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A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.

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THE LIKELIHOOD OF THE UNLIKELY: DEMOCRACY IN AZERBAIJAN AT THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY¹

By Rahman Badalov²

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
'I don't much care where –' said Alice.
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.
L. Carroll, "Alice in Wonderland"

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in developing countries is always a challenge. From the outside, it seems a universal technology and, therefore, *possible* for all countries, regardless of their historical and cultural experiences. From the inside, it seems *impossible* because of the persistence of the totalitarian mindset, the habit of paternalistic patronage, the fear of routine work, impatience, and so on. The problem of democracy in developing countries is the problem of *the possibility of the impossible*.

At one instant, democracy in Azerbaijan runs ahead, at another, it rolls far back, sometimes it falls into illusions, at other times, it passes into a state of indifference and apathy. At some point, the nation imagines itself to be in transition to democracy, but later becomes disillusioned with democracy and with the whole civilized community into the bargain. In response to challenges from the outside, the Azerbaijani mentality discovers new internal barriers from the inside which must be overcome to make serious democratic reforms possible. Time will tell what the number of these internal barriers is, if there will be enough will to overcome them, and for how long these processes will draw out.

And if the truth is on the side of those who believe that democracy can only sur-

1 This paper was published by the CI in Russian as: Badalov, Rahman. "Demokratiya v Azerbajane: nachalo XXI veka." *Diaspora, neft i rosy: chem. zhivut strany Yuzhnogo Kavkaza* ("Democracy in Azerbaijan: the Start of the 21st Century." *Diaspora, Oil and Roses: What Makes the Countries of the South Caucasus Tick*). Ed. by Ivlian Khaindrava and Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Heinrich Böll Foundation and Caucasus Media Institute, 2005 (in Russian). – Pp.10-32.

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vive if it becomes introspective – i.e. describing and analyzing its own actions, then the necessity for introspection remains a serious challenge for democracy in Azerbaijan. Democracy in Azerbaijan, as in any country of the world, must recognize and adjust itself at every step of the way, rather than trying to feed its future with age-old illusions, false promises and blatant myth-making. That, in turn, requires openness and publicity in the interaction between institutionalized or spontaneous centers of thought and the society, which should be able to understand the information supplied by these centers and respond to it by adjusting political and social structures accordingly. Only then will we be able to talk about the genuine results of post-communist transformation in Azerbaijan.

THE REALITIES OF HISTORY IN THE MINDS OF AZERBAIJANIS

Both from the outside and the inside, Azerbaijan is usually seen to be at the intersection of the East-West and North-South axes, with an asymmetrical focus on the East and the South. This conditional geography has largely defined the history and culture of Azerbaijan, and in modern times, it has defined the geopolitical position of Azerbaijan in the world. From the inside, this geography and geopolitics defined a cultural conflict where national traditions (mainly Turkic and Islamic) interacted with the European cultural experience at various stages of Azerbaijani history; from the outside, they often turned Azerbaijan into an instrument of geopolitical manipulation.

Within this historical and cultural matrix - a sort of crossroads of cultures and religions - the people of Azerbaijan had to overhaul their political and ideological systems at least three times in the course of the past 150 years. The first time it happened was in the second half of the 19th century, as a result of the industrial boom associated with oil mining, the growth of national mentality, a new search for national identity, and a deeper perception of European culture. The political outcome of this stage was the founding of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR), a parliamentary republic that existed in 1918-1920. Its parliament may be considered the pinnacle of Azerbaijani parliamentarism (and for the beginning of the 20th century, perhaps, the peak of all parliamentarism in both the Near East and the Middle East). Alongside other factions, ethnic minorities were represented in that parliament, including the “Slavonic-Russian alliance” faction, two Armenian factions – the Dashnaktsutyun and the Armenian Faction, and a few others. The Armenian factions were present despite the then strained relationship with Armenia.

The second overhaul took place after the advance of the Red Army and Azer-

baijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union. Soviet political rhetoric declared the USSR to be a union of independent national republics, several of which were even *de jure* subjects of international law. But *de facto*, the national republics were the satellites of the center, a fact clearly expressed in the formula of "*Moscow. The Kremlin*" as a symbol of the whole country.

The third overhaul followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence, when we had to master the paradigm of civilized life: democracy, rule of law, liberal economy, human rights, etc.

Such a drastic and profound change of "historical epochs" (almost historical upheavals) in such a short historical period could not fail to affect the mentality of modern Azerbaijanis. First, they started perceiving the world beyond their thresholds as an "alien realm" to which one must adapt without setting any goals that go beyond family wellbeing. The history of the country (state, nation) became "alien" and in no way related to real life. Second, because the "historical epochs" (that were so close in time) were perceived as quite discrete, the very notion of "history" eroded, and the concept of transition transformed into the usual extra-historical stereotypes, like "nothing can change," and "things will stay the same forever." Third, it led to a split in the society where some groups of people could not relate their interests to those of other groups of people. Social and cultural differences were no longer natural but painful, because they were no longer sanctioned either by tradition or by history. The crack inside the "us" spawned newer versions of the conflict between "us and them" ("nationalist-cosmopolitan," "townsman-villager," "Azeri-speaking-Russian-speaking," "native Baku resident - newcomer Baku resident," "Turkic - non-Turkic," plus a variety of derogatory slang names for migrants, plus impenetrable barriers between the elite and the masses, plus a painful reaction to the one-sided regional representation of the authorities, etc.) and produced a dramatic conflict. Fourth, the majority of the population began to take its complete dependence on the state for granted. Political and civic mimicry became the norm of behavior, while such civil and political institutions as "a court," "a party," "the parliament," "elections," "human rights," etc., were perceived as pure phantoms.

How shall one treat this historical experience in terms of the prospects of building a democratic society? Is this experience the same for all post-colonial countries? Is it always negative? I can only say that introspective Azerbaijani democracy (which is what it should be) will have to start by focusing its attention on democracy vs. Azerbaijani Enlightenment, democracy vs. the quest for national identity, democracy vs. nationalism, democracy vs. authoritarianism (both top-down and bottom-up), democracy vs. Islamic values. Importantly, all these issues must be considered in a

systemic unity. The Azerbaijani Enlightenment, which was intense and impatient, realistic and naive (perhaps every Enlightenment involves overestimating the possibility of revamping the world with the help of reason), attempted to formulate a national idea. The national idea gave impetus to the quest for national identity; the quest for national identity, in turn, provoked nationalism of various stripes. Nationalism transformed the nation into a political actor and, at the same time, provoked renewed interest in Islamic values. In the end, nationalism both gave impetus to democratic changes and reined them in, because, as a rule, nationalism can only operate with simplistic models, including a simplistic model of democracy.³

All these historical upheavals gave rise to such features of modern Azerbaijani mentality as submissiveness to circumstances, inclination to mimicry, the habit of being constantly manipulated, a weak sense of inner freedom and independence, fear of openness and transparency, rejection of self-discovery. It was with such a mindset that we began democratic transformations following the declaration of independence.

AZERBAIJAN IN THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

The ten years of Azerbaijan's independence can be divided into two asymmetric periods, both in terms of time and essence (it is too soon to talk about the third period, which began with the 2003 presidential election).

It would be fair to brand the first period as spontaneously democratic due to the fact that it was marked by anti-imperialistic and anti-totalitarian protest. In terms of social action, though, it never went beyond the "revolt of the masses" and democracy of rallies, and ended with the short-lived (under 12 months) rule of the National Front of Azerbaijan (NFA). The *perestroika* and related developments in the Soviet Union gave impetus to this movement but its immediate catalyst was the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (i.e. challenges from outside and inside).⁴ The movement had to wrestle not only with the resistance of the pro-Soviet political nomenclature, but also - and that was very typical - with the resistance of the mass mentality, accustomed to "no participation" and "no presence."

3 See Nodia, Ghia. "Nationalism and Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 3, Number 4, October 1992. – Pp. 3-22; see also Francis Fukuyama's comments on Nodia's paper, *ibid.* – Pp. 23-28.

4 For details, see: Abbasov, Ali and Dmitri Furman. "Azerbaijanskaya revolyutsiya." *Azerbaijan i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva*. ("The Azerbaijani Revolution." *Azerbaijan and Russia. Societies and States*). – Moscow: 2001 (in Russian). – Pp.118-176.

In general, democracy in Azerbaijan during the reign of the NFA can be defined as non-institutionalized democracy.

First, the country's civil society was in its infancy (the number of non-governmental organizations was minuscule; local self-government was absent altogether, the multi-party system was only emerging, etc.).

Second, the organizing body of the NFA did not have sufficient administrative personnel (it has been estimated that the representatives of the NFA held only about 267 of the approximately 5000 administrative positions).

Third, the "face" of that government (not only in the social, but even in the physiognomic sense) was so unusual that it scared the average citizen, who was always fearful of change, especially because there were a lot of angry losers with excessive ambitions among the administrators appointed by that government. The NFA lacked the usual aura of power and that affected the attitude of the society (parodies, jokes, derogatory labels etc. were widespread).

At the same time, during the NFA's rule, there was an outburst of people's energy, though largely chaotic and not properly contained.

The main slogan of the new Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev and his team was the replacement of "incompetent" people from the street with "competent" statesmen (mainly former Communist party and nomenclature). The views of these new-old officials, however, were far removed from democratic values. Just beginning to learn democratic phraseology, these people were still accustomed to authoritarian methods of government and a rigid power hierarchy.

As in many post-Soviet states, in Azerbaijan, the presidency filled the existing political vacuum at a time when political parties, political elites and the civil society had not yet properly stabilized. The publicly expressed concerns that the president may eventually concentrate the whole power in his hands, thereby creating an authoritarian regime, were not perceived as a serious threat by the population, because only the absolute power of a strong personality (i.e. the "strong hand") could guarantee stability and order.

Beginning with the first presidency of Heydar Aliyev (1993-1998), the government officially declared its commitment to democratic values, and opposition parties were represented in the parliament, but democracy in Azerbaijan was increasingly controlled from the top, responding to external challenges primarily with an imitation of democratic transformations. As for domestic ideology, it focused on the role of the political leader as a historic "savior" of the nation, whose return provided for social stability and the creation of the Azerbaijani "state."

The post-Heydar Aliyev era has just began; it is beginning as if nothing has

changed in our society: dirty political technologies at presidential elections, and, where that is not sufficient, extreme violence, police batons, arrests, torture, direct neglect of the views of the international community. The Azerbaijani authorities, it seems, were able to adapt to new conditions (learning the lessons of Heydar Aliyev), ignoring the opinion of the domestic opposition and sluggishly reacting to criticism from international organizations. The world, both from inside and outside, turned to be completely safe for the new-old Azerbaijani authorities, and for now, nothing can shake that confidence of theirs.

HEYDAR ALIYEV AND “HEYDARALIYEVS”

One cannot talk about both the political and non-political history of Azerbaijan of the late 20th - early 21st century without referring to the figure of Heydar Aliyev. Democracy in Azerbaijan in the past ten years is certainly a controlled democracy, and it was controlled primarily by one person, Heydar Aliyev. Democracy in Azerbaijan in the past ten years is not only a manifestation of the underlying processes stirring the society, but also the result of Heydar Aliyev's political maneuvers, or, in other words, his ability to influence people and circumstances so that they would not leave his control, would always be subject to his will, and would not endanger Heydar Aliyev, his family and his close associates. The ability to totally control the situation was perhaps Heydar Aliyev's key quality.

Heydar Aliyev worked for the NKVD-KGB system for about 30 years, becoming a Soviet KGB general, and never abandoned the methods employed by the KGB (the same total control over the situation and human beings). Unlike the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis, he managed to enter the highest ranks of the Soviet political establishment and was for the rest of his life proud of this career achievement (to Heydar Aliyev, his political career was a confirmation of his superiority over all other Azerbaijanis). Both when his office was called the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, and when it was called the President of the Azerbaijani Republic, Heydar Aliyev created and maintained a regime of personal authoritarian power, and thereby largely emasculated the Azerbaijani society. But how can an almost 33-year rule by one person in a country go without a corresponding response of the society to this rule, and also, perhaps in this sense, does not the portrait of that one man become the collective portrait of his fellow countrymen? How did it happen that the post-communist euphoria in Azerbaijan was so quickly replaced by the return of a former Communist leader to power? Who can argue that Heydar Aliyev's political actions were not dictated by the demands of the time, in

Azerbaijan and beyond? What is the reason that Heydar Aliyev was not perceived as an odious figure by the global community, unlike, say, the post-Soviet leaders of Belarus or Turkmenistan? Perhaps a figure of Heydar Aliyev's scale should not be considered only from a political perspective; is it not hard to imagine a future writer for whom Heydar Aliyev will be interesting simply as a man with a strong will and an incredible strength of spirit that conquered the most adverse circumstances and created his own destiny with his own hands. Although the official mourning for the death of Heydar Aliyev has ended in the country, sophisticated intellectuals from the government camp are on Azerbaijani television almost every day, trying to invent new rationales in the vein that that we, the Azerbaijanis, have lost a genius never equaled in our history, a man who created the "modern Azerbaijan," and who was almost a dissident in Soviet times. Referring to sacred religious texts, a well-known theologian and academician of the National Academy explains to viewers that Heydar Aliyev was chosen by God. A commission is working to perpetuate the memory of the president, and it is putting forth the most extravagant proposals, for example, erecting a huge statue of Heydar Aliyev in the sea (perhaps to compete with the American Statue of Liberty). But at the same time, the most radical opposition newspapers in Azerbaijan describe Heydar Aliyev as a typical twentieth century dictator; they extensively quote "The Autumn of the Patriarch" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, finding direct parallels in the novel with the final stage of Heydar Aliyev's life and with his death.

In contrast to other myths, political myths are usually short-lived and quickly destroyed by the first serious challenge that time mounts. One can easily suppose that this will sooner or later (rather sooner) happen to the political myth about Heydar Aliyev. But what will happen with the real legacy of Aliyev in the minds and souls of Azerbaijanis, including the minds and souls of the political and intellectual elite? How will this affect our future? Is serious introspection possible in present-day Azerbaijan on what has happened to us over the past decade? If that turns out to be possible (for now it is hard to believe that), then the first thing that will have to undergo an in-depth analysis will be the widely publicized idea that Heydar Aliyev saved the country from chaos, built our statehood, raised our prestige on the international arena, etc. One will have to answer whether there are any national interests in the name of which the state can resort to sophisticated and, if necessary, rough methods of destroying any serious opposition opinion; besides, there are reasons to expect the current government to stick to Heydar Aliyev's "successful" policies. Is it a virtue when one man is able to successfully rule not only the state but also the society, ignoring the constitution? Should we admire the fact that one man person-

ally supervises all major financial flows within the country? Can we have a strong state with a weak civil society, and what is the good of such a state for its ordinary citizens? Why does disappointment with our government make us apathetic, and why does disappointment in one man result in a loss of faith in the society of normal people, in which everyone's fate is not decided by the Father-Savior but by us, the ones who vote, monitor, elect and reelect? How shall we reconcile the paternalistic tendencies so typical of Azerbaijani mentality with the establishment of democratic institutions that rule out any "fatherly" care?

Adam Michnik, the famous Polish dissident, used to tell his version of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. According to Michnik, for decades we have tried to break through into the cave, the entrance to which was guarded by the seemingly indestructible idol of communism. Finally, we managed to crush it, break into the cave, and there, to our horror, we found a huge number of no less powerful idols, whose existence we had never suspected. Similarly, we have been trying for many years to destroy the idol of "Heydar Aliyev", and when we finally succeed and we break into the cave, we will find a lot of idols, "heydaraliyevs," whose existence we have not suspected. Only then, with the fight against these idols, the struggle for genuine democracy in Azerbaijan will begin.

AZERBAIJAN'S OPPOSITION BETWEEN "YESTERDAY" AND "TOMORROW"

Both on the eve of presidential elections and afterwards, the topic of the opposition occupied the front pages of Azerbaijani newspapers. We hear faint calls for dialogue from the authorities' side, although these calls can hardly have a constructive basis, because for more than ten years the opposition has been declared the main cause of almost all ills and society's number one enemy. After the elections, the opposition was criticized not only by government newspapers, but by "centrist" and radical publications as well.⁵ Everybody wants to stone the opposition losers (even if *de facto* they have not lost), as if retaliating for unfulfilled expectations, or simply as a symptom of general disappointment and frustration.

In my opinion, many of those who are trying to distance themselves from the Azerbaijani opposition do not realize that the existence of that opposition allows them to at least preserve some degree of independence, even in private, non-polit-

⁵ See, for example, "The opposition is confused. One can even assume that it is prostrate." *Zerkalo*, December 11, 2003. The first sentence in the heading is in large type and spread over the whole page, so that readers can appreciate its social significance.

ical issues, like having less reason to fear the bosses and less need to pretend, and being able to freely buy and openly read the most radical publications. We can admit that the Azerbaijani opposition has done little to help us become a civilized society, with properly functioning rule-of-law institutions, but at the same time, we must acknowledge that the Azerbaijani opposition has been helping us overcome the totalitarian Soviet past rooted in the minds of people.

However, all this happened *yesterday*. We have passed a milestone in the history of our democracy; it had begun with massive rallies at the “Azadlyg” (“Liberty”) square in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, continued for a year under the NFA government, passed through many other states and ended with the October events in Azerbaijan. One has to admit that this stage is gone forever (relapses can only be pathetic and comical). Something is over. It ended in defeat, if one does not perceive defeat as death; sometimes, though, defeat equals victory, if one has the courage to honestly interpret it. A hundred thousand people rallying for the opposition just days before the elections of October 15, 2003, speeches by opposition candidates on television (outside the campaign, they have never had that opportunity), which stirred the public, a premonition of a possible victory of the opposition (the premonition was part gamble and part over-excitement but also a true spiritual uplift), the presidential elections that triggered unprecedented engagement of Azerbaijani society, and then a decline and disappointment with the reaction of the international community to the events in Azerbaijan.⁶ Azerbaijanis will remember the demeanor of the Norwegian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Steinar Gil, who clearly and unequivocally declared that democracy, freedom and humanism have no alternative and cannot be a bargaining chip, even for a high-ranking diplomat.⁷ However, that was all *yesterday*, even though some of those trends persist.

Despite disagreeing with much of what is being written about the Azerbaijani opposition, I am inclined to think that the past presidential elections in Azerbaijan must become some sort of a borderline for the opposition, a borderline to be followed by new ideas and new actions.

The ability to prolong the future (the *tomorrow*) is an important ability of living systems; if, of course, they are still *living systems*.

⁶ In this sense, the question posed by well-known human rights activist Arzu Abdullayeva is illustrative. “Have international institutions betrayed us?” One newspaper chose to run this as the heading for her interview (*Obozrevatel*, November 26, 2003). From disappointment with the world to frustration with oneself there is only one step.

⁷ *Echo*, December 13, 2003.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN AZERBAIJAN

A. *The myth of stability and the civil society*

Debates over civil society mention a problem that relates directly to the social and political realities of Azerbaijan. The problem may be described with the following formula: “stability versus democracy” (an important modification of it is “force versus dialogue”). For the past nearly ten years, the Azerbaijani authorities have built virtually all of their political rhetoric around the myth of stability: stability = the doing of the president, stability = end of chaos and amateurism in politics, stability = successful nationbuilding, etc. Everyone who dares to criticize the equation of *Stability = President = State = Nation = Azerbaijani people* is destructive and plainly hostile. These include those parties, NGOs, media and other civil society organizations that are not subject to control from the top.

Arguing with the myth is pointless and hopeless. But the problem of “stability versus democracy” is a very serious one; it has many aspects (political, psychological, and perhaps even mental), and correlates with the establishment of civil society in Azerbaijan in the form of the following three questions: How is the establishment of civil society possible in post-Soviet, post-totalitarian societies? What modifications may civil society undergo in these societies? How can civil society function in a place where cultural and mental traditions do not contain prerequisites for democracy? Or, perhaps, in this case we should rather speak about prerequisites for an anthropogenic civilization?

All post-Soviet countries (the Baltic countries to a lesser extent) have emerged from the Soviet totalitarian system. Several decades of existence in the Soviet Union accustomed us to the fact that our whole life - from the state-run maternity ward to the state-run cemetery - happens within the state and under its constant supervision. The social structure of post-Soviet societies in the early years after independence was about the same. It included presidential authority with almost unlimited powers (in Azerbaijan, political rhetoric has presented Heydar Aliyev as absolutely synonymous with the notion of “President”). Public officials became super-monopolists in the economy (in Azerbaijan, the bureaucracy itself is under the full subordination of the President and his family). Meanwhile, most people in the society are dispossessed, especially in terms of their mentality.

A thin stratum of so-called “oligarchs” has formed in several post-Soviet countries, but almost everywhere (Azerbaijan is no exception), these people cater to the demands of the ruling clan (“the Family”) not to the requirements of the market.

We can therefore state that political power in Azerbaijan is used as a tool to obtain huge profits, thus consolidating the authoritarian, bureaucratic and corrupt system of government. Add to this the amalgamation of power and property, and you inevitably get a judicial system dependent on the authorities, and the substitution of human and civil rights with privileges (their extent depends on one's place in the vertical hierarchy). Given all this, it is not surprising that such "societies" have been nicknamed "neo-feudal."

Can institutions of civil society operate under such conditions? After all, the first shoots of civil society in Azerbaijan had to find social lifts in that kind of a "society" (to be more precise, in that kind of a "state"). Those shoots could only grow due to external challenges, primarily thanks to international funds and the global information space in which post-Soviet countries found themselves once the Soviet information barriers finally went down. The institutions proto-civil society, or rather, the proto-institutions of civil society of proto-civil society, recruited into their ranks many active and enterprising citizens (both honest and dishonest, unscrupulous and moral) who, depending on the public mood, got involved in political parties, the non-governmental sector (NGOs), and the media. However, the social space of the civil society was under pressure from all sides, mostly on the part of the state that tried to keep this sector under its control, but also on the part of the "society" (the dispossessed population), which was afraid of independent existence without state support. It is unlikely (at least in the transition period) that an atmosphere of publicity, competitiveness and free "pulsation" (all that Jürgen Habermas ties with the concept of "the public sphere") can emerge in Azerbaijan and in most other former Soviet countries. Similarly, it is hard to expect in the near future that we will build institutions of civil society that are, first, public and open; second, capable of establishing multi-dimensional, communicative links; third, able to defend themselves from the power of the bureaucratic, corporate-authoritarian state; fourth, preserving their spontaneity but able to avoid the excessive greed and selfishness of personal, family and group interests (the latter is particularly relevant for Azerbaijan); fifth; sixth, tenth ... One should hope that domestic challenges will remain and challenges from the outside will not weaken. Also, one should hope people will eventually realize that democracy is impossible without at least some separation of the society from the state.

Finally, we need to look at the cultural matrix and popular mindset that can either prevent or encourage the establishment of democracy (or of an anthropogenic civilization) in general and institutions of civil society in particular. Did Azerbaijan possess historical-cultural and mental preconditions for such a leap? To answer this

question, one must go beyond the scope of this article and perhaps beyond democracy studies in general. One will need to see post-communist transformations in the context of either a dialogue or a clash of civilizations, and view the possibility of democracy in post-Soviet countries from the perspective of mastering the cultural-genetic code of an anthropogenic civilization.

B. Institutions of civil society in Azerbaijan

The establishment of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should be recognized as the most significant achievement of civil society in Azerbaijan. The NGO movement in Azerbaijan began in 1991, immediately after the independence and at a time when many international organizations opened their offices in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus. As of November 2003, there were approximately 2000 registered NGOs in Azerbaijan, of which approximately 25 percent were active. Their activities chiefly lie in the realm of human rights, environment, health, education, people with disabilities, children, youth, gender and migration.

The NGO movement in Azerbaijan remains vulnerable for the following reasons:

- The state has monopolized the social sector, does not view NGOs as social partners, and is potentially ready for direct or covert repressive measures to prevent NGOs from becoming an autonomous and independent force;
- Among the majority of the population, accustomed to paternalism in the social sphere, there is distrust, and sometimes even outright aggression with regard to NGOs (one of the negative labels, “grant-eaters,” is essentially a reaction of dispossessed consciousness);
- State and public distrust towards NGOs prevents them from overcoming the open or latent tendencies of state tutelage and moving into the open public space, with a strong reliance on communication, social and legal technologies;
- In the absence of funding from the government, NGOs largely remain the clients of Western donors, which forces them to adapt to the donors’ priorities;
- There is a persistent gap between actual projects and the real concerns and needs of the society (the population); and
- Financial sustainability of NGOs remains elusive, because NGOs are not actually involved in the real market.

Any innovation program presupposes the involvement of active agents of the society, but if the initiative of these agents, united in voluntary organizations, continues to be restrained, then the NGO sector in Azerbaijan will forever remain dependent on Western funds and at best engage in charitable activities.

Under new conditions, social investments by the government should not be about distributing privileges; rather, they must aim to create a legal space which is essential for the self-fulfillment of citizens. In Azerbaijan, however, even the simple issue of the legal registration of NGOs becomes a lever of pressure on NGOs in the hands of the authorities (another manifestation of the so-called “controlled democracy”). Nevertheless, the recent struggle against the abolition of the amendments to the Law on Grants adopted by the parliament in June 2002, which was aimed at the subordination of NGOs to local executive bodies, demonstrated that Azerbaijani NGOs have become a real social force, and are able to consolidate, when and if necessary.

Local self-government bodies (municipalities) could become another important sector of civil society in Azerbaijan. The laws on local self-government in Azerbaijan were drafted back in 1997, but were not approved by the parliament. The amended legislation was adopted only in 1999, right before the first and so far the only elections to municipalities. They generated an unprecedented electoral situation in the country: overall, 27,000 municipalities were established throughout Azerbaijan. However, both the elections and the first results of the operation of municipalities have demonstrated, first, that the very existence of municipalities, as a form of plurality in the field of public administration, remains alien to the philosophy of the government in power in Azerbaijan. Second, they put on display the complete unpreparedness of the population to the ideas and practices of local self-government. Scant and confused views on local self-government were held not just by voters but also by the first wave of elected municipal officials.

By creating municipalities (above all, under pressure from the international community), the government allowed a rather large number of opposition representatives access to the social stage, but had no wish to share power with the newly organized bodies. For instance, according to Article 7 of the Law on Land Reform, part of the land was transferred to municipalities to ensure that they would be able to finance their activities from the income from these lands. However, the subsequently adopted Land Code (Article 46) took the land away from municipalities. Thanks to this Code, the legislative and executive branches (no need to repeat that under Azerbaijani “neo-feudalism,” both branches are components of a single power hierarchy) substantially limited the financial resources of local “self-government” bodies. In Baku, the executive took control of those areas of activity that by law must have been transferred to municipalities (advertising, etc.) Data which is both funny and sad was published by *Qanun* (“Law”) magazine that put together a comparative table of the division of powers between the executive and municipal authorities. In

almost all areas (agriculture, transport, communications, trade, etc.) powers intersect, and the powers of the executive greatly exceed the opportunities of municipalities. The only sphere exclusively controlled by municipalities is “the organization of funeral services and the protection of cemeteries”; however, it is hard to believe that a potentially income-generating activity - and funeral services are one - can actually stay in the hands of municipalities.

We have to admit that most municipalities are virtually dormant. Only a few of the most enterprising mayors manage to find scarce funds to implement minuscule activities. There is, meanwhile, no doubt that both local self-government and the restoration of the historic and cultural diversity of Azerbaijan depends on the future of municipalities. “Controlled democracy” is essentially a euphemism for the lack of civil society. That is why one can easily surmise that the problem of “civil society vs. controllability” will remain the major challenge for the Democracy Project in Azerbaijan. Anyway, civil society in Azerbaijan remains the main area where the individual has an opportunity for self-determination, and therefore also freedom, or, in other words, becoming conscious of one’s presence in this world. That consciousness, once it emerges, becomes ineradicable, even if it appears suppressed, stifled, and totally controlled. It is just waiting for its time.

BAKU: A CITY AND A STATE

In this article, we refer to the capital city to an extent to which its history and modernity impact democratic changes in Azerbaijan. The paradox is that industrial and postindustrial Baku encourages democratic change while also preventing it by being an apparent substitute for the rest of Azerbaijan and an epitome of authoritarianism.

In the early 19th century, it was impossible to identify Baku with the country whose capital it would later become. Therefore, we have reason to believe that the chronotopes (the co-ordinates in which time intersects with space, thereby creating a particular cultural and historical phenomenon) of Baku and Azerbaijan only began to converge, overlap, coincide and, subsequently, mutually identify only in recent times, reaching an extreme when one chronotope threatens to destroy the other.

Beyond doubt, conquest by the Russian Empire stimulated Baku’s urban development, manifest in the gradual reduction of agricultural activity, population growth and changes in its composition, and in various trends of economic development, education, etc. In many ways, however, the city remained an agricultural one,

though with differentiation of crafts (possibly, a legacy of a developed medieval town) servicing in part the needs of agriculture.

The situation changed dramatically with the advent of the oil boom. It started with rapid industrial development of the city, typical of the so-called “mushroom towns” that grow in close proximity to sources of commodities: the construction of a port and a railway, an intensive influx of people and the emergence of a large metropolitan area and of a commercial and administrative city center, and the construction of luxurious private houses, many of which later became architectural monuments. Various forms of municipal government developed gradually, though the divide between civilian and military rule remained intact (an empire is an empire) until the establishment of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic.

In Soviet times, Baku became the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic, with all ensuing symbols and rituals. The city’s industry developed, and a satellite town was established. Baku turned into an educational and cultural center with many research and education institutions, libraries, theaters, and cinemas.

Since independence (especially in the past 5-7 years), a huge number of new buildings have been erected. Embassies, banks, offices of international companies, supermarkets, night clubs etc. have opened in Baku.

The picture seems very rosy, suggesting a smooth transition from a “city of commodities” to a multifunctional modern industrial city. Apparently, the costs of such rapid development can be considered natural and some of them even inevitable: many large industrial cities have “shanty towns,” and some countries have become hinterland of their new-born capitals. But today many things suggest a crisis in the development of Baku, which to a greater or lesser extent affects democratic reform in Azerbaijan. A rather regrettable “functional transmission” is underway: having started its urban development from a commodity function, Baku is gradually returning to it. On one hand, the “commodity base” makes Baku an instrument of geopolitical manipulations (in which we, Azeris, do not seem to be present), on the other hand, in the absence of proper democratic institutions, it aggravates corruption. It is well known that many cities have disappeared from the historical arena due to overexploitation of natural resources and failure to ensure a “functional transmission”; we cannot exclude such a scenario in the case of Baku.

However, it is possible that in the historical cataclysm like the one Baku has experienced, mutational phenomena emerge that are hard to pin down. They lead to the emergence of a new active type of person with a new lifestyle (or, so far, without one), whom most other people reject on aesthetic or ethical grounds. Neverthe-

less, time may eliminate many of the concerns and perhaps harmonize the “old” and “new” worldviews.

Below I cite two factors in the development of Baku that, in my opinion, have become major obstacles to democracy in Azerbaijan.

A) The extremes of centralization

Baku, with its concentration of political and administrative power, has for some time been suppressing political, social, intellectual and even artistic life in the regions. In political terms, such centralization is an extension and expression of the hierarchy of power in Azerbaijan. It is not just about the “emasculatation” of the regions, but about Baku not being able to cope with the flow of refugees, displaced persons and migrants moving in the search of jobs. In the absence of an organic “functional transmission,” various ways of behavior in the city become mutually hostile, and it is difficult to predict how this pot may behave. On the other hand, there is nothing unusual about metropolitan areas that suck energy out of provinces and then crumble under the pressure of those same energies.

B) The non-reflective principle of urban life

For normal life, a city (even if it is not democratic) needs adequate information about itself, ranging from data on economic activity to the variety of opinions that citizens hold on various issues. Therefore, a city must constantly engage in *self-description* and *self-reflection*, which must ensure the self-regulation of its fragile social coexistence (in this case, fragility is a virtue of the city, like the fragility of democracy is its virtue). Without the reflective exercises, the city will slip into the traditional rural lifestyle (which always exists on the city’s margins and in its “subconscious”), giving preference to the past “non-reflective” experiences of the ancestors over self-reflection through a constant flow of information. In this event, the past, as something more stable and more deeply rooted in the mind, will constantly return, but it will do so in perverse forms.

In Baku’s everyday life, in its administration and in its, so to speak, philosophy, information and self-discovery have not become truly functional. There is still no clarity on such key issues as the changes in the proportion between urban and rural areas, incomes of the city dwellers, migration trends within the city, demographics of the city center, the number of migrants, the dynamics of their settlement, detailed medical statistics, etc. Of course, newspapers and magazines are mushrooming, and to some extent they reflect public opinion. In recent years, many think tanks have opened; there are also quite a few research institutes and research departments at

universities. But none of them, irrespective of whether or not they work well, are *institutionally embedded* in urban life. They are not weaved into the city's multifunctional fabric, fulfilling the information and adaptation functions needed for the development of the city, and thereby of the country. This results in the rebirth of a traditional patriarchal mentality, which, in turn, is quietly transformed into tribalist and clan mentality. Baku, in this sense, is not a guarantor of political stability but a permanent breeding ground for social discontent, both within the city and beyond.

Typically for a large industrial city, Baku is surrounded with uncontrollably growing satellite towns that strive to break through to the center and impose their aesthetics of life, the aesthetics of "time-servers," on it. The democratic rhetoric becomes a way of disguising the tribalist and clan-based organization of social life. What is more, the residents of the capital city become increasingly disconnected - both politically and culturally - from the rest of the population of Azerbaijan. According to the 1997 population census data, more than 60 percent of the Azerbaijani population dwells in cities and towns, and Baku's population makes up for over 40 percent of the population of Azerbaijan (in reality, the figure is higher, since many migrants reside in Baku illegally).

Azerbaijanis are certainly no longer a rural nation, but who can guarantee that we will not eventually turn into a nation of "eternal migrants" in our own capital?

AZERBAIJANI DEMOCRACY: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

How should one assess democracy in Azerbaijan? Can the present political regime in Azerbaijan be considered democratic?

It is difficult to answer such a question in concrete terms. First, there is no "standard" of democracy against which the processes currently underway in Azerbaijan could be "measured." Of course, implicitly there is the Western "standard" of democracy, which Western missionaries of democracy refer to, and which the government in Azerbaijan attempts to simulate (from time to time, it hypocritically justifies its actions by saying that we, in contrast to Western democracies, are only at the beginning of the road, and that explains our errors of judgment). But it is practically impossible to describe this "standard," and political scientists have to recognize the vagueness of the concept of "democracy." Second, the question gets even more confusing when it comes to "democratic transition" in different countries and different regions, including "democratic transition" in post-authoritarian countries. There are more questions than answers here: is it possible to detect trends in democratic

transition in post-authoritarian countries, and will we not find major differences in the outcomes of these transitions? Should we perhaps speak about the emergence of new types of democracy but also about the “growing diversity of incompleteness” and a wide grey area of “incomplete democracies”? Is it a legitimate concern that democratic transformation is impossible without a special culture of “legal norms and moral imperatives”? To what extent do cultural and psychological characteristics impede the advancement of democracy? Are post-authoritarian countries actually undergoing a democratic transition involving dramatic restructuring of political institutions, or should we speak of the “freezing” of post-communist states and the “procrastination of transit”? Or, maybe even of the “standstill” of democracy, which came to replace the “tidal wave” of democracy (the “third wave” defined by Samuel Huntington)? Or, perhaps, we should simply speak of the stability of certain features that have already been acquired by the “new democracies.” In any event, we need to abandon unnecessary illusions and unjustified expectations.

These questions are directly linked to democracy in Azerbaijan, and we will have to answer them for years to come. But even for a preliminary assessment of democratic changes in Azerbaijan, we cannot avoid relying on minimal democratic standards. We can even select just one standard from this list: elections (some researchers believe one must apply at least two standards: elections and tax payment). If we agree with Huntington that “democracy does not mean that problems will be solved; it means that rulers can be removed,” we must acknowledge that this parameter of democracy in Azerbaijan has not yet been fulfilled.

There is another criterion of democracy in Azerbaijan which cannot be ignored: *freedom*, though admittedly “freedom” is hard to measure. In its *Nations in Transit* ratings, Freedom House lists Azerbaijan as a “not free” country, a fact that irritates the pro-government circles of Azerbaijan who are apparently dissatisfied with the “uncontrolled world.”

In this context, if one tries to diagnose the democratic development of Azerbaijan at the turn of the decade, one has to first of all note a sharp divergence between the dominant political rhetoric and the reality. According to the Constitution of Azerbaijan and the public statements of the ruling political elites, Azerbaijan is a democracy, in which democratic principles are applied to all spheres of life, from economy to culture, and where priority is given to the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. But in reality, we see stable authoritarianism, going far beyond the requirements of the “transition period”; virtual absence of separation of powers and, as a consequence, total dependence of the legislative and judicial branches of government on the executive; omnipotence of security struc-

tures; widespread violation of basic civil rights; arbitrariness of the bureaucracy; dominance of the informal sector, which by itself, is an indication of the permanent failure in the implementation of laws; weakness of civil society institutions; corporate and clan trends (in Azerbaijan these trends are manifest in the regional clan version) that disrupt the unity of the Azerbaijani society, etc.

This said, it would be simplistic, on one hand, to demonize the political power, and on the other, to exaggerate the need for the “protection of the oppressed.” One has to admit that the hypocrisy of the authorities (someone accurately described it as “systemic insincerity”) is the reverse side of the simplified perception of democracy as a linear-progressive process, a perception shared by the public and the elite. Moreover, in mass mentality, there is an old and recurring belief that democracy must immediately meet everyone’s material needs and ensure “social justice.” The painful reaction to material hardships became a breeding ground for both authoritarian rhetoric and various manifestations of populist demagoguery.

As a rule, the transition from authoritarianism to democracy does not happen overnight and involves two stages which are different but not necessarily separate in time: the demise of the authoritarian regime and the actual creation of democratic institutions. In Azerbaijan, the first stage is not over; it may even have achieved some stability (i.e. lost the quality of transition), and we may have to witness its various transformations and modifications for a long time to come. Of course, we live in a global world and can expect stronger pressure from the international democratic community. Yet, unfortunately, many Azerbaijani illusions associated with that pressure have so far not materialized. One can only hope that new political actors will enter the Azerbaijani political arena and launch the process of democratic change consciously and without hypocrisy. Perhaps the transition in Azerbaijan will then start in earnest, with all the difficulties and problems inherent to any transition.

AFTERWORD

While working on this paper, I kept thinking of the traditional opening line of Azerbaijani fairy tales: *biri var idi, biri yok idi*. It can be translated in various ways, e.g. “one was and one wasn’t”, “there was and there wasn’t” and “it either happened or it didn’t.” Even a seemingly simple phrase like this has so much ambiguity. No wonder then that it is so difficult to agree on the meaning of a complex phenomenon like democracy.

Democracy has long ceased to be an idea; it has become a geopolitical reality. It is clear that is universal and can be reproduced, at least on the level of democratic

procedures. However, in the context of national cultures, it can only be unique. This uniqueness is manifest in both the discussion and the implementation of democratic change. There is also the “unspoken” of each democracy, not always discussed and not always implemented, but still unique.

The main thing is that the “unspoken” of a democracy must not contain hidden threats, whether internal or external.