan's parliament scheduled an emergency debate on Ibragimbekov's interview on October 30. In its virulence and vindictiveness, the debate was chillingly reminiscent of Soviet-era intolerance of dissent. One deputy after another accused Ibragimbekov of lacking patriotism or seeking to split the nation. For example, Yagub Mahmudov, the director of the Institute of History of Azerbaijan's Academy of Sciences, denounced the interview as an insult to the entire Azerbaijani nation, and in particular to the intelligentsia. He declared that if pravda.ru had distorted what Ibragimbekov actually said, he should disavow the interview, and that if he was quoted accurately, he should apologize.

Not a single deputy spoke out during the debate in Ibragimbekov's defense, although indefatigable oppositionist Panah Guseinov commented that if Ibragimbekov had the current parliament in mind when he spoke of persons who rose to authority despite their lack of abilities, his observation was correct. But some deputies from the ranks of the intelligentsia reportedly admitted privately that they considered the vilification of Ibragimbekov excessive.

By contrast, opposition politician Lala-Shovket Gadjiyeva lauded Ibragimbekov in a November 1 interview with day.az as "a true patriot," and argued that the parliament deputies' collective reaction only serves to underscore that "the tradition of exerting pressure on successful, honest, worthy people still survives.... We have never valued our intelligentsia," but always sought to destroy its finest representatives, Gadjiyeva said.

Echoes of the Soviet Era

Journalist Ramiz Abutalybov on November 3 compared the verbal attacks on Ibragimbekov to the 1930s denunciations of Mamed Emin Rasulzade, leader of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic from 1918-20, as an "enemy of the people," and to the later vilification of acclaimed Soviet Russian writers Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn by people who had never read a word they wrote.

The creative intelligentsia, meanwhile, rallied to Ibragimbekov's defense: a total of 286 people signed a statement affirming Ibragimbekov's right to express his views and criticizing the parliament reaction as "an alarming symptom of our lawmakers' low [level of] political culture," day.az reported on November 7.

Echoing George Bernard Shaw, Ibragimbekov told day.az on October 31 that while he does not share his critics' assessments, he respects their right to express them. He also confirmed that his original statements were not distorted, although he said they were shortened in a way that slightly changed the original emphasis. And he said he sees no reason to apologize.

But in a November 3 interview with RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service, Ibragimbekov was more categorical, affirming that parliament deputies demonstrated "political illiteracy" by convening a debate on his interview without taking into account the political implications of doing so. "The parliament session was a direct refutation of [the existence of] freedom of speech in Azerbaijan."

At the same time, Ibragimbekov stressed to RFE/RL that he did not mean to imply in his pravda.ru interview that the present Azerbaijani leadership is composed entirely of mediocrities.

While much of what Ibragimbekov said in that interview is valid, two aspects of his jeremiad nonetheless require qualification. He fails to mention that the eclipse of Baku's reputation as a cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and tolerant city began before the collapse of the USSR, with vicious reprisals against Armenians in 1988 in retaliation for the campaign initiated by the oblast soviet of the then-Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast for the enclave's unification with the then-Armenian SSR. Many Armenian families fled Azerbaijan at that time in fear of their lives.

And Ibragimbekov's warning that in a country devoid of a national elite, connections and money, rather than ability, become the key to a successful career does not encompass the counterargument that during the Soviet era, membership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and public adherence to the party line were the sine qua non for advancement.

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Azerbaijan Constructing Film Complex In Baku

Government Press Releases (USA) - Wednesday, March 31, 2010

BAKU -- Azerbaijani officials announced that foreign companies have invested some \$5 million in the construction of a major film complex in Baku, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

Rustam Ibrahimbeyov, the chairman of Azerbaijan's Cinematographers Union, presented the project on March 29. The complex will consist of a cinema house with 500 seats, a film-festival center, a world cinema museum, and an international film school.

There are also plans for a banquet hall and a hotel.

Ibrahimbeyov said construction has begun on the project and was due to be completed within two years.

Ibrahimbeyov said no state funds were being used in the complex's construction.

He said there was a minor dispute with the State Oil Company (SOCAR) over the site of the complex but it has since been resolved. Ibrahimbeyov said construction was delayed for three months due to the dispute.

The idea to build the complex was approved by President Ilham Aliyev in 2006, abc.az reported.

Ibrahimbeyov, 71, is a well-known writer, screenwriter, and dramatist who has written screenplays for such movies as the Soviet cult film "White Sun Of The Desert" and the Academy Award-winning "Burnt By The Sun."

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Azerbaijan's Opposition Gears Up To Give Aliyev Serious Challenge

Government Press Releases (USA) - Monday, June 24, 2013

By Arifa Kazimova

June 22, 2013

BAKU -- Azerbaijan hasn't had a competitive presidential election since Abulfaz Elchibey was voted into office in 1992. But the country's opposition political forces hope to change that when voters go the polls in October.

On Azerbaijan's Republic Day holiday last month, a wide swath of the country's opposition came together to form a National Council, headed by writer Rustam Ibragimbekov, 74, who won an Academy Award in 1995 for his script for the Russian film "Burnt by the Sun."

The National Council includes the Musavat Party, Ali Kerimli's Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, the EI Movement, the Civil Solidarity Party, the Open Society Party of former parliament speaker Rasul Quliyev, and around 15 others.

This development, says Baku-based political analyst Huseynbala Salimov, has captured international attention and that of the Azerbaijani government.

"In the past, the opposition has been limited to unacceptable, Russophobe, marginalized groups. Now, all of a sudden, an Oscar laureate, a successful man, has joined the opposition. Therefore, the government is concerned," Salimov says. "Face it, neither the West, nor Iran, nor Russia has ever shown serious interest in the opposition before. Now there is the possibility that such interest could appear."

Ibragimbekov (aka Ibrahimbeyov) was in Washington last week, where he held meetings with State Department officials and members of Congress. Ibragimbekov told RFE/RL he was trying to raise awareness of the National Council in Washington and to counter efforts by the government of President Ilham Aliyev to depict him as a tool of Moscow.

Resisting Change

Aliyev, whose family has presided over the country since his father helped oust Elchibey in a 1993 coup, is widely expected to seek a third term in the October 16 election, and he has already been nominated by his ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) Party (YAP).

In recent months, the government has taken several measures seemingly aimed at controlling the election process. It has downgraded the status of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Baku mission, possibly as a prelude to banning European election monitors.

It has cracked down on NGOs, arresting activists and accusing the local office of the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute of financing a "Facebook revolution" in Azerbaijan.

And on June 6 Aliyev signed a much-criticized law making the posting of defamatory or offensive views on the Internet punishable by up to three years in prison.

Speaking to reporters at a press conference in Brussels on June 21, Aliyev defended his government's record. He said that "there are no political prisoners in Azerbaijan, if you read carefully the comments after the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe this January, which rejected the report about political prisoners of Azerbaijan. I think that this chapter is closed."

On June 19, Human Rights Watch issued a statement saying that "since March 2012, the authorities have arrested or convicted at least 22 political activists, journalists, social media bloggers, human rights defenders, and others who criticized the government. This year alone, people have been charged or convicted in 16 cases."

Aliyev also rejected claims the authorities are interfering with access to information from outside or inside Azerbaijan, saying, "we have a free Internet, and the number of Internet users in Azerbaijan is more than 70 percent and there is no censorship."

Opposition Seeks Serious Challenger

The National Council has evolved slowly since its founding on May 28. Its program includes a new constitution with decentralized power and checks and balances, a parliamentary government, and new parliamentary elections in 2015.

The government has been downplaying the significance of the unified body, hoping that it would falter as past attempts to unite the opposition have. Government newspapers run daily articles criticizing the National Council and dismissing Ibragimbekov as a political amateur.

In a speech to a YAP gathering on June 7, Aliyev did not mention the National Council, but instead accused the opposition generally of following "orders given to them from abroad."

"They are ready to make any concessions in order to come to power," he said. Referring to Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic-Armenian region of Azerbaijan that has been de facto independent since 1994, Aliyev said the opposition "is ready to present Karabakh to Armenia."

YAP Deputy Chairman Ali Ahmadov told a local news agency this week that the National Council was "an ordinary incident in Azerbaijan and carries no significance." He predicted it would collapse "within a short time."

In comments to RFE/RL, YAP Deputy Executive Secretary Mubariz Gurbanli echoed the same line: "First, I do not believe they will agree on one candidate. Second, even if they agree, it will not produce a major result for the

sociopolitical process of the election, as they expect. Nothing will change, regardless of who they nominate."

Can Opposition Unite?

Behind the scenes, Aliyev and his party may not be so sanguine.

In recent weeks, Abbas Abbasov, a former insider who is based in Moscow, has weighed in with some highly critical statements about the Aliyev regime. Abbasov served as deputy prime minister under Heydar Aliyev, is a wealthy and influential figure in the Azeri diaspora, and is a friend of Ibragimbekov's. In addition to his clout, analysts view him as a potential source of funding for the opposition.

Nevertheless, with the National Council in intense negotiations over its single candidate, it is far from certain that Ibragimbekov will be endorsed. At a meeting on June 21, the group failed to choose a common candidate.

Although he is popular and well-known in Azerbaijan as a cultural figure, he has little political experience. In addition, he has spent much of the last few years living abroad, splitting his time between Moscow, Baku, and California.

He is a secretary of the Russian Cinematographers Union and chairman of the Confederation of Cinematographers Unions, which unites similar organizations from across the former Soviet Union.

'Too Early To Say'

Ibragimbekov has not openly said that he would like to be the opposition candidate, and he has not appeared in Baku since the National Council was founded. He did tell Reuters in a recent interview that he "would not be afraid" to run, if drafted.

Speaking to RFE/RL, he said was coy about his plans. "I have my own candidate in mind. We'll discuss it. I hope a single candidate will be agreed upon. Several people want me to be the candidate. There are five or six reasons why I wouldn't like that," he said.

"It's early yet for me to speak about this," he added. "I'll disclose my reasons in time. But for several reasons, it would be difficult for me to agree to this."

National Council executive headquarters head Eldar Namazov says Ibragimbekov is expected in Baku at the end of the month and a decision will be reached then.

Gulaga Aslanli, deputy head of the opposition Musavat Party, one of the National Council's most influential participants, told RFE/RL his party had no objection to supporting Ibragimbekov.

Elkhan Shahinoglu, head of the Atlas Studies Center in Baku, says some within the National Council may try to push longtime opposition politician Isa Qambar, who was the main opposition candidate from the Bizim Azerbaijan (Our Azerbaijan) bloc in 2003, as the council's choice.

However, choosing Ibragimbekov would be a game-changer that could shift the way Aliyev and YAP handle the election. "Ibragimbekov is well-known not only in Azerbaijan, but around the world. The authorities would hardly conduct a blackmail campaign against him," Shahinoglu says. "He would be supported in Washington, Moscow, and European Union countries. His financial resources also increase his chances. Unlike Azerbaijan's poor opposition, Ibragimbekov can fund his own election campaign and the National Council. That is very significant, at present."

But skeptics note that even with Ibragimbekov on the ballot, Azerbaijan is a far cry from neighboring Georgia, where billionaire political newcomer Bidzina Ivanishvili financed his own political movement and trumped President Mikheil Saakashvili's ruling party in parliamentary elections last October.

Robert Coalson contributed to this article from Prague and Richard Solash contributed from Washington

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Azerbaijani Opposition Leader Seeks Support In Washington

Government Press Releases (USA) - Monday, June 17, 2013

By Richard Solash

June 14, 2013

WASHINGTON -- Azerbaijani opposition leader Rustam Ibragimbekov has met with U.S. State Department officials in Washington this week to seek support ahead of the Caucasian country's presidential election in October.

The 74-year-old, who is known across the former Soviet Union for his work as an award-winning screenwriter, told RFE/RL, "I came to Washington and met with key representatives of the U.S. administration and Congress in order to familiarize them with our declaration, our program, our intentions, and to receive their comments."

"I hoped that our initiatives would be supported here, and that is exactly what happened," he added.

Ibragimbekov said he met with Uzra Zeya, the acting assistant secretary in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, among other department officials.

He also said he met with U.S. Senators Benjamin Cardin (Democrat-Maryland) and Roger Wicker (Republican-Mississippi), as well as with staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and U.S. Helsinki Commission.

"It was promised that they would support not us, but rather, would support the development of democracy and the chance for equal conditions for elections," Ibragimbekov said.

"If the elections are fair and [President Ilham Aliyev] is reelected, we would support and accept the choice made by the people. The important thing is that the elections are honest. It is not our goal to overthrow anyone. Our task is to ensure the elections honestly reflect the right of the people, the right of the people themselves, to elect their authorities."

While energy and counterterrorism issues often dominate relations between Washington and oil-rich, strategically located Azerbaijan, Ibragimbekov expressed confidence that his message was well-received.

"Without broad international support, it is impossible to conduct the upcoming elections [in Azerbaijan] in a more or less democratic, clean fashion," he said. "It is this kind of international support that our National Council is seeking in the United States, in Russia, in Turkey, and in Europe."

Ibragimbekov was named the chairman of Azerbaijan's opposition coalition, the National Council for Democratic Forces, on June 7. He had officially launched the coalition just days before.

Popular among Baku's intelligentsia and the Azeri diaspora in Russia, Ibragimbekov has brought new prestige and unaccustomed unity to the country's opposition elements.

While President Aliyev is widely expected to secure a third term in office this autumn, Ibragimbekov is considered to be the strongest potential challenger.

He has said that he will contest the election if named the opposition coalition's candidate and has warned that supporters could take to the streets if the vote is rigged.

Ibragimbekov told RFE/RL that if the opposition did manage to win in October, its candidate would remain president for just two years to oversee constitutional reforms before calling fresh elections.

Azerbaijan has never held elections that were just free and fair by international observers.

A controversial 2009 constitutional amendment abolishing term limits allows Aliyev to potentially stay in office

indefinitely.

When asked whether he was afraid to return to his home country, Ibragimbekov responded, "What's the meaning of the word 'afraid'? I'm 74 years old and at that age a person should not be afraid of anything."

"We're talking about what I can do to help develop democracy in Azerbaijan. What would be more effective -- my being abroad or being in an Azerbaijani prison? "Speaking from a purely pragmatic point of view, it would be right for me not to return to Azerbaijan quite yet."

Ibragimbekov said he plans to soon visit the Council of Europe and the EU Parliament.

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The Political Rise Of Azerbaijan's First Lady

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By Daisy Sindelar

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Most presidential wives in the former Soviet Union are content to remain in the background. Think Halyna Lukashenka, the soon-to-be-ex Mrs. Putin, and Azizimo Asadullaeva, the wife of Tajik leader Emomali Rahmon.

Not so Mehriban Aliyeva, the 48-year-old wife of Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev, who has avidly cultivated her own political career as a parliament deputy, charity enthusiast, and cultural ambassador, all in an increasingly expensive series of outfits.

Aliyeva's status rose even further on June 7, when she was elected deputy chair of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP).

In addition to making her the highest-ranking woman ever in Azerbaijani politics, the move has fueled speculation the first lady may be considering a presidential bid of her own -- possibly as early as this fall, when her husband is currently due to seek reelection.

Baku political observers say Aliyeva's sudden elevation to the upper ranks of YAP is a way of giving the entrenched Aliyev regime greater flexibility at a time when the president may be contemplating the wisdom of a controversial third term.

"There could be a sudden transfer of power via Mehriban Aliyeva," analyst Zafar Guliyev says. "There's also a theory that it's a step aimed not at some time in the future, but for this year's presidential election. Despite the fact that YAP has nominated Ilham Aliyev, the government is working out a backup alternative. If Ilham decides he doesn't want to run or is obliged to take back his candidacy, Mehriban can run."

'Guarantor Of Peace, Harmony, Love'

A controversial 2009 constitutional amendment abolishing term limits has technically cleared the way for the 51-year-old Aliyev to serve ad infinitum as president of the energy-rich state. He was nominated as YAP's presidential candidate on June 8 and is expected to easily secure a third term over any opposition candidate, including renowned filmmaker Rustam Ibragimbekov, widely considered to be the strongest potential challenger.

But rising anger about the regime's autocratic tendencies and ill-gotten fortune -- which in January prompted one NGO to crown Aliyev as corruption's "person of the year" -- has led some to speculate that he may even vacate the

presidency early, albeit without abandoning his hold on power.

Erkin Qadirli, a member of the Republican Alternative (ReAL) opposition movement, says Aliyev, facing increasing scrutiny and public unrest, may be looking to consolidate power among an increasingly select group of allies.

"It may be that the number of people within the party that the president relies on has diminished to such a degree that he's had to elect his wife as his assistant," he says. "They're narrowing the circle. You can say that they're choosing the most natural circle -- the family format."

Others, meanwhile, suggest Aliyev may simply be eager to give his ambitious wife the ultimate gift by offering up his post. The president's admiration of his wife is well-documented, although his estimation of her political acumen is unclear. "A woman is a woman, even if she is the president's wife," he's been quoted as saying, going on to describe her as a "guarantor of peace, harmony, and love in the family."

Keeping It In The Family

Such chauvinist-tinged sentimentality, however, belies the fact that the Aliyevs' marriage is possibly the most formidable political union in the post-Soviet arena. Ilham Aliyev is the son of Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB chief who went on to rule Azerbaijan, both before and after independence, for more than two decades.

Mehriban Aliyeva, for her part, is a product of the prominent Pashayev clan, which has come to dominate Azerbaijan's political and cultural life under Ilham's presidency and has made millions through dubious deals in real estate and telecommunications.

Nearly every member of her family carries a title of distinction in academia or politics. Her paternal grandfather, Mir Jalal, was a noted writer. Her father, Arif, serves as rector of the National Aviation Academy in Baku; her older sister, Nargiz, heads the Azerbaijani branch of Moscow State University.

Hafiz Pashayev, her uncle, was once an ambassador to the United States and now serves as deputy foreign minister. He is described in leaked U.S. diplomatic cables as playing a domineering, sometimes disapproving role in his niece's political upbringing, and once cut her off in front of members of the U.S. Congress as her English began to falter.

A husband-to-wife transfer of power may be unsurprising in Azerbaijan, which has already witnessed one hereditary succession. Heydar, shortly before his death in 2003, arranged for the presidency to pass to his son who, Guliyev notes, had already been named deputy chairman of the YAP, the same post Mehriban was appointed to last week.

"During Heydar Aliyev's time, YAP was already becoming a tool for the ruling family. Ilham Aliyev was elected deputy chair at a party convention in 2001. People inside and outside the country immediately took that to mean that Heydar Aliyev was going to transfer power to his son," the analyst explains. "And actually, Ilham Aliyev came to power and became YAP chair two years later."

Suited For Office?

Together, the Aliyevs are believed to possess a personal fortune in the tens of millions of dollars. Their wealth, built on Azerbaijan's phenomenal energy reserves and the regime's absolute grip on power, has translated into extraordinary investments into the country's art and cultural scene, much of it led by Mehriban and the couple's two daughters, Leyla and Arzu.

But it has also financed a well-equipped police state, which has routinely used tear gas and rough treatment to squelch even small public demonstrations. Aliyeva, whose appetite for high-gloss publicity rivals that of another regional political aspirant, Uzbekistan's Gulnara Karimova -- daughter of that country's president, Islam Karimov -- is also seen as contributing to the regime's notorious crackdown on independent media.

All the same, Aliyeva is seen by some as a welcome alternative to her husband. Her family's intellectual roots -- she herself graduated with a medical degree from Moscow's Sechenov Institute -- have kept her closer to the country's cultural elite.

Aliyev, whose own clan comprises gray-haired Soviet-style enforcers, is seen as having isolated that potential base of support, as evidenced by Ibragimbekov's presidential run.

Her dramatic fashion sense -- and reported encounters with plastic surgeons -- have also built Aliyeva's reputation as a model of the new, fashion-forward Muslim woman eager to push her traditional country into the 21st century.

The YAP, however, denies any suggestion that the first lady is being groomed to replace her husband. Lawmaker Yevda Abramov, a member of the party's political council, says the move is designed to enhance the role Aliyeva has always played for her husband -- a political guarantor, if you will, of peace, harmony, and love in an increasingly chilly political climate.

"All this talk is absurd," Abramov says. "What's the connection between Mehriban Aliyeva's new position and the presidential election? YAP is set to change significantly with her in her new position. The party's social base will expand. The president established this post in order to have someone who will support him in establishing a stronger Azerbaijan."

RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service contributed to this report

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