

ARE THE WINDS OF CHANGE BLOWING IN AZERBAIJAN?

The author presents an opposition viewpoint to the current government of Azerbaijan, pointing out the alleged repression and corruption. Arguing that the Azerbaijani society has, in fact, a history of democracy as well as a cultural preparedness for it today, the author implies that should the upcoming elections not be fair, the people may revolt.

Ali Kerimli*



* Ali Kerimli is the Chairman of Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has been an independent state for almost 14 years. Strong national movements began within Russia itself in Ukraine, the Baltic States and Georgia, playing an important role in the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the former soviet republics. Azerbaijan has special connections with these countries. National movements for independence began in 1987 and grew stronger in 1988-1989. The famous “Shpigel” journal declared Azerbaijan “the nation of year” in 1988 because of the activities organized by the people and rallies held over a week with attendance consistently topping 1 million. As a result of pressure from this movement, the administration of the former Azerbaijan Soviet Republic was the first Soviet republic to adopt “the law on economic sovereignty”. Finally, Azerbaijan declared its independence one and half months before the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed the famous *Belovejsk* declaration abrogating the USSR in October 1991. □

It has been a great pleasure for me to have played an incontestable role in Azerbaijan’s independency along with the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan and its national leader, Abulfaz Elchibey. The future state structure, social order and development were being discussed even during popular uprisings that eventually led to independence. Ideas regarding the secular nature of the future Azerbaijan, establishment of a democratic government instead of autocracy and totalitarianism, and transition from a planned economy to a free economy dominated these discussions. It is a fact that the majority of our citizens want democracy. The existing government and its supporters try to manipulate public opinion and the international community with the idea that the people of Azerbaijan are not ready for democracy and have no idea about democracy. The reality on the ground, however, is totally different.

Even a cursory glance through the pages of our history demonstrate that all these assertions are groundless. Democratic views were disseminated widely in Azerbaijan at the turn of the 19th century. The intellectuals and enlighteners of that period promoted reformist ideas in all areas of society. They started bringing progressive European ideas to Azerbaijan. It is not astonishing that the first newspaper, *Ekinci*, which was published throughout the entire Muslim East, was edited by Hasan Bey Zardabi in the Azeri language. First theatre, first opera and first university in the East were also opened in Azerbaijan. More importantly, the first democratic, parliamentary state in the Middle East was established in Azerbaijan in 1918. Six parliamentary fractions were represented in the Parliament led by the great Mahammad Emin Raulzade and a group of western-educated intelligentsia. Men and women had equal rights in this country; especially noteworthy is the fact that women had the right to vote. In 1920 this republic was destroyed as a result of Bolshevik Russia’s occupation. However the creator’s of this republic did not stop working for the freedom and democratization of Azerbaijan even in political exile. That is why Azerbaijan’s independence was reestablished in 1991, and this new country was proclaimed the successor of the Azerbaijan People’s Republic of 1918-20. The efforts of the Popular Front and its leader, Abulfaz Elchibey,

intensified. In 1992 Elchibey was elected president, beating his opponents in democratic elections and beginning serious reforms. The new government adopted laws regarding political parties, freedom of press, non-governmental organizations, professional unions, the establishment of independent courts, privatization of state property, and a whole package of western-oriented laws and programs within a short period of time. New independent TV was established during the Popular Front's rule. People were given the freedom of assembly. Different political opposition groups were allowed to declare their opinion freely via state TV. □

However, former communists got revenge and the upper hand in Azerbaijan just as they did in other former Soviet republics. Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB general and an important man in the Soviet Union's Communist Party organization, took office in Azerbaijan as a result of a military rebellion supported by certain neighboring countries. Many political freedoms were restricted during his rule. The government consistently tried to restrict its opponents right to freedom of assembly. Thousands of opposition members were taken to prisons which created a political prisoner problem. Although, some of these prisoners was released after Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe, 107 political prisoners, including members of our party are still under arrest according to information provided by local and international human rights organizations.

The ruling clan in Azerbaijan has total control of parliament, the courts and TV channels. Corruption and bribery have become so rampant as to be considered state ideology and the economy is monopolized. The black market economy accounts for 60 percent of the entire economy in Azerbaijan. The country is classified as "oppressive" because of the number of economic, political and human rights violations. Even the authorities state that 40 percent of the people live below the poverty line, although a small group of citizens continue to control the natural resources of the country. According to Russian sources, 2-2.5 million Azerbaijanis left the country for Russia to earn a living.

The regime has tried to use all possible methods to suppress the press, including revoking the law on mass media, persecution of journalists, closure of press offices, the arrest of journalists and physical abuse of journalists organized by officials and members of the ruling party. The editors-in chief of *Azadlig* and *Baki Xabar*, newspapers who consistently criticized the government, were harassed. Eynulla Fatullayev, a correspondent with the popular *Monitor* journal was attacked and injured; Jalal Aliyev, President Ilham Aliyev's uncle, threatened Mirshahin Agayev, editor-in chief of *Hesabat* (Report) journal, with death because of his publication entitled *The 30 richest men in the country*. Finally, Elmar Huseynov, a well-known publicist and editor-in-chief of *Monitor* was shot at the entrance of his apartment. The government has not made any serious attempt to find and punish the perpetrators of this terror.

To obtain more resources, the ruling elite tries to keep their position by falsifying elections. Democratic principles suffered tremendously. Finally, the peak of

political regress in Azerbaijan came in the 2003 elections, in which one person was killed, hundreds wounded, and thousands arrested the day after the election. Thus, a transfer of power from father Aliyev to his son took place. □

During the years of political regression, the Azerbaijani people and opposition continued the struggle for democracy relying on their historical democratic traditions. Today Azerbaijan is faced with possible changes. The processes in neighboring Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan have an influence on Azerbaijan. A democratic revolution has already transpired in the mind of the people. Therefore, everybody expects that the upcoming parliamentary elections will be a victory for democracy. The readiness of Azerbaijan for democratic changes is also a result of the opposition's successful struggle for democracy. The three major opposition parties in Azerbaijan – the Popular Front Party, Musavat and the Democratic Party got together and established the election block “Azadliq” (“Freedom”). The block is nominating candidates for 124 election districts. Moreover, the block held mass meetings on May 21st and June 4th. The mass meetings, as well as debates and polls in the mass media indicate that electors are supportive of the opposition block, “Freedom”. There are also some other opposition political blocks like “Yeni Siyaset” (“New Policy”). Entrepreneurs have also started the struggle for their rights. People are tired of bureaucratic arbitrariness, corruption, suppression of free business initiatives, monopolies and a judiciary controlled by the executive branch. Therefore change is inevitable. Young people led by the “Yeni Fikir” youth movement are especially active in this process.

International support for democracy in Azerbaijan has also increased, international organizations demand democratic changes in Azerbaijan. The European Union, Council of Europe and OSCE made Azerbaijan responsible for democratic changes and stated the importance of a democratic parliament. Prejudice people sometimes state that the west is more interested in petroleum than in democracy. The latest developments have dissipated these claims. Mr. David Woodward, the president of BP Azerbaijan, the operator of Azerbaijan International Operation Company, made two statements within 20 days. He declared that the forming of a freely elected government and a transparent economy is the key to long-term stability and sustainable development. Hence, transnational companies are also interested in long-term stability in Azerbaijan. How oil revenues are spent is a matter of concern for Azerbaijani people, countries interested in Azerbaijan and international companies. As the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline starts pumping oil, with estimated revenue of 160-210 billion USD for 8-10 years, the issue of transparency will become even more relevant.

The Popular Front Party has always used the legal system in its struggle and therefore the deputy fraction in Parliament introduced alternative drafts of almost all the key laws discussed in the legislative branch, including an alternative Constitution Project, a new approach to the liberation of occupied lands, a democratic reforms packet and so on.

We and our allies consider power to be a tool to serve people. We want to direct oil revenues to the resolution of the country's problems, provide parliamentary control over the Oil Fund and guarantee major freedoms and rights of citizens.

Journalists frequently ask us about the possibility of a "velvet revolution" and this is very normal question. We respect evolutionary development and therefore proposed amendments to the election code. We also demand that the composition of election commissions be changed, forming them on the principles of parity. However, if the authorities reject our suggestions and falsify the elections, the voters will protect their votes. Azerbaijan has structured opposition parties that can lead the nation to democracy.