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## Azerbaijan

# Azerbaijan strongman Ilham Aliyev names wife as vice-president

Appointment consolidates first lady's position as frontrunner to succeed her husband



*Mehriban Aliyeva, who has previously served as an MP, has long been tipped as a potential successor to husband Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's president © AP*

FEBRUARY 21, 2017 by: **Henry Foy** in Moscow

Azerbaijan's president [Ilham Aliyev](https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Ilham_Aliyev) ([https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Ilham\\_Aliyev](https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Ilham_Aliyev)) has named his wife as his deputy, tightening the family's grip on power in the small former Soviet oil-producing state.

Mehriban Aliyeva will become Azerbaijan's first vice-president, Mr Aliyev said in a decree issued on Tuesday that did not detail her responsibilities but effectively installed the first lady as the country's second most powerful person and consolidated her position as a frontrunner to succeed her husband.

Energy-rich [Azerbaijan \(https://www.ft.com/topics/places/Azerbaijan\)](https://www.ft.com/topics/places/Azerbaijan) has been controlled by the Aliyev family for most of the past five decades. Mr Aliyev's father Heydar was head of the country's governing Communist party before becoming president of the post-Soviet republic in 1993. His son took over as leader in 2003.

Mrs Aliyeva, who on Tuesday attended a meeting of the country's security council, hailed the support of her husband in accepting the position.

"Mr President, I express my deep gratitude to you for this high confidence in me," she said, in remarks reported by local media. "Your assistance and your support stand behind each success and each achievement [of mine] you have mentioned."

The 52-year-old Mrs Aliyeva, who hails from one of Azerbaijan's most powerful families, is well known in the majority Muslim country for her western dress sense. A 2010 [US embassy cable \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/245758\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/245758) published by WikiLeaks described her as having had "substantial plastic surgery" that rendered her "unable to show a full range of facial expression".

Like many longstanding rulers in central Asia, [Mr Aliyev \(http://next.ft.com/content/d151cb58-8721-11e6-a75a-0c4dce033ade\)](http://next.ft.com/content/d151cb58-8721-11e6-a75a-0c4dce033ade), 55, has positioned himself as a guarantor of the country's stability, security and long-term energy prospects. He has also closely aligned the country with western allies as a bulwark against Russian influence in the Caspian region, which borders Iran and Turkey.

## Global Insight

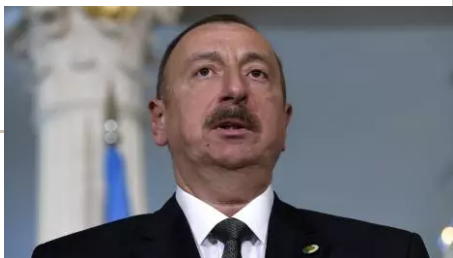
Azerbaijan's strongman hankers after greater power (<http://next.ft.com/content/d151cb58-8721-11e6-a75a-0c4dce033ade>)

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But human rights groups have condemned the administration for alleged abuses and suppression of dissent and political opposition. In October an anti-corruption watchdog ordered it to remove [restrictions on NGOs \(http://next.ft.com/content/dee61e6c-9b5e-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae\)](http://next.ft.com/content/dee61e6c-9b5e-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae) or risk losing financing or a lucrative oil pipeline.

"For all its accommodation with the west, Azerbaijan is one of the world's longest-running dynasties and the ruling Aliyev family sees little

constitution is unclear because he has never felt bound by it



incentive to change,” said Kate Mallinson, an independent analyst on the Caspian region. “The direction of the country’s political trajectory has been obvious from the creeping ‘illiberalisation’ of the government.”

Mrs Aliyeva, who has previously served as an MP and runs a charity, has long been tipped as a

potential successor to her husband, Ms Mallinson added.

The appointment of Mrs Aliyeva to a full constitutional role comes after a referendum in September granted extra powers to the president. These included the right to choose his deputy and an extension of the length of presidential terms to seven years, from five years previously.

The passing of the referendum was viewed by analysts as affirming Mr Aliyev’s dynastic rule in Azerbaijan, ensuring he can continue to run for office after limits on the number of presidential terms were removed in 2009.

The Venice Commission, which advises on constitutional law for the Council of Europe, the human rights watchdog, said the constitutional changes passed by the referendum give “unprecedented” control to the president.

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