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The Two Faces of Azerbaijan's Mr. Aliyev

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan does a masterful political Jekyll and Hyde. A cable from the American ambassador to Baku released on WikiLeaks described him as a Michael Corleone-Sonny Corleone figure — referring, respectively, to the coolly calculating and the impetuously violent brothers of the “Godfather” mafia family. Mr. Aliyev is “pro-Western” in many of the ways the West admires: He is suave, well dressed and well spoken in English; he is ready to send his country’s ample supplies of oil and gas to Europe and to Israel; his Islam is moderate and modern; and he hosts lavish international events like the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012 and the European Games to be held next June.

He is also hugely corrupt, and his authoritarian regime has one of the world’s worst records on human rights.

Last month, continuing a crackdown on independent media and nongovernmental organizations, police officers [raided](#) the offices of the United States-financed Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Baku — known locally as Radio Azadliq — taking away computers and documents and sealing the premises. A dozen R.F.E./R.L. employees were detained and questioned.

A few weeks earlier, the government [jailed](#) a well-known investigative reporter, Khadija Ismayilova, who had worked for the broadcaster and had reported on the lucrative business dealings of Mr. Aliyev’s family. The government first tried to frighten and blackmail her, then hit her with the Orwellian charge that she had pushed a lover toward suicide. Another critic of the regime, Leyla Yunus, a prominent human rights activist, has been in jail since April along with her husband, Arif Yunus.

Mr. Aliyev, of course, is not the only dictator whose skillful politics and control of valuable natural resources have confronted American and European policy makers with what the cable released by WikiLeaks called “a choice between U.S. interests and U.S. values.” His father, Heydar Aliyev, ruled Azerbaijan with an iron hand from 1969 to his death in 2003, first as its Soviet boss and then as its president. The son, assisted by Azerbaijan’s oil wealth, has steadily built on the father’s cult of personality through three questionable elections.

Yet even as Mr. Aliyev cultivates the West, he is convinced that foreign-financed organizations, including R.F.E./R.L., are out to get him. Like his partner in authoritarianism, Vladimir Putin, he sees a hostile American hand behind everything from the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine to the various Arab uprisings, and he is determined to nip any such opposition in the bud. On Dec. 4, Mr. Aliyev’s top lieutenant, Ramiz Mehdiyev, published a 60-page manifesto complaining of a “fifth column” of nongovernmental organizations plotting a revolution, and suggesting that Ms. Ismayilova was getting her information from “foreign spies.”

The West must understand that the authoritarian Mr. Aliyev is the real Mr. Aliyev. As he accelerates his campaign to crush opponents and any other semblance of freedom, the United States and Europe should make far clearer than they have that while they may be compelled to do business with him, they have no illusions about what he is and the severe damage he is doing to his country.