Conflict Studies Research Centre

Ella Akerman (Ed)

Political Culture Case Studies

March 2003

M27

Contents

Introduction

Ella Akerman

Much has been said and written in the recent years about the need for the developing countries to democratise. Not only would the democratisation process ensure the development of the society, the observance of basic human rights and the political participation of the citizens in the decision-making process, but it would also provide for stability and peace on the local, regional and therefore global levels. In particular, following September 11 2001, democratisation as a universal value and a means of achieving global peace has gained in importance, the governments in the West perceiving totalitarian regimes as a potential threat of future conflicts, and calling for substantial reforms in autocratic societies. At the same time, everybody agrees that democratisation is not something that is merely dependent on the will of people and can be achieved in the short-term; it requires a fundamental change of the political culture and political institutions in place. Differences in socio-political and economic development in various societies play a cardinal role in the way the democratisation process develops, clearly demonstrating that there is no single 'recipe' to follow, but rather an array of policies that lead to democracy. In this process, the political culture of a given country appears as a major element in democracy building, determining the pace of the democratisation process. Undoubtedly, countries with a long totalitarian tradition and a lack of any institutions that would allow for participation in the decision-making process are likely to face more difficulties than those countries where democratic tradition and institutions once existed.

The papers in this volume attempt to link the political developments in the South Caucasus, Central and West Asia to the political cultures of the regions, illustrating the importance of the socio-political models in place for political change. Examining the current political situations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Syria, the authors provide for a wide spectrum of opinions with regard to developments in these countries, and allow for comparisons and contrasts across the region.

These papers have been realised in the framework of the project 'Global and Regional Influences on the Democratisation Process in South Caucasus, Central and West Asia', launched by the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research in 2002 as a part of a larger international endeavour. In 2001, the Toda Institute in collaboration with the Globalization Research Center (GRC) of the University of Hawaii initiated a new project entitled 'Globalisation, Regionalisation, and Democratisation (GRAD): A Multi-Civilisational and Dialogic Research Project'. This project is a continuation of the Toda Institute's pursuit of peace with peaceful means through participatory and collaborative research. In the current phase, the Institute and GRC will act as catalysts in launching a truly world-wide, multi-civilisational, and dialogic research programme on the most pressing problems facing humankind in the new millennium.

Consisting of research teams in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Syria, this part of the project is aimed at identifying the mechanisms for the correlation of

Ella Akerman

the democracy-building process, regional co-operation and global development issues in these countries, as well as the role of outside forces in this process. Regional researchers using their knowledge of their respective countries not only share their experience, but also exchange ideas on how political participation and democratisation can be promoted, taking into account the political realities and institutions already in place. The experience gained from the comparison of political cultures, and the ways the governments in these countries deal with the challenges and opportunities of globalisation is valuable not only from the academic point of view, but also for a better understanding of the interconnection between local, regional and global politics. Finally, this project contributes to raising public awareness of the importance of political participation and democratisation for a more stable and safer world.

Political Culture & Democracy Building:
The Case of Armenia

Aghavni Karakhanian

Director
Institute for Civil Society and Regional Development (ICSRD)
Yerevan, Armenia

Modern history is the history of the progress of democracy. Democratisation is one of the most frequently used words today. However, the development of democracy does not always follow a linear path. The model of representative democracy was seriously called into question in Western developed democracies. As for the young democracies, they are experiencing great difficulties in their democratisation processes. New democracies in Central Europe, East Asia and the former Soviet Union have held their first free elections. But it is one thing to adopt formal democracy and another thing to attain stable democracy. The democratisation process in post-Soviet republics once again proves the assumption that there is no universal model of democracy, or just one road to democracy or one pre-established model to guarantee its success. Moreover, each democratic experiment contains the particulars of each society which has its own historical and cultural background.

It is a widely held view that political development in ex-Soviet countries has not proceeded as fast and successfully as desired. There are many disappointed voices among both the direct participants of these processes and observers. In general, the explanation is very plain: democracy is a process that is always subject to developing and improvement and needs time. In particular, one reason for the lack of political stability and lack of trust is the underdeveloped political culture that derived from the breaking down of society's capacity for self-organisation and democratic political culture in the past system. The historical heritage profoundly affects the political culture of post-Soviet states and the capacity to create a new political order. As the reforms of the structure of political institutions continue, the more democratisation depends on the development of political culture. Although the past does not explain all political processes, this is especially evident during periods of transition, when social reality undergoes profound changes.

Over the past decade, Armenia's road to independence and democracy has experienced all the features common to the post-Soviet transition states: economic and social problems, political infighting, and uncertainty about the future. Nevertheless, compared to its neighbours, Armenia has enjoyed remarkable internal political stability after proclaiming its independence in September 1991. Today the republic is demonstrating an increasing interest in society's political behaviour and the rules that regulate it.

Processes of transformation periods are complex, difficult to define and recognise. They include important economic, political and social changes, especially in social consciousness. At the starting point of political activity in Armenia the mass

movement took control of the state apparatus and established its monopoly in politics, which was dominated by nationalist issues. And the most successful politicians and political parties were those which could convince the electorate that they would be most effective in asserting the claims of their nationality against the claims of other nationalities.

But the analytical framework based on nationalism is not sufficient to understand the political processes in Armenia during 12 years of independence. Today a new framework will help to understand the domestic political processes currently being experienced by the republic. For this it is necessary to consider political culture in Armenia in a framework of its main methodological components: values, norms, knowledge and beliefs that are connected to procedures, traditions and rituals; the political self-identification of a decision maker, an important part of which is national identity; the language of politics, concepts and symbols that are connected to political activity; political behaviour, practical choices of voices, people and activities.

Most suitable to the political development of Armenia are the methodological approach and the theoretical framework of three stages in the development of political culture during the period in question: "the mythological stage, the ideological stage, and the critical-rational stage".[1] Political culture is nothing immovable, and it is even more changeable than usually considered. We can mark out all these stages when observing the transition period in Armenia from 1988 onwards (as well as in other post-Soviet states).

In Armenia, the Soviet doctrine never reached the position of an ideological hegemony. Instead of fighting it, people tried to use it for personal gain and to preserve national culture. The more the stagnation of the 1980s developed, the more Armenian political culture was characterised on one hand by a pragmatic use of official structures and ideology, and on the other hand by a desire for full realisation of national ideas of liberation and unification – the Karabakh movement.

The first period of 1988 to 1990 was characterised by mass movements and the gathering of people around these certain shared goals. Political meetings lasting many hours were broadcast on radio and television. Emotional devotion, rather than rational deliberation, made the rise of the small republic possible. The characteristic forms of political activity during this period were mass gatherings and rallies, boycotts, sit-ins, and the collection of signatures. Under the leadership of charismatic leaders, rituals of common behaviour emerged, which allowed mass emotional involvement. Political discourse was also ritualistic in its character, often consisting of repetitive exclamation of certain values formed into "magic" slogans.

As with many radical mass movements, the mass movement which arose in Armenia at the end of the 1980s experienced a total change in character when it came to power. Firstly it strove to mobilise support behind slogans promising an entirely new political and social order. Some of the myths circulating within the movement were expressed by short sound-bites. These myths were simple ideas, which were able to mobilise the people. The slogans stated that only freedom solves all problems and brings along wealth, democracy and a blossoming national culture and so everything will be all right when freedom comes. And one has to sacrifice in order to become free, "now or never". The whole movement was based on the idea of self-fulfilment through collective identity, freedom, and a return to the national traditions. The political movement of this period had its own attributed myths and was characterised by black-and-white, 'either-or' thinking. Everything that even

4

remotely represented the other side was immediately declared to be bad, whereas one's own actions were naturally good. Political debates were characterised by utopian visions of a bright future where everybody will be happy by default. Political thought was directed towards a mythologised past, and towards the future. The present received very little consideration - besides the feeling that something very important was happening.

Large mass demonstrations united the participants with emotional high voltage. 90-95% of Armenians showed interest in politics. Symbols, myths and rituals had a heyday, and the function of words during the mass rallies was magical. Speeches, songs and slogans, jointly holding hands, joint singing and waving flags represented a collective witchcraft, the symbolical fight of a small nation for its independence.

The Karabakh movement started before the dissolution of the USSR. It was quite natural that by using the same mythological foundations, the mass movement intended to express democratic values in the forms used before. Thus, new content was poured into old moulds.

In the first stage of the transition, where the new relationships and institutions had not yet taken shape, there was no variety in political interests. Political developments in Armenia since the late 1980s navigated the transition of leading political forces from being a radical mass movement to being a party of government. There was much confidence placed in the people and institutions representing the movement. This 85-90% trust in the Supreme Soviet lasted until the end of June 1990. Despite the arrest of the Karabakh Committee in December 1988 (that suggested that relations between the nationalist movement and the Armenian Communist Party leadership would be characterised by great antagonism), in June 'a kind of condominium between the Communists and the nationalists',[2] as specified by Ronald Suny, was ushered in. Under this 'condominium' leading figures in the Karabakh Committee were invited to participate in sessions of the republic's Supreme Soviet. Later on, the new regime once it came to power took on a 'mixed character' despite the criticism of Communist rules. After the victory of the Armenian National Movement (ANM) in the June 1990 elections to the republican Supreme Soviet it formed the country's government, distributing ministerial portfolios to representatives of the old Communist elite.[3] (It was also able to buy off potential political opponents. In this respect the political activity of this period in Armenia, in some ways, has more similarities with the Baltic popular fronts than the nationalist movements in neighbouring Georgia and Azerbaijan.)

These important tendencies lasted until the declaration of independence in September 1991 that began to the second, ideological stage of Armenian politics where true democratic political culture finally began to emerge. Firm ties between political discourse and political practice tended to be established. A multitude of opinions emerged and the discourse became problem-solving by character. The articulation of interests and debate between political actors became central to political discourse.

Rationality in political life increased with the election of the National Assembly and referendum on Armenia's constitution in July 1995 and with the creation of new political parties.[4] An ideological dialogue emerged inside the national movement, and the time for a united mass movement was over. The mythological stage was not very long in Armenia because the mass movement was centred around one power, ANM, and people were united on the Karabakh issue. The population of

Aghavni Karakhanian

Armenia was not divided into groups: those who wanted active political mass movements appeared to be all the people.

Armenian politics in this stage tended to find an agreement about the goals and the means to achieve these goals. Both the electorate and politicians knew these relations so that by supporting one political programme or another one might (in theory, at least) change political practice. This presupposed economic and political stability, as well as general political experience. This stage witnessed the emergence of new political actors (parties, citizens' movements and expert-groups) able to feel, express and defend the interests of the main social groups upon which public policy was to be formulated. Mythological, suggestive symbols had been replaced by the key words characterising political ideologies - market economy, open society, rule of law, etc, and the argumentation of political leaders for a position very often was more closely connected to the Western ideological narratives than to the political practice of the country. At the same time, the political programmes were formulated and defended through theoretical concepts and political activity became more professional.

The domestic political scene had been stable since independence and the same political party, the ANM, and the same leader were continuously in power from 1990 to 1998. This consolidation of its hold on power by the leading political force was greatly affected by a number of factors, different in character, such as military successes in Karabakh, as well as by the ethnic homogeneity of the population, the relative unimportance of regional, clan and other subethnic groups and even by the republic's lack of natural resources. Moreover, the relatively smooth transition from Communist Party rule in Armenia was facilitated as well as by the political strategy of mass movement leaders to strike informal and formal pacts with leading personalities and groups from the Soviet era elite, the early subordination of paramilitary groups to central political control, and the creation of a powerful state apparatus.[5]

To this relatively smooth transition contributed the social basis of the mass movement, the broad character of its membership, which contained representatives of the old nonconformist intelligentsia, younger activists who had become politically active in the mid 1980s, as well as former Communist Party representatives.

Besides involving compromises with the radical ideals of their original programme during this period, political life in Armenia displays many of the features of regime consolidation. The early part of the regime consolidation phase in the republic was characterised by struggles between the political leadership and various informal groups, typically paramilitary organisations with links to organised crime, for state control, which gives access to most if not all of the economic resources of the republic. Besides offering wide opportunities for personal enrichment, control over the state budget is a vital instrument for political groups which want to bolster their position vis-à-vis their rivals.

However, in contrast to the first phase the mass public had become demobilised. Attempts by nationalist groups to organise the mass rallies, petitions and hunger strikes which dominated politics until a few years ago, invariably ended in failure. People were demoralised and apathetic; if previously there was a sharp polarisation between those who supported the nationalist movement and those who supported the status quo, now many could not even be bothered to vote, as the turnout in parliamentary by elections indicates.

As the regime began to consolidate itself, political groups tended to confine themselves to mobilising limited groups of supporters, usually already occupying influential political or economic positions in the regime, to take control of key branches of the state apparatus which either gave access to the so-called 'power ministries' (the ministries of defence, internal affairs and national security), or to economic resources, such as those with control over privatisation, state property committees, parliamentary commissions, etc.

Such political struggles appear similar to those which take place in western democracies. But in Armenia, where, according to expert assessments, the political culture was defined as propitious for an authoritarian regime, such political struggles could reinforce a trend towards authoritarianism. This could happen also because of the simplifying of societal life, a tendency to evaluate everything according to the scale "good-bad", the weakness of civil society, the corruption of the legal system and especially the absence of a strong middle class.

Political passivity creates premises for irresponsibility, and there appears the threat of self-interestedness in politically and economically privileged people in the society. People expect a lot from the state but little is done to change anything, and this produces alienation from state life and increasing chaos of values. The gap between the political elite and citizens in Armenia, being a problem of political culture and the political system itself, became deeper by fragmentation and specialisation, the diffusion of social energy that is accompanied by big emotional disappointments, disillusionment, and the inner turmoil which some researchers have called "ideological and moral vacuum". Transition within this stage is very complicated and contradictory because of the logic of the development of the political culture itself. The concentration of social energy needed for achieving a political breakthrough is no longer necessary, as the extraordinary situation does not last for long.

The political leadership in that period had managed to mobilise the country's resources for the war effort in Nagorno Karabakh through the 'power ministries' which rapidly acquired a central position in the new regime. With control over the state apparatus increasingly concentrated in a small group, these ministries, particularly the ministry of internal affairs, increasingly became the target of opposition attacks. Whilst before 1994 opposition rallies tended to coincide with setbacks in the war in Nagorno Karabakh, after the military predominance in the winter offensive in Karabakh the main theme of the opposition rallies and attacks (being in fact mostly selfserving) was now the abuse of power and corruption. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that despite the fact that the first major political crisis was the so-called 'militia crisis' of July-August 1990 as the Armenian Parliament first refused to enforce a decree ordering the Armenian National Army to hand in its weapons to the republican authorities but finally ordered its immediate dissolution and imposed a state of emergency, the various militias in Armenia have not subsequently played an independent role in Armenian political life.

As the 1995 parliamentary elections approached the political atmosphere in Armenia became increasingly tense. If for no other reason, the fate of ruling parties in other post-Soviet republics made the political elite fear for the outcome of the electoral contest. This anxiety was heightened by opposition promises to prosecute those who had made illegal profits from the division of state property. On 28 December 1994 the opposition Dashnaktsiutiun party, in the run-up to the July 1995 parliamentary elections, was banned from political activity inside Armenia and its leader imprisoned. A referendum was held at the same time and saw the

approval of a new constitution according to which the president would have wide powers, particularly over the judiciary. International observers expressed strong reservations about the democratic character of the elections. Whilst a team from the OSCE confined itself to the comment that the elections had been 'free but not fair', an American group 'observed an alarming trend to suppress political competition and consolidate the position of the ruling regime' and a British group found the elections neither free nor fair.[6] But despite all these negative signs this election nevertheless was a turning point in the political life of Armenia, as it contained some element of genuine party competition, although the competition was within limits.

Despite the fact that it is necessary to have an enabling environment with a free press, genuine political debate, and people's awareness of their rights in order to establish democracy, the election process remains an important, although not the only, element and foundation for democratisation processes. Democracy does not just consist of periodic elections and the orderly conduct of elections. In many cases it seems more likely that the democratic features of the elections owe more to the weakness of regimes than to an adherence to democratic principles. Anyway the conduct of election processes allows the establishment of a framework which demonstrates the transformation of political culture.

The presidential election of September 1996 which resulted in the re-election of president Ter-Petrosian was considered fraudulent too. The tenacity of the Armenian opposition demonstrated that his main opponent, Vazgen Manoukian, was the real winner. Many opposition activists were arrested while leading the crowds of people storming the parliament.

This has proved to be a particularly complex process in the republic because the salience of ethnic conflict in the first phase of their political development saw the dispersal of state authority. Whilst the struggle for Karabakh has ended in a remarkable victory, the population has been ground down by a catastrophic economic and social crisis. So alongside the government accusations of widespread corruption, the failure of the economy to deliver an improved standard of living, and because the economy is subject to an external blockade from Azerbaijan and Turkey and has practically no exploitable natural resources, the Karabakh issue that has dominated Armenia's domestic and foreign policy agenda became the main reason for governmental crisis two years later. A strong sense of national identity accompanied the early days of independence and the Karabakh movement succeeded in uniting the nation. For a people whose history was forged in the twentieth century's first genocide, the struggle for the Karabakh was that of a people striving to determine their own national status and to right an old political wrong. (Claimed as Armenian by both history and demography, Karabakh was ceded to Azerbaijan by the Russian Communist Party in 1921.) In 1997 the Armenian president urged people rather to accept a phased solution to the conflict based on a proposal from the OSCE's mediation efforts (the Minsk process), in which demilitarisation of the enclave would be followed by negotiations with Azerbaijan on its final status. Charged with defeatism over Karabakh, Ter-Petrosian resigned in February 1998.

The presidential election (the second in two years) a month later on 16 March merely exposed the fractures in Armenian society. The former president of Nagorno-Karabakh and prime minister of Armenia Robert Kocharian was elected president; he improved his position by legalising the banned Dashnak Party and the release from prison of its leaders. Armenia's last Soviet Communist Party leader,

Karen Demirchian, garnered 40 percent support in the first ballot in March 1998, a protest vote for the present and nostalgia for the days which were communist, but "everybody had jobs". It seems that at that moment Armenian society yearned more for the stability of the old Soviet era than for the Karabakh.

In the run-up to the May 1999 parliamentary elections, a new - Communist-Yerkrapah movement - parliamentary bloc, the Union Alliance (UA), was formed. As a result the UA won 61 seats of the 131-member parliament, Demirchian became parliamentary speaker and Sarksian was named Armenia's prime minister. The true motives behind this political marriage will probably remain a mystery. On October 27, 1999, five gunmen stormed Armenia's parliament building and killed Sarksian, Demirchian and six others. These events led to a political crisis striking the very basis of statehood. The president was balancing on a tightrope of possible resignation, governments were falling one after another (three in seven months) and the army was close to splitting. But the authorities managed to consolidate power and by spring 2000 political stability was restored.

To some extent the development of the political culture in Armenia is dependent on the stability of the economy and free media. Monitors during the 1998 presidential elections noted that in the second round in particular there was a marked attempt on the part of journalists to provide as objective an analysis of political events as possible. "The overall pattern of election reporting suggests that most media outlets had no clear strategy for covering the campaign, and that they placed themselves, possibly inadvertently, at the service of the candidates by relying heavily on campaign managers to provide information … The sincere aspiration to objectivity evinced by most Armenian journalists is paralleled by the failure of many of them to adequately comprehend this concept."[7]

Despite the commitment of the Armenian authorities to run a "free and fair election", this was not going to be an easy thing. However, unlike many countries in the former Soviet Union the population of Armenia is politically aware and more likely to become involved in the electoral process. This was demonstrated in the parliamentary elections of 1999.

This whole process proves that the development of political culture is characterised by the relationship of political variety and participation; political variety meaning the availability of choices between different political developments; participation, an active interest in politics. During the first stage, participation in political life is at its maximum, and the variety of the possibilities is minimal. Then, participation goes down, and variety up. In the last stage the variety should reach its maximum: that means a pluralist society, in which the increase of participation occurs through new "communication nets", not as a mass activity.

Current politics in Armenia is mostly about image-making and not about structuring social reality. Because the new values have not yet been tested in real life, politics is characterised by intense rivalry between competing personalities, rather than competing values. The new political institutions and the norms of democratic behaviour and communication took shape by learning from the West. In this process people learned ready-made texts by heart and copied ready-made institutions. And as matter of fact, the political and economic elite learned "this lesson" much faster than the general population who do not yet feel the representation of their interests and do not understand either the need, or the content of these slogans and procedures. Consequently, participation and interest in politics goes down. The most striking fact, however, is a complete lack of trust in

political parties, especially in conditions where most of the parties have not yet formulated their ideologies.

The percentage of people preferring a given political party, or feeling close to one, is very small. Partly it can be explained by the changing sense of responsibility, as it was easy and safe to be part of a mass movement, which did not entail personal choice or responsibility. The choice was already "pre-made" by belonging to the "we" that opposed 'them'. The content of mass movement had been the restoration of the state; after that had happened, the majority of those who had desired an independent state did not feel any responsibility for it.

Besides, one can see a sharp reduction of trust in political institutions, in the parliament. It is interesting to note that since 1992, although the trust in the government, the army, the police and the court system has diminished, it is higher than trust in the parliament. On the contrary, trust in the president as a symbolic figure is constantly higher than trust in government and parliament.

Disappointment and disillusionment with politics and democracy in Armenia is inevitable, since expectations were too high and myths about the liberation movement were not possible to realise, or took much more time than previously thought. The transitional shock emanating from the rapid economic and social changes created serious problems for everyday life. The high level of corruption has added to the crisis of trust and legitimisation. Political tolerance and mutual confidence among politicians as well as tolerance among people is quite low, as demonstrated by the practical absence of the practice of creating coalitions both in parliament and in local governments in the past.[8] The opposition, while being a consolidation factor during the first period of democratisation, has lost its constructive role. Post-soviet political opposition in Armenia fully applied its resources in the course of consolidation for national state-building. However, political mobilisation aimed at the real securing of independence and shaping a national identity is often accompanied by the emergence of convictions of political exclusiveness, prejudice about opponents and political intolerance, and particularism arises, declaring the political predominance of some political groups against others. As a result, this undeveloped opposition and political egoism cause domestic and external insecurity, and influence negatively on current social and political changes, worsening social cohesion and preventing democracy. It is very characteristic of Armenian political culture (as well as that of other post-soviet states) that authorities underestimate a system of political opposition and fail to view it as an important functional complement to any political regime. In its turn, a destructive opposition provokes destabilisation, hampering the government's struggle for democratic management. The political techniques that are now being demonstrated by the opposition in the current presidential campaign (February 2003) prove this assumption: the opposition are far from nominating a joint candidate.

The discrepancy between political culture and political institutions is visible. Whereas political reforms have been effective in changing institutions, very little has changed in the content of politics. The situation of democratic development relying only on institutional changes demonstrates a lack of power. Politics is still viewed in simplistic terms, as a form of power-struggle and nothing else, and this fact reinforces a tendency to think along "personal" lines rather than "issues" lines. Fortunately, there is still a strong desire to learn as well as resilience and belief in the future.

Conclusion

Armenia, as other ex-soviet countries, is passing from state centralism to citizens' participation in governing and the individualism of the market. It stresses its commitment to the norms of democracy and human rights. The republic has already entered the World Trade Organisation and is a member of the Council of Europe. The stable domestic political situation has allowed Armenia to progress with far-reaching economic reforms, especially in privatisation and reform of the banking system. It has endeavoured to create a liberal investment climate to attract foreign investment but still foreign investment has remained at a low level. Still it is passing through its second - ideological - stage, towards democracy and active citizenship. Most democratic institutions are not yet developed and the political mode and culture of political behaviour are still unstable.

Armenia's political development for the last decade is characterised by all the features and conditions of transitional democracies and democratic consolidation processes. Still the theories have lagged behind data and political reform has lagged behind economic reform in Armenia. Even so, the development of Armenian political culture is closely connected with the development of its economy, bringing with it some clarification of political interests. It is a long process, and it does not run smoothly, for it has to digest its own negative experiences.

Actually, political activity in Armenia can be defined as "subject" political culture. That means that the population is orientated to a political institution without feelings of personal responsibility; feelings in evaluation of political phenomena dominate, mythological thinking (political myths reflect the population's wishes and help to organise the activities of society) prevails, the distinct ideologisation and politicisation of social life and incapacity to solve problems collectively is evident.

Political life is defined less by political programmes than by possibilities to use forms of Western political experience (like running electoral campaigns). Therefore, actual behaviour differs significantly from programmatic truths. The result of such political activity is that during that stage, people are removed from decision-making, which causes mistrust and delegitimisation of power. This political apathy is caused partly by the absence of real opposition as a political institution in Armenia. The activities of social and political organisations in the republic indicate that after 12 years of transformation from a parliamentary form of governing to a presidential one,[9] only the formal existence of many democratic institutions, ie parties and democratic movements (including constructive opposition) may be certified.

Anyway, one can state that Armenia has successfully passed through regime consolidation, which is a necessary condition for democracy because if a regime cannot provide basic guarantees of personal security for its citizens and establish a bureaucracy which operates according to consistent rules there can be no question of democratic elections. This has proved to be a success in maintaining a clear policy of democratisation.

Trying to predict Armenia's future development of political culture, one can mark out two possible scenarios. The pessimistic view is that the creation of the necessary experience will still take a long time. The optimistic scenario is that the democratic goal will be achieved in a few years and will be connected to the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2003: to be exact, in the post-election period. But this presupposes a gathering of political actors with

common interests and the resolution of political programmes that reflect the real interests of these actors, as well as presenting these programmes as detailed and clear alternatives during the election campaign.

Still, in the years to come the republic will be able to reach that critical-rational stage of development where politics will follow real interests, firm cooperative agreements between grass-roots movements and political institutions, ideological slogans and definitions will be tied more closely to political life, gaining content that is anchored in political practice. Meanwhile the stage of interest formation is only starting.

The development of democracy takes years, if not decades. Liberal democracy took shape in Western Europe and North America during a very long process. And it took many decades between 1828-1900 while they struggled with the first wave of democratisation.[10] In new democracies such as Armenia democratisation processes take much more time than one might suppose.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Almond, GA & Verba, S (eds), (1963). *The Civic Culture.* Princeton University Press.
Bremmer, I & Taras, R (eds), *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*. Cambridge University Press.
Aves, J, Politics, *Parties and Presidents in Transcaucasia.* Caucasian Regional Studies, Issue 1, 1996.
Dahl, RA (1989). *Democracy and Its Crisis.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Diamond L (ed), (1993). *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
Holmes, L (1997). *Post-Communism: An Introduction.* Cambridge & Oxford: Polity Press.
Huntington, SP (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press.
Karklins, R (1994). *Explaining Regime Change in the Soviet Union. Europe-Asia Studies,* 46 (1), 29-45.
Lucian WP & Verbe S (ed), (1965) *Political Culture and Political Development*. Priceton: Priceton University Press.
Matynia, E (ed), (1996). *Grappling with Democracy: Deliberations on Post-Communist Societies (1990-1995).* Prague.
O'Donnell G & Schmitter PhC, (1990), *Transition from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Ramet, SP (ed), *Adaptation and Transformation in Communist and Post-Communist Systems*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press.
Schwartz, DV & Panossian, R (ed), (1992). *Nationalism and History. The Politics of Nation Building in post–Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, University of Toronto.
Tismaneanu, V (ed), (1995), *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. New York: ME Sharpe.
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Report of the Survey Mission to Armenia, March 15-31, 1995.
Armenia 1995: Democracy and Human Rights, A Report by the British Helsinki Human Rights 26.
Financial Times, 21 February 1991.

Political Culture & Democracy Building: The Case Of Armenia

ENDNOTES

[1]   Kari Rummukainen & Johanna Berger (eds), Pathways to Democracy, 2nd Year, SOCRATES, 1999, www.akatemia.org

[2]   Ronald Grigor Suny, Looking towards Ararat. Armenia in Modern History, Indiana University Press, 1993, pp23-36.

[3]   Gagik Harutunian until July 1992 and Khosrov Harutunian until January 1993.

[4]   Parties remain the most important mediating institutions between citizens and the state. The existence of minor 'protest parties', especially those on the right, is considered to act as a channel for disaffected voters. From the other point of view, party fragmentation or polarisation is associated with lower levels of democratic support overall. At the moment, more than 114 political parties and associations have been registered by the Ministry of Justice. Armenian parties address the entire nation and correspondingly speak in the name of the entire nation. The programmes of the parties do not differ very much. To a certain extent, the political parties of Armenia are groups of people with fuzzily defined ideological principles and are united around the person of a charismatic group leader. The loss of a leader (a physical loss as in the case of Demirchian or Sarksian) or a gradual fading away of the leader's charisma automatically bring decline in the ratings of the party or even the complete disappearance of the party from the political arena.

[5]   Between December 1994 and March 1995 almost the entire Communist parliamentary faction was expelled from the party by the Central Committee for consistently voting with the government.

[6]   National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Report of the Survey Mission to Armenia, March 15-31, 1995.

[7]   Monitoring the media coverage of the March 1998 presidential elections in Armenia, Final Report, European Institute for the Media, July 1998.

[8]   Except the Demirchian-Sarksian Union Alliance during the 1990 parliamentary elections.

[9]   By its constitutional arrangement Armenia is a semi-presidential republic.

[10]   Huntington, SP, *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century,* Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, pp13-26.

Political Culture & Challenges In Azerbaijan: Past, Today & Future

Razi Nurullayev

Co-Chair, Society For Democratic Reforms, Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan

Area: 87,000 sq km (33,591 sq m)
Population: 7,734,000
Capital: Baku 1,149,000
President: Heydar Aliyev
Religion: Muslim
Life Expectancy: 63 years
GDP per capita: $1,460
Parliament: The National Assembly has 125 members, 100 members elected for a five year term in single-seat constituencies and 25 members elected by proportional representation before the changes to the constitution on 24 August 2002.

Introduction

Upon regaining independence in 1992, Azerbaijan was faced with significant political, economic and social problems, many stemming from the military conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. A cease-fire has held since 1994, but Armenia and Azerbaijan have yet to resolve the status of this disputed enclave located within the territory of Azerbaijan. This conflict has constrained economic investment and trade, and has resulted in the displacement of more than 700,000 people. Meeting the immediate needs of the refugee and internally displaced (IDP) populations has distracted the government of Azerbaijan and donors from implementing meaningful, structural reforms in the key areas of rural development, infrastructure, legal and regulatory reform and banking.

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire Azerbaijan has tried hard to establish democratic values and bring political culture to the country. With no traditional political culture and being under Empire for 70 years it has lost all the values it had accumulated during the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in 1918-1920. The Bolsheviks captured Baku on 28 April 1920 and their regime took over.

Abulfaz Elchibey became president in the first elections after independence on June 7, 1992. These elections were preceded by power struggles between the Communists and the Popular Front. After a year of democratic rule, the Special Police Unit led by Prime Minister Surat Huseynov rebelled against the new president and Elchibey called in the aid of Heydar Aliyev. But after having been

14

elected as chairman of parliament, Aliyev turned against Elchibey and replaced him as president in 1993. Aliyev was to encounter Huseynov once again in 1994, but now as his opponent. Aliyev succeeded in defeating a coup attempt by Huseynov and Huseynov fled to Moscow. Aliyev consolidated his power in 1995 when another coup attempt by deputy-minister of the interior Rovshan Javadov, who was spared from the purge following the political troubles in 1994, was crushed. In the meantime, a purge of the state apparatus, defence and internal security forces was pushed through.

On October 3, 1993 Heydar Aliyev was the single candidate in the presidential elections and won with 98.9% of the vote. Since this bloodless coup d'état Aliyev has remained in control of the country. In the October 1998 Presidential election Aliyev won 76.1% of the votes. Although he was not the only contestant in these elections, the OSCE declared the elections undemocratic. Opposition rallies were organized as a protest against the election results, but were violently broken up by the police. Azerbaijan's three most influential opposition leaders, who attended the rallies, Ebulfaz Elchibey, Isa Gambar and Etibar Mammadov, were threatened with prosecution for 'defaming the honour and dignity of the president', a crime under Azerbaijani law. 23 political parties signed a declaration and formed a new opposition bloc, 'Movement for Democracy'. The government and the opposition could not negotiate and build good civil relationships among themselves. Lack of civil society and political culture kept them from thinking in a broader way and shaking hands in a friendly way after the elections. Both sides started accusing each other of not making a compromise and acting like those politicians in Europe and the USA who after elections again become friends and work for the benefit of their peoples.

In the 1995 parliamentary elections, Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party, YAP, won the majority of votes (67 seats). Four opposition parties were excluded from the elections, including the popular Musavat Party. International observers concluded that the results had been tampered with. According to the new election law of June 1998, half the members of the Central Election Committee were to be appointed by the president. Candidates for the presidential elections needed at least 50,000 signatures; this has been reduced to 45,000 by a new law, which is still to be ratified in the Parliament of Azerbaijan.

Domestic Policy

Since independence Azerbaijan has been troubled by domestic power struggles, in which dissident army and police forces operated on their own account. Furthermore, domestic politics in Azerbaijan have been overshadowed by the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The Nakhchivan region, separated from Azerbaijan by Armenia, has autonomous status (as did the Nagorno-Karabakh region before it was conquered by Armenia). Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan was and is populated predominantly by Armenians. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan had already started in the 1980s. After Russian troops left the region in 1991, war broke out, which went badly for Azerbaijan in 1993, when Armenia gained control of the enclave.

Besides the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the dealings around oil fields and oil pipelines dominate Azerbaijani domestic politics. There have been several coup attempts since 1995, which have ended in trials of the leaders. A major scandal broke out in 1997 after 4 million USD had been spent on passports, which later turned out to be flawed. One of the major domestic issues in the first half of 1998 was the new

electoral law, which was deemed undemocratic by the opposition but implemented anyway.

Foreign Policy

In 1988, the Soviet republic of Armenia demanded control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan. Direct rule was imposed by Moscow, but Azerbaijan regained control of the region in 1989. War broke out and Armenia controlled the whole region by the end of 1992. In February 1993 the Armenian army conquered the Kalbajar region in order to connect Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

Like domestic affairs, foreign policy has been dominated by the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The OSCE commenced peace talks in 1992, and a cease-fire was signed in 1994. Since then no progress has been made. Border incidents occur, but the cease-fire generally holds. While negotiations have continued since then, an overall solution seems to be impossible. Both countries refuse to give in. Armenia refuses to return the region to Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijan refuses to recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which is its internationally recognized territory. Changes of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) borders will not be recognised by world leaders. The mid-January 2003 visit of the Armenian president to Germany proved this. Chancellor Schroeder stated that "any change of CIS borders are not admissible" and he was absolutely against these kinds of actions.

Relations with Russia deteriorated when Soviet troops invaded Baku in January 1990. President Elchibey pursued a pro-Turkish foreign policy, away from the influence of the Russian Federation, and refused to take part in the CIS. During the democratic government of Elchibey (1992-1993) it was the first republic among the CIS to gain the withdrawal of Russian army and frontier troops from its territories, in spring 1993. After their accession to power, the government of the Democrats had made a switch in the foreign policy of the country towards the West. Under President Aliyev, the policy towards the Russian Federation changed and Azerbaijan joined the CIS in September 1993. Russia's policy towards Azerbaijan is ambiguous. Russia brokered the 1994 cease-fire, and tries to play a dominant role in the peace process through the OSCE Minsk group. On the other hand, Russia has also been a destabilizing influence. Russia has also been suspected of supplying arms to Armenia. Consequently, Azerbaijan has not been as compliant towards Russia as the other states of the Caucasus, for instance when refusing to cede part of its conventional arms quota to Russia in the context of the Conventional Forces in Europe agreement.

Expansion of the oil pipelines is the root of a new conflict in the region. Lucrative oil contracts and the routes of oil pipelines are a big influence in this part of the world. For the next century, Russia desired a 'north route' through Russia to export Azerbaijani oil, while the Americans supported an alternative route through Turkey's port Ceyhan, which has now become a reality.

With the Caspian states, Azerbaijan is negotiating on division of the seabed. Relations with Turkey are good. Relations with Iran are tense, with Azerbaijan frequently arresting Moslem militants and Iran in return arresting Azeri activists in Iran. Azerbaijan signed partnership and cooperation accords with the EU on 22 April 1996.

Political Culture

There is a well-known philosophy that the cause of every phenomenon should be found in itself. Proceeding from this point of view we come to the conclusion that Azerbaijan is not ready for democracy. "Time" magazine quotes one of the citizens of Baku: "We are given freedom, but we do not know what to do with it." A similar quotation appeared in the "Financial Times", in a report about falsification during parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan (November 1995): "The voters say they have got freedom only they do not know what to do with it."

Democracy is a phenomenon that should be established in all the deeds of the country. Democracy cannot be one-sided. It is a whole process, which is achieved by having a certain political culture and a wider world outlook.

Now recent political developments are also being watched by those international conglomerates with substantial investments in Caspian oil and gas development projects. Scott Horton, the president of the International League for Human Rights, said[1] many oil executives are concerned that the illegitimacy of the election endangers their investments. "Legitimacy is a vital concern … There is a high level of anxiety about Azerbaijan." The greatest fear is that if there is not a smooth, universally recognized transition of power in Azerbaijan, contracts concluded during Aliyev's regime may not be recognized by the country's future rulers.

According to Horton, oil companies are aware of the dilemmas surrounding their dealings with Aliyev's government. In order to protect both their image and their investments, oil companies have been working with non-governmental organizations, including human rights groups, to develop a code of conduct. Such a voluntary code could soon be put into place, Horton suggested. "The industry itself recognizes the problem and is prepared to take action," he said.

Democracy

The military coup d'état inspired by Russia in summer 1993 struck a blow to democracy in Azerbaijan. According to the "Freedom House" reports on Human Rights, Azerbaijan from a "partly free country" in 1993 became a "not free country" in 1994 and 1995. In spite of the mass arrests of the democrats, an informal veto on employing them and severe censorship it was impossible to turn back society to Stalinism. As the result of an unceasing political struggle, the democratic community of the country gained government recognition of the existence of opposition political parties and free mass media. The most fortunate thing is that the present government had to renew the foreign policy adopted by the democrats which looked towards independence and integration with the democratic world community. Therefore, Azerbaijan has also made significant achievements. The estimate of the experts of the European Bank (EBRD) in their report published in March 1993 was as follows:

> "*Azerbaijan with regard to the work that was done in the orientation toward market economy, as well as establishment of multi-party system and democracy, to the economic potential and mental ability of the population is one of the most prepared countries of the former USSR which have already started to carry out the economic reforms.*"

The EBRD Azerbaijan Strategy Overview approved on 17 December 2002 states that: "Azerbaijan's macroeconomic performance has been impressive over the period of the last strategy. Gross Domestic Product growth across a broad range of sectors

has been 10% on average over the last two years and inflation has been held below 2%. However, the economy continues to be highly dependent on oil and gas-related activities, with extraction and processing contributing more than 30% of GDP in 2001. With the implementation of major oil and gas projects this percentage is expected to increase substantially. While the consolidated government budget recorded a surplus of 1.5% of GDP in 2001, measures to bring energy subsidies on budget and the elimination of some preferential tariffs are likely to result in a small deficit and a slightly increased inflation in 2002. The external debt ratio continues to be moderate at about 22% of GDP in 2001. Already strong foreign exchange reserves are expected to grow substantially with increased revenues from oil and gas projects." The report also claims " ... poverty and inequality remain a significant concern. The results of a household budget survey conducted by the state statistics committee indicates that 49% of the population were living in poverty in 2001 ..."

In order to reduce the level of poverty, the government has prepared a comprehensive State Programme on Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth in cooperation with international institutions, including the active participation of the EBRD, bilateral institutions as well as NGOs and the wider civil society. The implementation of this Programme was officially launched by President Aliyev on 25 October 2002.

A 5 February 2003 press release of EBRD also "recognizes improvements in the investment climate and calls for continued progress, ... macroeconomic performance in Azerbaijan has been impressive over the last two years but there are still obstacles and progress to be made in the transition process", said George Krivicky, Director for the Caucasus, Belarus and Moldova.

Human Rights
The Azerbaijani government has a very poor human rights record. Arbitrary arrests, police beatings and suspicious deaths in custody have been documented. The opposition can operate openly but is frequently harassed, and so is the independent press. Political parties can be banned from the elections. The judiciary is corrupt, and not independent.

Physical abuse and torture are used routinely against detainees in Azerbaijan, where the criminal justice system is riddled with corruption. Based on a visit to Azerbaijan in late 1997 and follow-up interviews and information, a 58-page Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, "Impunity for Torture", says that the government has shown little interest in curbing police practices: "The result is a clear message to lower-level officials that torture is an acceptable practice during criminal investigations."

"There is an overwhelming lack of public confidence in the criminal justice system in Azerbaijan," according to Holly Cartner, director of HRW's Europe and Central Asia Division. "Citizens are being preyed upon by corrupt and abusive police, and they have nowhere to turn for redress," she says. Testimony from victims, their families, and attorneys point to a "systematized pattern of physical abuse and torture" of both political detainees and common criminals, according to the report. The problem first came to light in 1996 and 1997 when hundreds of individuals, who were arrested on charges of terrorism or trying to overthrow the government after Aliyev took power in 1993, finally came to trial.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

According to statistics from Background Paper on Azerbaijan prepared by the UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, in September 1995 Azerbaijan hosted 233,682 refugees and 616,546 IDPs – 8% of the total population – who had been displaced as the result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Since May 1994, when the cease-fire was adopted, only 60,000 have been able to return to their areas of origin along the front line.

Whereas most of the refugees who arrived in Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1991 have managed to integrate, including acquiring Azerbaijani citizenship, a large majority of IDPs still live in temporary surroundings, hoping to be able to return to their homes one day. To date, more than 50% of the IDPs are accommodated in public buildings and some 90,000 are living in 15 IDP settlements, dependent upon external assistance. The existing resources in the public sector are not sufficient to ensure significant improvement in the living conditions of these IDPs.

Elections

HRW researchers in Azerbaijan have documented how local government officials in Azerbaijan intimidate those who gather signatures for opposition candidates' registration and citizens who signed nomination sheets. Officials also use delaying tactics to prevent opposition candidates from completing the registration process in time. Once candidates complete the registration process, election commissions arbitrarily declare their signature lists invalid, blocking access to the ballot for hundreds of independent, opposition and other candidates who complete requirements for registration. No independent domestic groups are permitted to monitor the vote. For months prior to elections, the government attempts to intimidate the opposition-affiliated and independent media through libel suits, threats of closure, detention and other harassment.

Speaking about parliamentary elections in November 2002, Rachel Denber, Acting Director, HRW Europe and Central Asia Division, stated: "Admission to the Council of Europe is supposed to be tied to a demonstrated commitment to human rights and the rule of law. The conduct of these elections shows that Azerbaijan still has a long way to go."

Elections under President Aliyev have not met international standards. Azerbaijan's 1995 parliamentary elections were seriously flawed and produced a legislature controlled by the president's party. The 1998 presidential election, while conducted under an improved election law, was also marred by serious fraud, which the US' National Democratic Institute of International Affairs pre-election and election statements documented. The long-overdue 1999 local government elections suffered from gross mismanagement as well.

On 11 October 1998, Azerbaijan held presidential elections. Etibar Mammadov, Nizami Suleimanov and three other less well known politicians entered the field against the incumbent President Heydar Aliyev. While no one seriously expected Aliyev to lose, the opposition candidates were hoping for a second round. According to the Central Election Commission, however, Aliyev easily won more than the required two-thirds to win on the first round, gaining 76.11%. Mammadov won 11.6%, Suleimanov 8.6%, and the others less than 1% apiece. Official reported turnout was about 77%. Five leading opposition politicians, Abulfaz Elchibey, Isa Gambar, Rasul Guliyev, Ilyas Ismailov and Lala Shovket had boycotted the vote, unwilling to legitimize an election they were convinced would be unfair.

Razi Nurullayev

In some respects, the 1998 election was a clear improvement over the 1995 parliamentary election. All the participating candidates received the allotted air time on television, and could criticize President Aliyev openly. By all accounts, many voters tuned in to hear unprecedentedly slashing attacks on Aliyev, his government and his policies. Candidates could freely campaign and meet voters around the country. But despite the improved law, procedural advances, and the openness of the campaign, if the basic criterion of measurement is the reliability of the official election results, which means that the will of the people on voting day has been done, Azerbaijan's elections do not pass the test.

Referendum

Referendum was the main issue of 2000 in the country, because the referendum has set up the future developments in Azerbaijan. A political battle built over Azerbaijan's planned constitutional referendum, in which the most controversial question covered presidential succession in the event of death or incapacitating illness. Incumbent President Heydar Aliyev thought that the existing constitutional provisions were outdated. All the politicians, however, portrayed the referendum as a new scheme developed by Aliyev to ensure that his son, Ilham Aliyev, a deputy in the National Assembly of Azerbaijan and first deputy head of SOCAR (State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic) succeeded him as president.

As expected the opposition boycotted the referendum. Nevertheless, this did not stop the president putting the proposed changes to a vote. However, there were also big international pressures. Overall the referendum, held on August 24, covered 39 proposed alterations to 20 articles of the constitution, which was adopted in 1995. Many of the proposed changes were designed to bring Azerbaijan's basic law into conformity with Council of Europe human rights standards. For example, one referendum question concerned the appointment of an ombudsman, or human rights commissioner. Voters also voted for alternatives to compulsory service in the armed forces. Article 27 Part IV of the constitution was removed, which permitted the use of lethal force against people during emergency situations and martial law.

But most attention surrounding the referendum was focused on two questions: one changed the electoral framework to a first-past-the-post system, instead of the existing proportional representation format; the other altered the presidential succession process. Under the past constitutional framework, the parliament speaker was first in line of presidential succession. Now the prime minister will assume presidential duties in an emergency.

Opposition parties, political observers and the Council of Europe have criticized the moves as a step away from democracy and towards the greater concentration of power in the hands of the president. Andreas Gross of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe suggested a referendum was the wrong approach for Azerbaijan. "This is an incorrect way of resolving such issues, because referendums are for changes introduced by people and not by presidents. I regret that Heydar Aliyev did not consult the Council of Europe over these difficult issues." US diplomats, meanwhile, called for a postponement, saying more time was needed for public debate.

The proportional electoral system has been removed and it virtually bars parties from parliamentary elections. Opposition parties say that these changes were a return to the Soviet single-party system of government. Before the referendum, Azerbaijan used a mixed system, under which some MPs were elected in first-past-

the-post votes while others were selected from party lists based on the percentage of the vote that each particular party received.

I believe that president Heydar Aliyev will appoint Ilham Aliyev to a prime ministerial post and then engineer a transfer of power. The amendments made to the constitution are one of the parts of the plan to make Ilham Aliyev president. Why can the opposition not frustrate any of Heydar Aliyev's moves? The opposition is not strong and has different viewpoints. Azerbaijan's opposition parties have little inclination to cooperate.

New Electoral Law

The administration's proposed electoral code is designed to be Azerbaijan's first unified code, regulating elections to the parliament and municipalities and referenda. Most importantly, the code will regulate the upcoming presidential elections, and must be in force six months before the October 2003 vote. Since opposition parties hope to make an impact on those elections and potentially unseat President Aliyev's party, their inclusion in the law's creation has become a critical point for international observers. Aliyev's authorities sent their draft code to the OSCE, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, the International Foundation for Election Systems and the US Embassy.

The draft of the code consists mainly of five current electoral laws, with procedural innovations. It calls for the use of envelopes, numbered ballots and transparent voting boxes and requires candidates to disclose monetary deposits made in their name. It does not, however, change the composition of the election commissions and allow domestic NGOs to monitor the elections. On that score, many opposition figures view the draft as inadequate.

Opposition figures have also pointed out international feedback to the draft as indicating that the draft is flawed. "The OSCE has submitted 300 recommendations to the draft of the code," says Etibar Mammadov, chairman of the National Independence Party of Azerbaijan. "What kind of badly-prepared document is it, that it receives so many recommendations?"

Economic Indicators

Investment into the Azerbaijan economy for 11 month of 2002 totalled 8.98 trillion manat (1.83 milliard USD). This figure exceeds by 1.9 times the showing of the same period in 2001 period (4.66 trillion manat). Foreign investment was more than 6.86 trillion manat (1.4 milliard USD) or 77% of all investments. Analysts believe this can be explained by the beginning of complete exploration of the "Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli" deposit Phase-1. The total volume of local investments was 2.11 trillion manat (372.44 milliard USD), 23% of all investments. Investments made by companies' and enterprises' own financial resources were 81.9%, bank loans and credits 9.4%, budgetary means - 1.8% and individuals 3.9%.

Capital investment into Azerbaijan's economy for the last year totalled 5.6 trillion manat (1.18 milliard USD). The industrial sector received 71.7% of all investments, trade and services 3.5%, transport 4.9%, the communication sector 6.4%, construction 8.2%. Capital investments into agriculture only 0.7% and public health services have received only 0.9%. State investments were only 2.2% or 208.3 milliard manat.

Razi Nurullayev

Petroleum products manufacturing in Azerbaijan for 11 months of 2002 increased by 0.9% compared with the same period the previous year. Petroleum bitumen manufacturing was 49.3 thousand tonnes, an increase of 87.3%. Petroleum coke was 63.9 thousand tonnes, an increase of 300%. Kerosene manufacturing was 604.1 thousand tonnes, an increase of 6.3%, petrol manufacturing 565.5 thousand tonnes, an increase of 2.9%. At the same time only 2.34 million tones of mazout was manufactured this year, 4.5% less than last year's figures.

Regarding diesel fuel, manufacturing was 1.4 million tonnes, a decrease of 2.1%. In the period Azerbaijan oil refinery plants produced 5.1 million tonnes of petroleum products, including 46% which have been exported. Furnace mazout was almost half of goods realized, diesel fuel 29%, and petrol 11 %.

Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline
The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, often termed BTC, will run for over 1,700 kilometres (over 1,000 miles). Cost estimates range between $2.4 billion and $2.9 billion. The pipeline is projected to have a capacity of about 50 million tonnes of oil per year.

In Baku on 18 September 2002, the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey marked the start of construction on the Caspian oil route to the Mediterranean, capping eight years of planning for an energy corridor through the Caucasus to the West. Leaders who have supported the plan were unsparing in their assessments of its importance at the opening ceremony. President Heydar Aliyev called it a "dream come true" for his country, adding: "This project and its implementation can become a guarantor of peace, stability, and security in the Caucasus region. This steel pipe will bring Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia even closer together."

In a letter read by US Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, President George W Bush agreed, saying that BTC would strengthen "the sovereignty and independence of countries in the Caspian Basin". Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze went further, calling the $2.9 billion project "one of the most important events in the ancient histories of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia. This is Georgia's greatest achievement over the past decades since the restoration of Georgia's independence," he said on Azerbaijani television in a speech transcribed by the BBC.

Turkey's president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, predicted that the BTC would be joined by a Caspian gas pipeline through the energy corridor. Sezer said, "These projects will contribute significantly to integrating this region into the West by boosting the economic and trade relations of the Caspian countries with the West." The United States has been a major supporter of the project, even though some observers continue to question whether there is enough demand to justify the cost of building the pipeline in such a volatile region, over rugged, mountainous terrain.

Freedom Support Act

Restrictions were imposed on Azerbaijan in October 1992 during the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and have proven highly controversial. In Article 907, an amendment to the Freedom Support Act - which provides aid for the 15 former Soviet republics - the United States declared that government assistance "under this or any other act may not be provided to the government of Azerbaijan until the president determines, and so reports to the Congress, that the government

of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh".

Azerbaijan has always argued that Article 907 was unjustified and falsely portrayed the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-dominated enclave in Azerbaijan that fought for and won de facto independence from Baku in the early 1990s. Since a ceasefire in 1994, the OSCE has been trying to broker a peace through the Minsk Group, which includes representatives of the United States, Russia and France.

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, there have been increasing calls in Washington for Article 907 to be cancelled or waived, both in recognition of the military and intelligence support that Baku has provided the US anti-terrorist campaign and in an effort to deepen cooperation. In October 2001, US Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote to Congress recommending that the amendment be repealed, and on 19 December 2001, a committee drawn from both houses of Congress gave US President George W Bush the right to waive the ban on aid for one year. The ban was waived on January 18 for 2003.

The lifting of the amendment, though temporary, has been a worry in Yerevan for months. However, reactions in the Armenian press, while negative, have so far been relatively muted. That may be because one of the terms of the aid to Azerbaijan - in addition to an ongoing commitment to the battle against "international terrorism" - is that Baku will not use force against Armenia or hinder a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Regional experts generally appear to believe, however, that the waiver will help stabilize the situation in the southern Caucasus and help to make Azerbaijan a freer and more democratic state.

GUUAM

GUUAM, the geopolitical bloc that groups Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova, is reeling, and appears close to expiring. Participating nations appear to lack the political will to give the project a definitive shape. A GUUAM Parliamentary Conference, originally scheduled for January 2001 in Baku, has yet to convene. Meanwhile, a summit of GUUAM heads of state, slated for March 2002 in Kiev, was postponed until July, reportedly at the request of Azerbaijan and Moldova. The inability of the participant states to work out a strategic framework for the organization represents a significant geopolitical gain for Russia, which stands to remain a largely unchallenged regional political and economic force.

The organisation was formed in 1997, by the leaders of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (Uzbekistan joined the group later, in April 1999) with the stated aims of counterbalancing Russia's political dominance in the CIS and lessening members' energy dependence on Russia by securing alternative sources of oil and gas deliveries. It goes without saying, therefore, that Russia is the country least interested in the flourishing of GUUAM. From the very outset Moscow politicians viewed this grouping as inimical to Russian national interests. GUUAM additionally represents a potential challenge to Moscow's own efforts at organizing an economic bloc of states, the Eurasian Economic Union. Russian officials also perceive GUUAM as a potential political danger. Russia's Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov once bluntly called GUUAM a "political organization tending to grow into a military-political one". Vladimir Aksyonov, first deputy chairman of the Central

Council of the Union Public Chamber (a quasi-parliament of the pseudo-union state of Russia and Belarus) labelled GUUAM a "main anti-Russian geopolitical construct".[2]

GUUAM member states pledge co-operation in the following fields:

- Political interaction;

- Combating separatism;

- The "peaceful resolution of conflicts";

- Peacekeeping activities;

- The development of a Eurasian Transcaucasian transport corridor; and

- Integration into Euro-Atlantic and European structures of security and co-operation, including "the development of a special partnership and dialogue with NATO".

At the "GUUAM Workshop", the Georgian ambassador to the USA, Tedo Japaridze, declared that "GUUAM's birth mother is the CFE negotiations, and our foster mother is NATO". The April 1999 GUUAM summit, at which Uzbekistan joined the group, took place in Washington on the fringes of NATO's 50th anniversary celebrations, and just after the start of NATO's campaign against Yugoslavia over Kosovo. This was, for Russia, an exceptionally infuriating combination.

On 23 December 2002 US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs A Elizabeth Jones met ambassadors from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Uzbekistan to discuss future cooperation between the United States and GUUAM. The United States commended GUUAM for forward movement on other projects, such as establishing an information centre in Kyiv, the creation of an inter-parliamentary assembly and the implementation of a regional free trade zone.

Europe & Azerbaijan

On 28 June 1999, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe approved Armenia and Azerbaijan's membership applications. Armenia and Azerbaijan marched closer still to the heart of institutional Europe when the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) opened offices in Yerevan and Baku in 2000. Although both countries have been OSCE member states since 1992, to date they have been virtually absent from OSCE decision-making.

The two countries, bitter enemies in the struggle for control of Nagorno-Karabakh, have consistently crossed the thresholds of membership in various organizations in lock step. The OSCE offices were opened within one day of each other; the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly approved their membership bids on precisely the same day.

Nevertheless, Armenia and Azerbaijan were the last of the eligible Soviet successor states to be approved for membership in the Council of Europe, largely because of the organization's concern for these countries' human rights practices and the prospect of inducting states that are still, technically, at war with each other. Both

the Council of Europe and the OSCE have emphasized the need for Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and to insure free and fair elections.

The OSCE and Council of Europe traditionally focus on technical and legal reform, such as amending laws to comply with European standards. This approach is doomed to isolated victories at best in Armenia and Azerbaijan because it is predicated on a faulty assumption: that laws there are implemented fairly and evenhandedly, and that judicial remedies exist to correct cases of failed implementation.

On the contrary, widespread corruption means that justice is routinely bought in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Police, prosecutors and judges can all be bribed or otherwise influenced. In addition, opposition politicians and critically minded journalists are often jailed and harassed arbitrarily. Police are willing to resort to torture to extract confessions from criminal suspects, and courts use the confessions to convict them. Laws – good or bad – cannot be a guarantor of human rights in an atmosphere of government-sponsored lawlessness.

Symbolic concessions to abuser governments such as these are not simply diplomatic politesse. They come at the cost of masking the substantive, nuanced recommendations about urgently needed reform. The implication, sadly, appears to be that institutional Europe is willing to overlook Armenia's and Azerbaijan's bad human rights records, as long as they are equally bad.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Remarks made on 28 November 2002 at the Open Forum sponsored by the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute.
[2]   *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 March 2001.

A Dialogue Between Opposition & Government: Challenges & Realities

Zulfiyya Guliyeva

Society for Democratic Reforms, Azerbaijan

Background Information

Azerbaijan is a republic with a presidential form of government. Heydar Aliyev, who assumed presidential powers after the overthrow of his democratically elected predecessor in 1993, was reelected in October 1998 in a controversial election marred by numerous, serious irregularities, violations of the election law, and lack of transparency in the vote counting process at the district and national levels. President Aliyev and his supporters continue to dominate the government and the multiparty 125-member parliament. Parliamentary elections held in November 2000 showed some progress over the flawed 1995 elections in that political pluralism was advanced; however, there were numerous serious flaws; and the elections did not meet international standards. Serious irregularities included the disqualification of half of the prospective candidates in the single mandate elections, a flawed appeals process, ballot box stuffing, manipulated turnout results, premarked ballots, severe restrictions on domestic nonpartisan observers, and a flawed vote counting process. The Constitution, adopted in a 1995 referendum, established a system of government based on a division of powers between a strong presidency, a legislature with the power to approve the budget and impeach the president, and a nominally independent judiciary. The judiciary does not function independently of the executive branch and is corrupt and inefficient. The police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of National Security are responsible for internal security. Members of the police continue to commit numerous human rights abuses.

Political Prisoners

On 24 October 2000, a report entitled *Cases of alleged political prisoners in Armenia and Azerbaijan*, which was prepared by independent experts appointed by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe as part of the post-accession monitoring procedures with respect to Armenia and Azerbaijan, was published. The experts had been appointed in February 2001 following the requirement placed on Azerbaijan upon accession to the Council of Europe to release or grant new trials to "those prisoners who are regarded as 'political prisoners' by human rights protection organizations".

The experts selected 25 "pilot cases" and established that 17 of them could be defined as political prisoners. They pointed out that human rights violations had not only occurred in the "pilot cases", but that "the experts' conclusions would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the other cases" and that "other persons held in the same or similar circumstances are also political prisoners".

26

More than half of the political prisoners have been released by presidential decree upon amnesty. By the requirement of Council of Europe the cases of three prisoners – Rahim Gaziyev, former minister of defence, Isgandar Hamidov, former minister of internal affairs and Alikram Gumbatov, separatist president of the self-called "Talish-Mugan Republic" are being reconsidered. These three prisoners, considered as political prisoners by the Council of Europe, have been granted a new trial thanks to pressure from this institution, of which Azerbaijan is a member. But the conditions of these trials do not guarantee the right to a fair and impartial trial. These trials are held in the prison where the prisoners are detained and the international mission found that the following violations were being committed: absence of presumption of innocence, absence of public hearings, violations of defence rights and degrading detention conditions. Domestic non-governmental organizations say that hundreds of political prisoners remain in detention.

Various methods are used by the authorities in order to hold on to power at any price. These include:

- electoral and legislative fraud as recently happened with the referendum on 24 August 2002. The date for the referendum was set by presidential decree only two months before it was held, without prior consultation with the Parliament;

- harassment of NGOs and the media;

- pressure on opposition leaders (arrests and arbitrary detentions, legal harassment, arbitrary redundancies, ban on demonstrations and meetings, registration difficulties for opposition parties, raids on opposition party offices). At the beginning of October 2002 over a dozen members of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan and the Musavat Party were arrested and condemned to several days detention. They were finally released on 5 October after pressure from the United States.

The President has given many guarantees in the field of international and regional human rights protection (ratification of the main human rights instruments, adoption of legislation monitored by experts from the Council of Europe, successive waves of releases of prisoners). Yet these guarantees are only partial and are used to conceal the lack of independence of the judiciary as well as egregious violations of fundamental freedoms.

Human Rights Commitments

Obligations Azerbaijan undertook on joining the Council of Europe in January 2000 included ratifying, within a year of accession, the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocol No 6 concerning the abolition of the death penalty, and the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. By the end of 2001, Azerbaijan had signed but not ratified these instruments. On 25 December, the Parliament of Azerbaijan adopted the European Convention on Human Rights with Protocols 1, 4, 6 and 7 and the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment with Protocols 1 and 2. At the end of the period under review they had yet to be signed into law by the president.

Zulfiyya Guliyeva

On 28 December, the Milli Mejlis (parliament) adopted a "constitutional law" on a commissioner for human rights (ombudsperson).

Freedom Of Peaceful Assembly & Association

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly; however, the government restricts this right on occasion. Authorities have frequently prevented political parties critical of the government from conducting indoor meetings as well as outdoor gatherings. The government has allowed some opposition parties to organize so-called "pickets" (demonstrations with less than 50 participants) and to stage larger rallies far from the city centre. Authorities repeatedly cited security considerations to ban any larger demonstrations in the centre of town. During 2001, the authorities cancelled numerous protests and rallies. At the year's end, the government held 23 persons who were detained during demonstrations which took place in Sheki on 18 November 2001. The Government detained persons at unauthorized rallies and meetings throughout the year, but most were released without charges after a brief period of detention.

The constitution provides for freedom of association; however, in practice the government continued to restrict this right on occasion. The government repeatedly turned down requests for demonstrations in support of former Communist leader and President Ayaz Mutallibov, who now lives in Russia. Heads of local government in several different sections of the country repeatedly refused the requests of opposition Members of Parliament, such as Popular Front first deputy chairman of the "reformers" faction Ali Kerimov, to hold organized meetings with constituents and interested citizens. On several occasions, central government authorities intervened to overrule the local authorities and allowed Kerimov and other opposition Members of Parliament to hold meetings.

The government requires political parties to register. There are currently 38 registered political parties. Some of these are affiliated with or support the President's party. At least 20 registered parties are considered opposition parties. In February the government registered the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, which is led by former Parliament speaker Rasul Guliyev. Other unregistered parties have not met the legal requirements for registration. Nevertheless, unregistered political parties continue to function openly. Members of unregistered parties can run for president but must be sponsored by a registered party or an independent "voters initiative group". Members of unregistered parties may run for parliament, but only as independents in a direct constituency, not on a party list. A party must be registered to run a list of candidates. Members of unregistered parties can run in municipal elections only as independents, or as nominees of a registered party or another voter initiative group.

The government generally allows private associations to function freely. The Ministry of Justice requires private organizations to register but does not always grant this registration freely and expeditiously. There are credible reports that the government refuses to register many new human rights organisations (NGOs). Nevertheless, unregistered associations function openly. Many of the most active NGOs are affiliated with opposition political parties.

Respect For Political Rights

The constitution and the election law allow citizens to change their government by peaceful means; however, the government continues to restrict citizens' ability to change their government peacefully by interfering in elections. Azerbaijan is a republic with a strong presidency, and a legislature that the constitution describes

as independent. However, in practice the legislature's independence from the executive is marginal. The parliament exercises little legislative initiative independent of the executive. Opposition parties continue to be active inside and outside the parliament, agitating for their views in their newspapers and through public statements. As a result of the flawed November 2000 parliamentary elections, the New Azerbaijan Party led by President Aliyev held the overwhelming majority of seats in the 125-member parliament (71 seats plus 25 seats belonging to nominally independent parties loyal to the president).

Opposition members held 16 seats that parliament at the year's end, according to official results. However, opposition members temporarily boycotted parliamentary sessions to protest election results and called for new nationwide elections. In response to international criticism, the authorities voided results in 11 disputed districts and announced repeat elections would take place in those districts in January 2001.

The November 2002 parliamentary elections showed some improvement over previous elections since 1993 in that political pluralism was advanced, but they did not meet international standards due to numerous serious irregularities. During the pre-election period, parties and candidates had better opportunities to conduct campaigns.

The Political Players

The players on the Azerbaijani political scene can be divided into two main groups: the government bloc and the opposition parties. The government bloc consists of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) and a collection of minor political formations tied to the regime. A significant number of NAP cadres are well-entrenched and experienced functionaries who had served under Aliyev during his tenure as communist party chief in the 1970s. In addition to this "old guard", the NAP also has a "young" wing of reformers, often foreign-trained, who have associated themselves with the ruling circles. These two groups have widely divergent political and economic beliefs. Indeed, they seem to be engaged in a power struggle within the regime, which is likely to intensify once Aliyev leaves office. Currently, the power struggle seems to be developing in the reformists' favor. The presence of Aliyev's son Ilham in their camp, together with increasingly harsh criticism of the regime's inefficiency by the media and the opposition, probably has also had an impact in pushing the president in their direction. At the NAP's December 1999 congress, the modernist wing captured three of five deputy chairmanships. Significantly, these now include Ilham Aliyev, who officially became his father's deputy. Recently, Ramiz Mehtiyev, the increasingly powerful head of the presidential office, has come under criticism within the party. Reformist forces fear that Mehtiyev, part of the "old guard", will try to position himself as a successor to the president.

The Azerbaijani opposition displays tendencies toward both fragmentation and cooperation. Most of the major opposition parties have their roots in the Popular Front; the differences among them centre more on personalities than on political ideology. Despite being fragmented into several dozen parties, only half a dozen of which can be considered major, the opposition is capable of working together, whether it comes to organizing demonstrations or coordinating a response to government policies or actions. Although the opposition includes leftist forces, represented mainly by the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party,

centre-right and nationalist parties predominate. The opposition parties with the largest degree of popular support are Musavat, ANIP, the Democratic Party, and the Popular Front.

Musavat takes its name from Azerbaijan's first political party, founded in 1911, which ruled the first Azerbaijani republic between 1918 and 1920. The party benefits from a relatively strong nucleus of activists and has placed itself in increasingly radical opposition to the regime. Its leader, Isa Gambar, also gained some support by denouncing the domination of political life by natives of Nakhchivan - most of the country's leaders, both in government and opposition, spring from this enclave on the Iranian border. Musavat produces the country's most popular political newspaper, *Yeni Musavat,* and claims to be the largest opposition party.

The Popular Front party has been plagued by internal tensions. Since Elchibey's return from internal exile in 1998, the party had been divided between two factions led by equally charismatic figures: the "classics", led by Elchibey, and the "reformers", led by the party's 37-year-old deputy chairman Ali Kerimov. After Elchibey's death in August 2000, the rift widened, and shortly before the 2000 election the party split into two seemingly irreconcilable wings, both claiming to be the party's legitimate ruling bodies. The reformers clearly have a larger following among the party's rank and file. This wing defines itself as "centrist", dissociates itself from neoliberal economic ideas, and promotes a role (albeit a limited one) for the state in the economy. As Kerimov has acknowledged, the party has suffered greatly from not having dealt with its past mistakes. Its prospects of becoming a major party depend on its coming to terms with the 1992-93 debacle.

ANIP, which rivals Musavat as the largest opposition party, is led by Etibar Mammadov. It is decidedly liberal in the economic sphere, advocates a minimal economic role for the state, and has stayed in "loyal opposition" to both the Popular Front and the Aliyev regime. Unlike Musavat, both ANIP and the Popular Front have shown a willingness to engage in dialogue with the government.

The Democratic Party is led by Rasul Guliyev, a former speaker of parliament under Aliyev, who is currently in exile in the United States after having been indicted for corruption. The party is run by his loyal deputy, Sardar Jelaloglu, and its future depends upon Guliyev's return. The Democratic Party is a splinter group, not of the Popular Front, but of the Aliyev government.

These four main opposition parties broadly share the Aliyev regime's foreign policy. Their main differences with the regime relate to the country's internal political and economic situation. While Musavat and ANIP seem to be the two strongest opposition parties today, Azerbaijani politics remains characterized less by parties than by personalities. Since Azerbaijan is a presidential republic, the decisive factor will ultimately be who wins the country's next presidential elections in 2003. Analysts regard Gambar and Mammadov as the strongest candidates, but Kerimov's star is on the rise, despite his party's rather weak base and recent indications that he may be colluding with the government. Guliyev, however, is tainted by the popular perception of his direct involvement in corruption, and his prolonged absence from the country further inhibits his chances of becoming a serious contender. A main dividing line within the opposition is between "irreconcilable" parties like Musavat and the Democratic Party and parties more willing to deal with the government.

A Dialogue Between Opposition & Government: Challenges & Realities

Political manoeuvring within both the government and opposition blocs is centered on one issue - the succession to Heydar Aliyev. The succession problem is a major threat to the stability of all the personalized, authoritarian regimes of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and nowhere is the problem more acute at present than in Azerbaijan. The 1998 presidential campaign was hard on the 76-year-old Aliyev, who underwent heart surgery in early 1999. Given his age and declining health, it is not believed that he will run again in 2003, nevertheless he has several times said he would. However, his main concern seems to be to pave the way for his son Ilham to succeed him, something that has been discussed for several years. This will be a difficult task, however. Azerbaijan is not Syria or North Korea, and to expect the people to accept Ilham simply because he is Aliyev's son would be a mistake. His alleged past as a gambler and the fact that he has so far shown more interest in business than politics - he is currently vice chairman of the state oil company - are liabilities. Yet a significant number of people in Azerbaijan depend on patronage from the Aliyev regime for their privileged position and have a vested interest in keeping that regime in power. That is the main reason for Ilham's strong support within the state structures.

The opposition vehemently attacks any plans to create a "dynastic state" and smears Ilham, often unfairly, in every possible way. In the opposition's view, Aliyev's retirement will open the way for a true democratic transition. For this to happen, the present regime structures must be dismantled, the existing networks of patronage and corruption destroyed, and truly free and fair elections held.

Geopolitical factors are also likely to affect the succession. Azerbaijan's strategic location, its oil resources, and its role in the geopolitical realignment underway in Eurasia mean that overt or covert involvement by a number of different powers cannot be ruled out. The most blatant involvement will likely come from Russia and Iran, which both support rather shady contenders for the presidency (former Communist party leader Ayaz Mutallibov and former head of the interior troops Mahir Javadov, respectively) and may try to promote them during the transition period. In addition, the role played by Turkey is likely to be significant, although different forces in Turkey may support different Azerbaijani factions. Moreover, the United States may also play a role.

Under these conditions, the succession to Aliyev may not be a smooth one. A worst-case (but unlikely) scenario would be large-scale unrest bordering on civil war. Thus the need for preventive measures in order to ensure an orderly succession is pressing.

In this context, Azerbaijan is in desperate need of strong institutions with popular legitimacy that can keep order during the inevitable transition period ahead. In consolidated political systems, parliaments fulfil this function, but the manner in which Azerbaijan's parliament was elected left it unsuited to this task. With most of its members selected rather than elected, the Milli Mejlis enjoys little confidence among the people, and none whatsoever among the opposition.

Dialogue

The Council of Europe has suggested that the government and opposition open a dialogue. Both fronts – opposition and government talk about dialogue. However, both parties interpret it as they find it useful for their positions in society. Once, Isa Gambar, the head of the opposition "Musavat" Party, in an interview with the

Zulfiyya Guliyeva

opposition newspaper "Yeni Musavat", said the opposition was ready to discuss only two things with the government - the resignation of the president and the holding of free and fair elections.

Megrur Ali Polad, in an article entitled "Dialogue Culture" in "Yeni Musavat", comments on a statement by Ilham Aliyev that "the opposition has no culture of dialogue". He wrote that Azeri officials of high rank, including Ilham Aliyev, met Armenian officials without any problems. President Aliyev himself has met his Armenian counterpart Robert Kocharyan some 20 times. This means that in the government's eyes, Armenians are considered to be "highly-cultured" people, while it considers the opposition to be retarded. In other words, the authorities prefer Armenians - who have occupied Azeri land - to the opposition. Polad notes that in countries with normal civil societies there is no need for such a dialogue, because people, irrespective of their political opinion and affiliation, are able to meet, talk and exchange opinions. But in Azerbaijan everything is vice-versa.

The pro-governmental parties as well as the government itself are intensifying their criticism of the opposition. They accuse the opposition of working for foreign forces. They even accused a US-funded NGO, the National Democratic Institute, that proposed forming a special council of opposition parties, which would monitor voting during the 24 August 2000 referendum on amendments to the constitution and coordinate mass protests. There were appeals to law-enforcement bodies to prevent what was called an attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan. The law "On political parties" must also provide for a mechanism to deal with political extremism, they say.

Parliamentary deputies from the NAP on 8 October 2002 also accused the law-enforcement bodies of inaction toward the opposition. Ali Abbasov, former director of the Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences, said in an interview with RFE/RL's Azerbaijani service that the authorities' sharp reaction showed that the government was seriously concerned with the increasing number and size of protests. According to Mubariz Ahmedoglu, the head of the Centre for Political Innovation and Technologies, the government is in chaos and therefore reacts inadequately to opposition protests. The government must respond to the protests with protests, Ahmedoglu said. He also noted that the opposition parties were stronger and more significant than before. Therefore President Heydar Aliyev must become involved in the process and take the situation under control in order to avoid confrontation in the future.

The confrontation between the government and opposition is increasing. Even the parliament of the Council of Europe is talking about the existence of such a danger. The latest opposition protests have exasperated the authorities. The possibility of nationwide protest is real, and the authorities now have no effective means to prevent it.

Democratization

Anyone who expected that Azerbaijan could make such an enormous transformation in such a short period was wrong. After all, it took decades, even centuries, for the West to achieve the level of democracy that they experience today. People forget that even such solidly "European" countries as Spain and Portugal began embracing a democratic form of government only in the early 1980s. Azerbaijan has only had the chance to move towards democracy since December

1991. It should be noted that all of the other former Soviet republics have yet to achieve Western-style democracy.

The reality is that the process of democratization in Azerbaijan is plagued by numerous post-Soviet economic, social and political transition problems. These are well known. Nearly 15% of the population (nearly 1 million people) have been displaced from their homes and communities because of the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Some 20% of Azerbaijan's territory is still illegally occupied by this hostile, militarized neighbour.

In addition, Azerbaijan has had to deal with biased legislation in the US Congress (Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act of 1992), which denies direct aid to Azerbaijan's government to help alleviate some of these difficulties. Such discriminatory laws, pushed through by Armenian lobbyists, do not help to alleviate severe economic problems or to bring about a politically brokered, lasting peace in the region.

Meanwhile, the Western media has been satisfied in ignoring and downplaying the positive movements and changes, which are contributing to democracy building in Azerbaijan. At the same time, they seem eager to jump at the chance to report on developments that are negative. Of course, it is critical to expose outright undemocratic actions, however it should be noted that such activities do not happen in Azerbaijan with any greater frequency than in any of the other Former Soviet Union republics, especially in the Caucasus.

Obviously, there is no such thing as a "poor democracy". That is, when the population of a country has such a low income per capita and are experiencing serious financial and economic hardships. Such people cannot be expected to rush out and embrace democracy. Obviously, bread takes priority over democracy.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that Azerbaijan is more democratic today than at any other time in history. Opposition parties of all types exist, as do sophisticated human rights and other watchdog organizations, which work to foster democratization. Dialogue between the current government officials has taken place both with the opposition and the more radical elements, as well as the more moderate groups. These are great achievements for Azerbaijan and provide the best showcase that democracy is possible and that the democratization process is alive and moving forward in the country.

It should be understood that for Azerbaijan to attain its final goal - Western-style democracy - Azerbaijan must remain on an evolutionary path. Democracy is a political system that is based on its members having a mentality of openness. This does not necessarily mean that democratization must move forward at a snail's pace nor does it mean closing one's eyes to violations of human rights and other undemocratic actions. However, it does mean that the Azerbaijani mentality of its citizenry as a whole should be allowed to develop in parallel with the democratization process. The process cannot be forced. One cannot dictate democracy. It takes time to undo 70 years of politicization which is the antithesis of democratic individual freedom and self-determination. The revolutionary path pursued by countries which have tried to leapfrog developmental stages has rarely led to the desired final destination.

Zulfiyya Guliyeva

Political Culture & Its Impact On Politics:
The Case Of Iran

Farid Mibagheri

Defining political culture or politics is not a scientific task. Nevertheless, in the interest of clarity, two classical definitions given by Sidney Verba and Lucian Pye will be used here. In their view, a system of beliefs, values and symbols, which are the basis and sources of, and breath life into, political action can be seen to constitute political culture. In particular Verba states political culture to be "the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which define the situation in which political action takes place. It provides the subjective orientation to politics."[1] Pye believes political culture to consist of "only those critical but widely shared beliefs and sentiments that form the 'particular pattern of orientation' that give order and form the political process. In sum the political culture provides structure and meaning to the political sphere in the same manner as culture in general gives coherence and integration to social life."[2] Politics, on the other hand, in a general sense of the word, refers to the governing of the affairs of community. It would therefore seem inevitable that politics, if managed locally by the natives, is impressed by the political culture that pervades the society. Iran is no exception.

If politics is after all a community affair, then political actors are engaged in a human enterprise. Actors, such as states or governments, multi-nationals or NGOs, have no independent meaningful entity of their own. It is us, people (either collectively or as individuals), who breathe life into these otherwise abstract entities. Treaties are not signed by states but by statesmen, wars are not declared by countries but by their leaders, nor is peace negotiated between belligerent parties, but rather negotiated between representatives of warring communities. The relative nature of man, as regards his psychology, sociology, philosophical outlook and worldview can have a resounding impact on the political decisions he/she makes. Those traits are nurtured in an atmosphere which is produced by the historical coordinates and the socio-political settings of the community he/she lives in. It is thus impossible to divorce the politics of any community from its political culture.

The political culture of Iran, rather than being a definitive set of norms and ways, seems to lend itself to divergent strands of behaviour. The long history of Iran - two thousand five hundred years of recorded history - has been impressed by the institution of monarchy and also, since the arrival of Islam, by Shi'ism (however, for the purpose of this paper only, we take 1501, the beginning of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran, as the beginning of the influence of Shi'a in the country). These two important factors, the institution of monarchy and Shi'ism, have shaped much of what has happened in Iran in the last millennia, and the modern history of Iran very much reflects that. What will follow is an attempt to outline the main characteristics of monarchy and Shi'ism as practised in Iran. Thereafter three particular but very important events in Iran's modern history, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-9, the Oil Nationalization of 1953 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, will be assessed as regards the impact and effect of Iranian political culture on them. Why and how traits in Iranian political thinking and behaviour led, or at

35

Farid Mibagheri

the very least contributed, to those developments will form the latter part of this work. The inevitable consequences of certain national/historical disasters such as the Mongolian invasion of Iran and their impact on the Iranian psyche will also be mentioned.

Amongst channels through which political culture connects, or impresses policy are religion, values and institutions. There are of course more channels but, for our purposes, we only consider these three. Persians, as Iranians used to be called, were Zoroastrians before Islam arrived there during the reign of the second Islamic Khalif, Omar. Zoroaster, the Prophet of Zoroastrianism,[3] preached 'good thought, good speech and good deed'. Ahura, the old Persian name for God, was in battle with Ahriman, the old Persian name for Satan. Ahura would eventually triumph over Ahriman and when Zoroaster returned to earth, the Day of Judgement would take place.[4] Avesta, the holy Book of Zoroastrians, appears to place less emphasis on the other-worldly reward for man than the Quran or the Bible does. There is clear indication that Zoroastrianism was concerned with, and spoke on, temporal issues. It addressed the basic political structure of the Persian empire and dealt with worldly matters. In fact the concern of the old Persian religion – still practised by a minority of Iranians in Iran and some Persians in India – went as far as offering legitimacy to the system. It spoke of the King of Kings [King of Persia] as the highest authority on earth and the governor of the whole world.[5] This legitimisation was, however, qualified. The King of Kings, though the executor of God's will on earth, did not have any divine qualities himself. The old Persian King could not be compared to the Egyptian Pharaoh or Mesopotamian kings. While the latter were immune to any wrong-doing, the former was not infallible and could astray from the truth. The triumph of Zahhak (an evil Persian mythological ruler) and the decline of Jamshid (the famous Persian mythological king) happened because Jamshid had deviated from righteousness. Therefore it can be observed that religion in Iran has always had a big impact on politics.

Shi'ism also advocates the close proximity of religion and politics. Iran, the only country in the world whose state religion has been Shi'ism since 1501, has been impressed by the direct influence of Shi'a beliefs and Shi'a clerics. Like Zoroastrianism, Shi'ism also believes in the relation between the religious and the temporal. The only difference is that while in Avesta, a caste system is propounded whereby priests remain priests and kings remain kings, Shi'ism, at least in one interpretation, allows and in fact encourages the involvement of the clergy in political affairs through the theory of *Niabat*. This theory postulates the successorship of the jurist on behalf of the Twelfth Imam (who is hidden from public view) to run and manage the affairs of the people. How and why religion in Iran claimed and eventually attained the mantle of government has to do with the failure of secular movements due to what was publicly perceived as foreign intervention in the affairs of the country. Essentially, however, the Iranian polity has never rejected the infusion of politics with religion.

Values also are an integral part of any political culture. Political thinking or behaviour is based on many do's and don'ts, rendering politics essentially a moral affair. Values are the fundamental pillars of a moral system. Both monarchy and Shi'ism embody a very general as well as a specific set of values. First of all, they both appear to subscribe to a patriarchical socio/political system. There has never been a queen in Iran as the head of state, nor has there ever been a leading female jurist in Shi'ism. This trait may also be shared with many other societies but in Iran it may seem paradoxical due to the social influence and status of women. However, despite the relatively higher position of Iranian women compared to other

developing nations, today's Iran has not quite yet moved out of certain patriarchal traditions, eg there is still value attached to obeying one's father or elder brother.

Secondly, Iranians have always viewed their government as the cause of most social developments. In fact in both pre-Islamic as well as Islamic periods life in general was perceived as a dependent variable determined by the government of the day. If life was good, so was the government and if life was bad, then the government had to be bad. Much of this has to do with the numerous wars and invasions into Iran by foreigners. In particular, the Mongolians and their descendents, who virtually devastated Iran and literally killed people en masse in the most barbaric fashions, left a deep scar in the Iranian psyche and affected their political attitudes. For three hundred years Iranians had to flee for their lives or live in fear of their lives and their beloved ones. Rumi, the great Persian mystic and poet of the thirteenth century was one of those forced to flee his home with his entire family in the wake of Mongolian attack. Obviously such a tragic national experience leaves its marks on the memory and the character of the people: pessimism, distrust and viewing the entire world and life through their rulers (there was no alternative) gradually embedded themselves in the attitude of the people towards one another and their government.

Looking up to the ruling party and respect for authority is another important trait in the political culture of Iran. Authority is to be obeyed – at least historically that has been the case. Looking back at the turbulent history of the country it is little surprise that Iranians may have an attitude of ambivalence and obedience towards their rulers. The number of changes in the ruling elite, the bloody wars and the continuous invasions of foreigners all have caused security to be in very short supply indeed. It is the urge to make up for this insecurity that drives and motivates respect for authority in Iran. In particular the invasion of outsiders during various phases of history has understandably produced a sense of indifference towards their rulers. This emanates from a belief in Iran that people themselves have little influence in their history, if any at all. Iran abounds in conspiracy theories, precisely because so often foreigners have either invaded Iran or caused major developments in Iran without Iranians having much say. As might be expected, monarchy and Shi'ism are both staunchly against foreign influence,[6] but at the same time promote respect for authority. Khaje Nezam ol-Mulk, the famous Persian Minister to Holakoo, the Mongolian ruler, tried to revive the old Persian custom of kingship wherein the king's power and actions were perceived to be blessed by God and thus had to be obeyed without question.[7] Even though he failed, the point remains that Persian tradition looks up to authority. During the rule of the Safavids, Iranian clerics also stated that the king had to be obeyed.

Connected to this is a sense of seclusion in the Iranian psyche that has, in part, been responsible for the advancement of gnosticism and mysticism there. There is a clear tendency amongst Iranians to seek spiritual elevation marked by the emergence of great gnostics in Iranian history, Rumi, Hafez and many other mystics of the past are household names in the country. There is a sense of reverence attached to this spiritual school. Even today you can find many *khanghahs* (a place where Sufis – mainly men - and mystics gather) filled with all ages from various strands of society. One factor responsible for the appeal of mysticism in Iran throughout ages relates exactly to the political situation. Iranians' belief in their inability to effect change in their country in the wake of foreign invasion of their land and outside intervention in their affairs, has over time led people to seek comfort and peace outside the realm of politics. Sufism, with its emphasis on neglecting the world without and concentrating instead on the world within,

Farid Mibagheri

provides that perfect shelter where socio-political misfortunes can be dismissed as inferior matters and people would feel justified in their inaction (many times they had no choice). (It ought to be mentioned, however, that mysticism/gnosticism/Sufism all appear to be noted as attributes of the post-Islamic period in Iran.)

As institutions, as stated before, monarchy and Shi'ism have both played a pivotal role in the development of Iranian culture. It may seem unconventional to speak of Shi'ism as an institution; what I mean by it are the set of rules and norms together with the hierarchical system that Shi'ism embodies. There are special seminaries in Najaf (Iraq) and various cities in Iran (notably Qom) that teach a standard course to religious students. The contents of these courses have remained more or less the same for centuries. However, it would be reasonable to assume that only since the beginning of the Safavid rule in Iran in 1905, has Shi'ism begun to establish itself as an institution. Prior to that much of the Iranian population were Sunnis and although there were a great many Shi'as in the country, the sect had not yet developed along institutional lines. The establishment of the institution of Marja'a Taqlid (Source of Emulation) – whereby every Shi'a is obliged jurisprudically to emulate a Grand Ayatollah, is a development that started with the Safavids. Later, Molla Khorasani stated in the early twentieth century that no prayers of a Shi'a Muslim will be accepted by God if the individual refuses to choose a Source of Emulation to guide him/her in religious matters.[8] It can therefore be observed what is meant by the institution of Shi'ism here.

Monarchy, the oldest political institution in Iran, viewed the king as someone with superior qualities, who stood above the social system. Under him there were classes who each fulfilled their function and duty without interfering in the function or duty of others. There was a hierarchy, which placed kings and the royals at the top of the social pyramid; below them were military officers, clerics, scholars and secretaries, and subjects respectively.[9] Avesta observes this hierarchy and, in a way, the caste system has always been maintained in the Iranian polity.

The institutions of Shi'ism and monarchy had to live with each other, side by side, for nearly five centuries. Inevitably they influenced one another in some ways as they cooperated and, at times, competed for ascendancy in Iran. Shi'ism, after 1501, found a new confidence and felt able to push ahead with its advancement programme. That included establishing itself in Iran institutionally and amongst the Iranian people. This of course happened with the full blessing and cooperation of the monarchy. The cooperation between monarchy and religion could be dated back to the Islamic period. Ardeshir, the old Pre-Islamic Persian king, once stated that religion was the basis of kingship, which in turn was the protector of religion.[10] Therefore, essentially, the Safavids just continued an old Persian tradition. Religion and monarchy started a long official relationship which lasted well into the twentieth century.

There are striking similarities between the two institutions. Firstly, the heads of both institutions are considered superior to the people and somehow stand above the law. Secondly, it has been assumed, there is a mystic quality and a special relationship between God and the heads of both institutions. In Ethna Ashari Shi'ism (the official religion of Iran) it is believed that the Messiah will be the Twelfth Imam, who has been in hiding for over twelve centuries and will one day fill the world with justice. This belief is part of a Shi'a doctrine that states there have only been (and there will only be) fourteen infallible human beings in history. They include the Prophet himself, his son-in-law Ali (the First Imam), his daughter

Fatima, and eleven succeeding descendants of theirs, the last of whom is the Twelfth Imam. *Ismat* or infallibility is a quality unique to them and government is their right as they are the best and the purest. Under the Safavids the concept of *Niabat* emerged amongst Shi'a clerics, whereby certain others were allowed to rule the country on behalf of the Twelfth Imam. This theory offered legitimacy to the authority of the king, and the king in return protected the clerics and offered institutional power to them. It was also said that the 'king is the shadow of God on earth'. The similarity here is that the heads of both institutions are thought to have a special relationship with God. Note, however, should be taken that as for the Twelfth Imam, the question of infallibility clearly places him well above the monarch.

As the king was free to decree as he pleased, the Shi'a jurist has also been free, through the instituion of Ijtehad,[11] to consider the circumstances and issue edicts as he sees fit. This is another common characteristic between them, which relates to the degree of authority and power they can exercise. Iranian political culture was certainly at work here, accepting the institution of religion to allow itself so much room for maneouvre just as it had allowed the same for monarchy.

Impact Upon The Twentieth Century

We shall now turn to the three most important political development in Iran in the last century and examine them in the light of what has been said above.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1909 was obviously impressed by the import of modernity into the country. During the nineteenth century, the increase in the amount of foreign trade had opened the way to Western ideas. A group of intellectuals together with many merchants, or *bazaris* as they are called in Iran, formed a formidable front forcing the adoption of parliament on the monarchy at the time. It is noteworthy that unlike the West, where religion was always perceived to be the enemy of nationalism, religion did in fact come to the aid of nationalists. Ayatollah Nai'ni, one of the pro-constitutionalism clerics, openly supported the constitutional movement and as a senior religious leader his support had an impact. Already the impact of religious leaders had been felt in the late nineteenth century when an edict issued by Mirza ye Shirazi banning the use of tobacco, whose licence had been granted to the British by the state, had weakened the state. People's compliant response to the edict and the consequent withdrawal of the concession by the government promoted, for the first time, the clergy (institution of Shi'ism) as a serious competitor to the state internally.[12] Religious leaders opposing the Constitutional Revolution, such as Sheykh Fazlollah Noori, were not opposed to it out of loyalty to the state but because they believed parliamentarism was a deviation from the *Shari'a* (religious law).

Religion obviously played its part in the Constitutional Revolution and the Shi'a institution aided the movement. Even though parliamentarism was introduced, monarchy itself was not questioned. The old tradition of infusing religion and politics was upheld. However, people challenged authority openly hitherto uncommon in Iranian political culture. People realized that authorities in their country could no longer dictate everything to them. It was a relative success, though in terms of political development it was a huge leap forward.

The oil nationalisation and the coup of 1953 also have had a remarkable impact on the modern history of Iran. After WWII, during which the British and the Soviets

had occupied Iran and Reza Shah had been forced by the allies to abdicate in favour of his young son, Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran witnessed many governments in a rather short period of time. Mossadeq, a nationalist leader in Parliament, was appointed Prime Minister by the Shah, in spite of serious reservations by the latter. When differences came to a head, the Shah left the country and Mossadeq effectively became the leader of the country. His nationalisation of AIOC (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) incurred the wrath of the British and eventually he was overthrown by a coup engineered by Washington and London. The Shah returned to the country feeling more confident and began to increase his powers and showed intolerance to any serious opposition in the country.

The significant aspect of the oil nationalisation was its hostility to foreign control, which as already noted has been a dominant feature in the political culture of Iran.[13] This time, however, the support of the religious institution was not as forthcoming as it had been during the Constitutional Movement. Secular nationalists had clearly established themselves as the leaders of a new Iran and this separation from religion, though not antipathy, was significant. There was popular support for Mossadeq but novice democratic practices in the country failed to muster sufficient public participation in time to support the loose pillars of Mossadeq's power. Institutionally, monarchy had not been questioned and Shi'ism was still held sacred. But, unlike the Tobacco Movement some seventy years back, nationalism, and not religion, had entered into competition with the state.

Last but not least, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 has perhaps been the most breath-taking development in recent Iranian political history. Following the publication of an article against Ayatollah Khomeini in a national newspaper in 1978, a series of demonstrations took place in Iran. After a number of killings during demonstrations, strikes began to cripple the economy. However, the strike by the workers in the oil industry and the neutrality of the army declared in the last days of the monarchical rule were perhaps the two most important factors that led to the collapse of the old regime. Thereafter the Islamic Republic of Iran was established.

There are many features of the Islamic Revolution which are noteworthy. In the 1960s, after Ayatollah Khomeini had gone to exile because of his open opposition to the Shah's policies, he had developed the theory of *velayat e faghih*, whereby he called for the absolute rule by the jurist, a jurisprudical governnment. What this translated to in practice was the abolishing of the monarchy, the oldest political tradition in Iran. This was done in the name of, and with the leadership of the institution of religion, which since 1953 had been competing with nationalists for the leadership of the public. It had also been competing with the state, albeit incipiently, since the 1890s (the Tobacco Movement) for the running of the country. This was the first time ever in Iranian history that religion officially and openly took the mantle of government. Abolishing the monarchy was a prerequisite, since monarchy in Iran had a socio/political function and was the ultimate arbiter in internal affairs, a role which now Shi'ism claimed for itself.

Some Concluding Remarks

The phrase, 'king of kings' which was reserved only for Persian kings during the reign of the Achaemenids, and the special and unique quality that Shi'ism reserves for its leaders both convey a message about Iranians and their political culture. An extremely proud people who have inherited one of the oldest civilisations known to

mankind, they believe in their own uniqueness and in spite of constant mixing and mingling with other peoples and nations that their history has occasioned, they maintain, intellectually and politically, a very separate independent identity for themselves. An instance to illustrate the point is the preservation of Farsi, the official and spoken language of Iranians. Countries conquered by Islam adopted Arabic as their language; even Egypt with its old civilisation did not (or could not) preserve its traditional language. Iran is unique in this case, having maintained Farsi, its traditional language. Shi'ism is also unique to Iran, in the sense that Iran is the only state, which has adopted it as its official religion.

The infusion of politics and religion has always existed in Iran to varying degrees as religion has usually been the source of legitimacy for political power in the country. Perhaps that is another reason why authority is well respected there. However, starting with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 Iranians began to challenge the authorities with some success. Religion aided them in that instance, but did not openly support nationalists during the oil nationalisation of the 1950s. In the last decades of the last century, nationalism, which had become a serious competitor to religion in Iran and was adopting a legitimizing role in politics – a task traditionally reserved for religion and clerics – was pushed aside through the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This time religion in Iran, having cooperated with monarchy over thousands of years, forced it out, and for the first time in Persian history monarchy left the political scene, while religion became the sole political arbiter.

ENDNOTES

1   Sidney Verba, "Comparative Political Culture" in Lucian Pye & Sidney Verba (eds), *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p513.

2   Lucian Pye, "Introduction: Political Culture and Political development" in Pye & Verba, op cit, p8.

3   It is interesting to note that it was Ali, the fourth Islamic Kaliph but the most revered individual in Shi'ism after Prophet Mohammad, who stated that Zoroaster was a prophet and as such paid much respect to the old Persian religion.

4   This is stated in Dal Seung Yu, The Role of Political Culture in Iranian Political Development (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), p40.

5   R C Zaehner, *The teaching of the Magi* (London: Macmillan, 1956), p18.

66   During the Qajar Dynasty, however, Iran fell under the influence of Britain and Russia. The Qajar kings, by and large, except the founder of the Dynasty Agha Mohammad Khan, were little perturbed by this development.The Qajar were the exception in this regard.

7   Javad Tabatabayee, *Daramadi Falsafi bar Tarighe Andisheye Siasi dar Iran* (Tehran: Entesharate Kavir, 1337/1998), p43.

8   The most noted exception to this is Molla Sadra, the highly acclaimed Shi'a philosopher/jurist of the Safavid period. He openly challenged the principle of choosing a Source of Emulation and stated that every individual should understand religion for him/herself.

9   'Subjects' is a term used to denote inhabitants of a society where there is no public participation in the political process. 'Citizens', on the other hand, refers to those living in a society where there is effective public participation in the political process.

10   Dal Seung Yu, op cit, p40.

11   *Ijtehad* is the highest stage of theological learning in Shi'ism. Upon attaining this stage and becoming a source of emulation, the *Mojtahed* (the one who has attained *Ijtehad*) can issue edicts according to the requirements of time and place. Different *Mojtaheds* may disagree on any given issue as to their edicts.

12   It is always assumed that sovereign states have no superiors externally and no equals internally. The tobacco instance, however, proved that Shi'ism was more than an equal to the state internally.

---

[13]   Note should be taken that by anti-foreign I do not mean xenophobia. Iranians are, by common consent, one of the most hospitable people in the world. However, when it comes to outsiders inferring in their internal affairs, or giving the impression that they are, automatically Iranians take a very strong stand against it. Foreign elements in politics are always viewed with a great degree of suspicion.

The Political Culture Of Central Asia:
A Case Of Kyrgyzstan

Rafis Abazov

During the first years after gaining their independence, the Central Asian republics could have had a chance to democratize their societies, as their governments declared their intentions to abandon Soviet authoritarian practices and to open their societies to political reforms. Indeed it was this promise to embrace democratization and civil society values, which these and all other former Soviet republics made in the early 1990s, that allowed analysts to talk about the 'third wave of democratization'.

The realities of the political development, however, show that the picture is much more complex, and that political liberalization and changes do not necessarily lead to the establishment of a sustainable democratic system. The introduction of a democratic constitution, which guarantees most important freedoms and sets the principles of a democratic state, does not necessarily lead to the establishment of a democratic society. The parliamentary and presidential elections in these republics were based on a multiparty system and legitimate political opposition was allowed to take part in the electoral process in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Yet, the governments found ways to manipulate both the elections and the electorate. The constitutional guarantees of the freedoms of information and independent mass media do not stop incumbent leaders intimidating journalists and independent media outlets for criticizing government officials, and using loopholes in the existing laws to prosecute independent journalists using legal means.

In an attempt to explain failures of the democratization process in the Central Asian region and the "sunset of the democratic experiment" many scholars highlighted the centrality of the political culture of Central Asian society.[1] They argued that the Central Asians held "fundamentally different values".[2] One of the arguments explains that authoritarianism became strongly incorporated into Central Asian political culture as the legacy of the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras. The historical legacy left little experience with a civil society and with open competition between different organized groups in society, as despotic rulers and communist party secretaries restricted civil freedoms, and employed authoritarian methods of political and social control.[3]

The main questions that arise from here are: does the political culture in Central Asia conserve most authoritarian features of the pre-Soviet and Soviet systems? Are Central Asian societies open for democratization? What are the forces behind the continuities or changes in the political culture? Are there really any features in the society which undermine the process of democratization? Can western institutions of civil society successfully work in this environment? What are the consequences of globalization for the political culture in Central Asian Republics?

In this article in an attempt to answer these and other questions I will use the example of the Kyrgyz Republic. This country, like all other Central Asian

43

neighbours, has experienced significant political turbulences and political changes. Its government experimented with democratic reforms; yet it retained authoritarian instruments of dealing with opposition. This article is an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of traditional political culture in Central Asia and the effects of the contemporary process of globalization on political development in the post-Soviet era. Taking the case of Kyrgyzstan it will focus on some specific features of the political culture in the republic to generate a discussion about the effect of traditional political culture on democratization in the Central Asian region. The first section traces the historical background of the political and social developments in the modern era and focuses on the Soviet experience. The second section analyses the impact of the traditional society and group psychology (extended family, tribe, community or clan) on the political culture in Kyrgyzstan. The third section assesses the impact of the Islamic factor and political Islam on the political development and political culture. The fourth section assesses the role of external influences on the political environment and political process. The example of the Kyrgyz Republic is used again in the conclusion, which assesses the interactions between domestic and international factors and their effect on the democratization process in the Central Asian region in the post-Soviet era.

Historical Legacy

Political culture in every country is formed in a specific political environment and affected by specific political events, such as wars, colonization and anti-colonial struggles, domestic and regional turbulences. The modern history of Kyrgyzstan is rich in political turbulences that affected many aspects of life in this country. In response to these influences and changes, often imposed on the Kyrgyz people by external forces, Kyrgyz society strengthened some of its institutions, which could help to resist the changes and external influences. However, at the same time, some external influences were so powerful that they penetrated traditional political and social institutions and brought fundamental changes.

In June 1865 Russian troops took over the city of Tashkent, which was one of the most strategically important trade centres in Central Asia, and by 1876 the Russian Empire established its control over most of the territory populated by the Kyrgyz tribes. The Central Asian region had a chance to become an independent political entity after the collapse of the Empire and the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, as it was largely outside of Russian control between 1918 and 1920. However, by 1924 the Soviet authorities established full control over the region.

The Soviet leaders ambitiously thought to bring fundamental changes into the Central Asian societies, bringing them from "feudalism" to "socialism". In 1924 the region was divided into states with highly disputable borders, which anyway had no political significance during the Soviet era. The former Soviet government introduced the Cyrillic script (until the 1920s the Central Asians used Arabic script), and tried to create national identities based on given territories, standardised literary language and arbitrarily selected cultural symbols. The traditional political institutions were replaced by a one-party political system, as Soviet political thought rejected the idea of a competitive multiparty system. The symbols of a modern state – legislature, judiciary and executive branches of government were also introduced in the land where powerful Khans traditionally concentrated unlimited powers in their hands. The official ideology of the Soviet Union postulated that the one party system was democratic enough to represent the interests of all members of society. There were no open public debates and an

iron curtain was put in place to isolate the population of the country from external non-communist political or ideological influences. Religious practices were restricted as thousands of mosques were closed, converted into public buildings or destroyed. Soviet modernization produced complex changes, as the regime introduced mass literacy, established a high standard education system, a comprehensive health and social welfare system, and an overall better standard of living.

However, the realities were far from ideal. Harshly imposed social reforms changed the traditional institutions in Kyrgyz society, but could not destroy them. The one-party system could not overcome traditional tribal or regional rivalries. In fact these ancient tribal and regional rivalries were brought into the ruling Communist Party, as the Soviet authorities recruited native cadres into the party ranks and incorporated them into the *nomenklatura* of officials. The Communist Party in the republic was divided into several factions that subordinated existing clan and family links, and the political process was dominated by a hidden power struggle between major 'clans' that represented traditional rivalries between various tribes, clans or communities. These relations were preserved without significant changes even during the Soviet era and they became, as Shirin Akiner said, "a parallel system of power".[4]

The Soviet authorities were aware of the problem and changed their policies over time. Until the late 1960s Moscow directly intervened in this political process, supporting one or another rival group. The Kremlin's leaders incorporated numerous representatives of the ethnic minorities in the Soviet administrative and political apparatus at the regional (republic) level in order to undermine and balance this political rivalry, which was based on clan and patronage loyalties. In the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev relaxed the party's policy of direct intervention by giving the local party officials unlimited personal power and trust. In return, they had to continue to implement Moscow's official policies in their republics and maintain their loyalties to the Moscow bosses. Michael Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, attempted to reverse this policy and to influence the political development in the republic and in the region in order to promote his radical political and economic reforms and the introduction of a more open and pluralistic society. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended the Moscow-imposed experiments with social liberalization and Kyrgyzstan became an independent state.

Already in 1990 the Kyrgyzstani leadership exposed what Eugene Huskey called a "serious rift in the republic" and "fault lines emerged within the elite itself".[5] The government was forced to remove an article in the Constitution, which formulated the dominant position of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (CPK). Instead it introduced the Law on Public Organizations. In October 1990, following the constitutional changes, the *Jogorku Kenesh* introduced the post of the president of the Republic. The president was to be initially elected by the parliamentarians. The hopes of Absamat Masaliyev, the CPK candidate, to become the first elected president were not realized, as he could not obtain a decisive majority. After several rounds of elections a political compromise was found and Dr Askar Akayev, the former head of Kyrgyzstan's Academy of Sciences, was elected the first President. Akayev was elected with the support of the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK), however he decided not to join this movement, or any other political party. The president presented himself as a strong, technocratically-oriented leader, who had no ideological commitment to the CPK and who had a clear idea of where to lead his country in a time of economic turmoil, emphasizing the establishment of a

Rafis Abazov

democratic, pluralistic society and of a liberal democratic, multiparty, political system.

During the first decade of independence Kyrgyzstan focused on transforming the Soviet one-party political system into a pluralistic and democratic society. President Akayev's regime declared that it had chosen western liberal democracy as a 'model', attempting to build western style political institutions and civil society in this small, largely rural country with strong totalitarian traditions, deep seated patronage and tribal and communal differences. Importantly, these ideas and changes had a profound effect on Kyrgyz society, as it showed little nostalgia for the political practices of the Soviet past and within a short period of time embraced pluralism and institutional changes in the political system.

Among the first steps of the newly independent Kyrgyzstan was the introduction of a wide range of political reforms. This inevitably included dismantling the Soviet-style one party political system, building the institutions of a sovereign state, preparing a new constitution, building the legitimacy of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (the parliament) and presidential power, and in Gregory Gleason's words "seeking to develop European-style democratic institutions".[6] On top of this there was a need to establish political equilibrium among various political parties and nationalist movements in order to avoid a civil war similar to that of Tajikistan and to build national consensus over the direction of the future development of the Republic.

The first tough test of the president's credentials happened in August 1991, when the anti-Gorbachev military putsch in Moscow provoked a dramatic confrontation between the Kyrgyz president and democratic parties on the one hand and the CPK on the other hand. The CPK, which supported the anti-democratic forces, was banned and its property was confiscated, and Kyrgyzstan declared its independence from the USSR. A number of political parties and independent mass media emerged on the eve of and during the first years of independence, as Kyrgyzstan established one of the most liberal political environments in the Central Asian region. This earned the title of 'Island of Democracy' for the republic and millions of dollars in assistance from Western donors and international organizations.

On 5 May 1993 Kyrgyzstan adopted its first post-Soviet constitution, which provided a legislative framework for further democratic transition. The new constitution embraced the constitutional ideas of modern western liberal democracies, as it strengthened the division of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary. Unlike some Baltic states, Kyrgyzstan guaranteed citizenship and full political rights to all people of the republic without discriminating on language or ethnic bases. The constitution gave substantial power to the president but provided the parliament with a mechanism to balance the presidential power. According to the constitution, the president is the head of state; he has the power to appoint the prime minister and the members of the constitutional court (with the approval of the parliament). He also has the right to initiate new laws, and to veto the decisions of the *Jogorku Kenesh*. However, the *Jogorku Kenesh* has preserved its power, including the final say on the state budget, ratification of international treaties and the ability to defer presidential decisions.[7]

As the next step, the Soviet style single-chamber 350-seat *Jogorku Kenesh* was dismissed by presidential decree in October 1994, sparking a constitutional crisis and sharp criticism from the political opposition. This dismissal was justified by an argument that it would help to consolidate the political support and institutional

strength of the government, necessary for the implementation of radical economic reforms and in order to reflect what President Akayev called "tradition and culture of the people".[8] On 6 December 1994 the President suggested changes to the constitution, replacing the old single-chamber *Jogorku Kenesh* with a new, two-chamber *Jogorku Kenesh*. It was suggested that the new parliament would consist of 35 seats in the *El Okuldor Jyiyny* (the Assembly of the People's Representatives) and 70 seats in the *Myizam Chygaruu Jyiyny* (the Legislative Assembly). Parliamentary elections were held on 9 February 1995, becoming one of the hottest contested elections as a total of 1,021 candidates representing approximately 40 parties and organizations were standing for 105 seats. The Social-Democratic Party won the largest number of seats, followed by *Asaba*, Unity of Kyrgyzstan, *Erkin Kyrgyzstan*, *Ata-Meken*, the CPK and the Republican Party.

In the same year President Akayev called for early presidential elections (the elections were initially planned for 1996). These were the first competitive popular presidential elections (in 1991 Akayev was the only candidate in the popular elections), and two opposition candidates were registered by the Electoral Committee, Absamat Masaliyev and Medetkan Sherimkulov. The worsening economic situation in the country forced Akayev to change the accents in his platform. Although the candidate still emphasized the democratic orientation of the republic, the main accent was put on further intensification of economic reforms. He argued that only radical economic reforms, mass privatization and structural adjustments recommended by the World Bank and IMF could transform this small mountainous country into what he called the 'Switzerland of Asia'.[9] He also appealed to the ethnic minorities by elevating the Russian language to the status of an official language despite the resistance of some nationalistic parties and some members of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (the Kyrgyz language already had the status of the state language). The other two candidates for the presidency critically approached his policy from the position of the left. Masaliyev emphasized the values and achievements of the Soviet era, which, in his opinion, were lost. The other candidate, Sherimkulov, put forward a political platform emphasizing the necessity to preserve social guarantees, to lower taxes and to develop socially oriented policy. He built up a considerable part of his election platform on criticism of the economic and social policies of President Akayev.

The presidential elections were held on 24 December 1995 with high participation by the electorate: 81.1%. President Akayev won the elections, receiving 71.6% of the votes. The CPK candidate, Masaliyev, received 24.4% of the votes, and Medetkan Sherimkulov received 1.7%.

The years following the 1995 elections were among most difficult for independent Kyrgyzstan as the economic difficulties continued and the political environment deteriorated. The year 2000 parliamentary elections became an important benchmark, testing public support for the president and government policies. Pro-presidential political parties hoped to strengthen their presence in the *Jogorku Kenesh,* underlining the extensive political and economic changes and the success of economic stabilization. Meanwhile, the opposition aired their own views on radical economic reforms, their concerns about social polarisation and the increasing authoritarianism of the Akayev-led regime. It hoped to utilise general dissatisfaction with the falling standards of living, to consolidate numerous small groups and parties and to overcome a deep division rooted in regional rivalry. This rivalry between the north and south provinces was also complicated by the increasing political role of the tribal divisions in society.

Rafis Abazov

The parliamentary elections were held on 20 February 2000, followed, on 12 March, by a run-off. On both occasions the turnout was extremely low, at 57.8% in the first round and 61.86% in the second round. Direct elections were held for 45 seats in *Myizam Chygaruu Jyiyny* and 45 in *El Okuldor Jyiyny*; the other 15 seats in the *Myizam Chygaruu Jyiyny* were allocated on the basis of proportional representation.

There were a number of candidates in the elections (230 for the *Myizam Chygaruu Jyiyny*, and 186 for *El Okuldor Jyiyny*, and a second round was needed. Ultimately, though, just seven opposition candidates made their way to the new Kyrgyz Parliament by winning in direct elections. Several prominent opposition politicians - for example Daniyar Usenov and Omurbek Subanaliev, both powerful and popular, and both viewed as potential presidential candidates, were simply disqualified on legal grounds. General Feliks Kulov, another opposition leader, had good results in the first round, but lost in the second round. Those who did make it into the parliament, represented the *El* (People) Party, the Communist Party, the *Ata-Meken* (Fatherland) Party, and the *Kairan El* (Never-Do-Well People's) Party.

The pressure on the opposition before and irregularities during the parliamentary elections led to widespread criticism from the opposition and international observers. The OSCE observers, led by Marc Stevens, noticed that the Kyrgyz authorities "did not fulfil their commitment to organize fair parliamentary elections and the elections were neither democratic nor fully lawful".

That same year, the parliamentary elections were followed by the presidential elections. Electoral procedures established the deadline for nominating and registering candidates, and their need to pass a special Kyrgyz language examination.

In the presidential election campaign, the incumbent president and his team emphasized Akayev's capability to preserve political stability in the country and deliver results. Meanwhile, the opposition focused on allegations of corruption during the privatization process, growing nepotism and the social cost of the 'shock therapy' approach to economic reform and of the IMF designed structural adjustment programme. In the end, the Electoral Committee officially registered five candidates, plus Akayev. They were Omurbek Tekebayev, the chairman of the *Ata-Meken* (Fatherland) Party; Almazbek Atambayev, an industrialist; Melis Eshimkanov, a journalist and one of the leaders of the *Asaba* party; Tursunbay Bakir Uulu, one of the leaders of the *Erkin* (Free) *Kyrgyzstan* Party; and Tursunbek Akunov, a human rights activist. However, it was not political programmes, but rivalries between northern and southern clans that shaped political competition between candidates. In this environment President Akayev managed to strike deals with representatives of major clans and those deals combined with support from state bureaucracy helped him to strengthen his position.

According to the results published by the Electoral Committee, the turnout at the polls on 29 October 2000 was 77.3%. Like incumbent presidents in Kazakhstan in 1999 and in Russia in 2000, President Askar Akayev won in the first round, securing 74.4% of votes. The alliance between Omurbek Tekebayev and Felix Kulov surprisingly received only 13.9% of votes; Almazbek Atambayev 6.0%; Melis Eshimkanov 1.1%; Tursunbay Bakir Uulu 1.0%, and Tursunbek Akunov 0.4%.

Although the incumbent president won the election, the price was extremely high, as irregularities in both the parliamentary and presidential elections tarnished the image of the 'island of democracy'. In 2000, according to Freedom House,

The Political Culture Of Central Asia: The Case Of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan plunged to 20th place out of 28 transitional countries of the CIS and Eastern Europe, just behind Ukraine, Albania and Armenia, but ahead of Bosnia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. In the short term, it seems that international sponsors, on whom the republic is heavily dependent, will accept the situation as it is; however, in the longer term, it could be more difficult to find extended political support and economic assistance as the democratic experiment fades.

Yet the pubic in general and the opposition in particular did not accept the authoritarian tendencies in the regime's actions and mounted significant resistance. In the meantime, the Kyrgyz government, fresh from its decisive victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections, attempted to make a resolute move against the opposition by arresting parliament member Azimbek Beknazarov, one of the leading critics of the government and a prominent opposition figure from southern Kyrgyzstan. As in the case of former vice-president Felix Kulov, Beknazarov was arrested on dubious charges of professional misconduct several years before. However, very soon it became clear that the government miscalculated the mobilizing potential of the opposition and the public reaction to government moves against the opposition. Several opposition parties declared hunger strikes in protest, demanding Beknazarov and Kulov's unconditional release. The government continued to ignore the opposition's demands.

The tensions gradually boiled over and consequently resulted in tragic events. On 17 March 2002 a group of Beknazarov supporters in his native Aksy district attempted to organize a public rally in his support in the district centre – the town of Kerben. As the angry unarmed demonstrators gathered in front of the local police building, the police and security forces opened fire, killing six citizens and injuring more than 60 people. This was the first violent civil confrontation since the republic's independence in 1991. On the following day, in a televised address to the nation, President Akayev accused the opposition of "political extremism and attempting to destabilize the country".[10] Both the Aksy event and Akayev's remarks provoked wide public discontent. They deepened further the divide between northern and southern Kyrgyzstan, and were perceived by the people of southern Kyrgyzstan as a direct insult to their dignity.

The deaths and the government's mishandling of the event and its aftermath outraged and radicalized even the moderate opposition. There were several speculations in the republic on the causes of the Aksy event. One view claimed that it was an attempt to undermine the positions of several possible successors to President Akayev in the current government. Another view was that the state administration was so corrupted and incompetent that it could not coordinate or control the actions of its individual members, especially in the regions, who were able to establish their own fiefdoms and behave like feudal lords. The full range of opposition groups and the public joined in demands to investigate and to bring to justice those responsible for the tragic events. They also called for the resignation of the president and the government, as he and his ruling cohort in their view had lost all political credibility. In May 2002 several opposition groups organized a *Kurultai*, a People's Congress, and then established a popular movement "People for the resignation of President Akayev".

In response to the criticism, in May 2002 the Kyrgyz government did resign, and a new one was established, bringing in a significant number of new young ministers, led by the new technocratic prime minister Nikolai Tanayev. However, President Akayev refused to follow suit.

Throughout the summer numerous groups of citizens organized public rallies and marched toward the capital with the slogan "Akayev ketsyn!" (Akayev Must Go!) and demanded freedom for Beknazarov. There were round the clock rallies not only in Bishkek and major cities, such as Jalal-Abad, but for the first time in small towns, such as Kerben, Toktogul and many others. To defuse the tensions the government released Mr Beknazarov and announced public debates on constitutional changes. The Constitutional Council, which included members of the opposition, was established in September 2002 to assess possible considerable constitutional changes, including the return to a unicameral parliament and limiting the power of the president. In an important move, in autumn 2002 President Akayev finally declared that he would not seek re-election after his term expires in 2005 and would respect the decision of the Constitutional Council. However, a hastily organized referendum, which was held on 2 February 2003, did not address all issues raised by the opposition and strengthened further the power of the president. If he does step down, it will be a significant victory for the democratization process, as it will be the first time in a Central Asian republic that the president voluntarily steps down.

Impact Of Traditional Society & Clanism

For centuries, the institutions of the traditional society in Central Asia shaped an invisible but powerful network of tribal, communal or clan identities, loyalties and relations. These extended into the political scene, as well into the 20th century the national identities were weak and underdeveloped in the region. In fact, the institutions of the traditional society have been so deeply rooted that even the Soviet institutions could not destroy or penetrate them, despite harsh measures.

The political and social changes during the Soviet era, however, inevitably transformed the traditional forms of political activity. As the traditional tribal and communal borders were cut through by drastic administrative changes, newly formed administrative units – *rayons* (districts) and *oblasts* (provinces) – emerged as the basic units. Units based on local and regional loyalties and patronage were dubbed clans or mafias.[11] Political competition between representatives of districts or provinces is also well known in the domestic politics of major democracies in the West. What made the regionalism different in Central Asia was that the one party system forced representatives of the same party to furtively compete with each other for power and influence. What made the region different from other parts of the USSR was that in Central Asia the regionalism was reinforced by the remnants of tribal or communal (*makhalya*) loyalties. Last but not least, the *nomenklatura* system of political recruitments and promotions ensured strict hierarchical rules – the rise of talented individuals on the *nomenklatura* ladder from the city or district level of the political hierarchy to the *oblast* and then to the top (republic or national). Inevitably, every politician had roots in a particular *rayon* and *oblast* and expected assistance, help and votes from his or her relatives or fellow colleagues. Pauline Jones Luong, in her study of regionalism in Central Asia, argues that the foundation of regionalism in Central Asia was built around *oblast* level clans and traditionally representatives of various *oblasts* competed with each other for power and influence at the national level.[12]

The Soviet leaders knew about the cleavages within the ruling Communist Party in Central Asia and introduced non-natives, traditionally Russians or Ukrainians, into the *nomenklatura.* However, Kremlin efforts to penetrate the existing networks of

patron-client relations failed, as in many cases clans simply adopted the non-natives (who usually lived in the republics for generations) into their clans.

After Kyrgyzstan declared its independence in 1991, the clanism based on regional affiliations continued to shape political behaviour and became an even more visible part of the political culture. Politicians have openly acknowledged the phenomenon of clanism in Kyrgyzstan's politics. Moreover, during various elections to the parliament or local governments they explicitly appealed to the support of the regional clans and attempted to exploit their tribal and community links. In the *Jogorku Kenesh* too, its members also formed parliamentary alliances and often voted according to regional affiliations. In fact, the formation of regional clans in the *Jogorku Kenesh* became even easier when Kyrgyzstan adopted its new constitution in May 1993 and the state abandoned the Soviet quota practices (quotas for women, ethnic minorities, trade unions, etc). In the new political environment all members of the *Jogorku Kenesh* have been elected directly from their electoral districts and the regional clan support became more important than ever.

Radical economic changes practically destroyed the middle class in Kyrgyzstan, which was formed during the Soviet era,[13] as according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the 1990s more than 71 percent of the population struggled below the poverty line and another 20 percent could be classified as 'poor'. In a time of economic collapse and social uncertainty, more and more people turned to the traditional institutions and to traditional forms of social mobilization, which could provide some forms of social security and support.

The institutionalization of the regional clans in the political life of Kyrgyzstan undermined the emerging western-style political organizations in the republic in many ways. Firstly, these organizations were established and were continuously encouraged to adopt western styles of political mobilization and political participation. Secondly, their members could not overcome the legacy of clan politics and clan rivalry. They found themselves divided deeply within themselves, as there was permanent struggle between representatives of different clans. Thirdly, these parties failed to establish their electorate base around the country and to become truly national parties, as many of these organizations were based in the capital, Bishkek, and could not attract votes in the provinces, such as in Jalal-Abad or Osh.

The Impact of Islamic Resurgence

The majority of Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School and they referred to themselves as Muslims even during the brutal political purges of the Josef Stalin era. It would be logical to assume that after 1991 Islam would play an important role in Kyrgyzstan's politics. Yet, the post-Soviet era showed a different pattern of political development.

In this regard the Soviet experience left a most profound influence on the political culture in the republic, as the Soviet regime was militantly atheistic and aimed to create a highly secular society. In the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, all religious activity and any kind of heterodoxy were banned. Stalin initiated a great purge of all political opponents to his regime, especially the religious clergy and intellectuals, who played a prominent role in the political and intellectual life of Turkistan during the tsarist era. Thousands of people were sent to Siberia or

Rafis Abazov

remote areas of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, never to return. Only the hardship of World War II compelled the Soviet leaders to change their policy towards Islam.

In 1943, the Spiritual Body of Muslims of Central Asia (Russian abbreviation SADUM) was established in Tashkent with representative branches in every republic of the region. SADUM controlled a very small number of official mosques, madrasahs and the so-called official Imams, who were allowed to preach in those republics. Also, there was a small quota established for those who wished to perform pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca. After World War II there was no large and systematic persecution of Muslim clergy, although from time to time, smaller propaganda campaigns on atheism, and public condemnation of the 'backwardness of some Muslim traditions' was conducted.

Cultural and other relations between Central Asian republics and other Muslim countries were allowed, and even expanded since the mid 1960s (for example establishing warm relations with Nasser's Egypt), but they were channelled through the state institutions or official department under SADUM. The 'iron curtain' was preserved, although in a less strict manner, through Brezhnev's era.

By and large, Moscow leaders did not implement a consistent policy towards Islam and the Muslims of Central Asia throughout the Soviet era. The policy experienced drastic fluctuation from a militant atheistic approach to semi-official acceptance of the Islamic practices among the Central Asian Muslim population. Nevertheless, the Soviet state continued to impose a strict ban on all kinds of religious activity in public life, consistently disseminating atheistic propaganda and maintaining a secular system of public education. However, the local authorities in Central Asia were increasingly reluctant to implement the policy of atheism in everyday life at the community level. Gradually Islamic practices became a matter of private life, especially in the rural areas of the region.[14]

All together, this led to 'dualism' in the life of Central Asian society. In the 1960s-1970s, Moscow leaders officially proclaimed the success of their policy of the secularization of society. Yet, since the 1970s, the Central Asian republics experienced a return to their Islamic civilization roots and a greater devotion to Islamic teaching. This phenomenon touched not only the older generation but young people as well. By the 1980s, the Kremlin's officials found that their perception of life in the region was far from the reality. Sociological surveys of the 1980s and 1990s proved that devotion to Islam was much stronger in the region than the Soviet officials had assumed. The number of "believers" ranged from 53 to 81% in different Central Asian republics.[15]

By the 1980s, conventional wisdom was for a semi-official acceptance of the coexistence of secularism in public appearance and Islamic preaching in private life. High placed officials from time to time included 'anti-fundamentalist' statements in their official speeches. However, outside their offices the local authorities especially at the community level, gave the green light to build new and restore old mosques, and to follow Islamic traditions and obligations. Nonetheless, the ban on any kind of political Islamic organizations or political participation of Islamic activists in public life was still in place throughout the 1980s.

The power of the Islamic heritage and Islamic political mobilization were perceived as the most probable causes of disturbance by the Moscow leaders and even by the local party elite in the pre-independence era.[16] Central Asian leaders tended to refer without adequate proof to the mysterious 'Islamic fundamentalism' as one of

the causes behind any disturbance in their region throughout the 1980s and even in the early 1990s.[17]

The Soviet experience had very important consequences for the Islamic revival in the region and leadership among Islamic activists. By the 1980s a strong division in the Muslim hierarchy into two groups of Islamic leaders emerged in the region. One was a tiny group of officials which was approved by the state and held state-assigned positions. The other was a numerous and quite influential group of the so-called unofficial Mullahs (Imams) and Sheikhs (Pi'rs). The latter group was community supported and existed practically in every *kishlak* and *aul* (village) of the region. These unofficial Imams were very much integrated into community life, and their position became apparent in times of turbulence and inter-ethnic conflicts. These Islamic leaders were a part of the community leadership, who showed their dissatisfaction with the deteriorating standard of living, disagreed with the official ethnic policies, and defended the rights of their communities against discrimination. The Soviet officials sometimes blamed Islamic leaders for the initiation of violent conflicts and 'destabilization of the situation' in their republics. However, in reality, the unofficial clerics often participated in those events as a part of the community, not as initiators of any particular conflicts.

The gradual transformation of the former ideologically oriented state and society into more or less pluralistic ones in the post-Soviet era has created a number of problems. The former Soviet system was quite secular and atheistic in its official ideological stands, which led to a dismissal of all religious activities from political and social life in the republics. The collapse of the ideologically oriented society and the Islamic resurgence gave birth to the problem of the reintegration of the Islamic values and Islamic institutions into the newly forming civil societies.

After 1991, the situation changed dramatically. All the Central Asian leaders quickly downplayed the antagonism between the state and Islamic creed. The republican leaders established full state support for the construction of mosques, performing pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), and sent hundreds of students to study in various Muslim countries. The number of official clergy was expanded, including the absorption of a significant part of unofficial Islamic leaders. However, the salient feature of the formal and informal political arrangement in the republic is that religion is a private matter and that there is no place for political Islam in the political life of the state. This notion was enforced, for example, in constitution of Kyrgyzstan. Article 7 irrevocably bans "formation of political parties on religious **and ethnic** grounds". It also states, "No religious organizations shall pursue political goals and objectives".

Militant incursions of 1999 and 2000 from Tajikistan to southern Kyrgyzstan, when members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan captured several villages and towns in Kyrgyzstan in an attempt to infiltrate into Uzbekistan, and alleged support, which they found in some elements of the Kyrgyz society, indicated new trends. Although the Islamic political parties have not been a part of the political process in Kyrgyzstan, the situation might change and Islamic creed and political mobilization might become a part of the political process and political culture in future.

Rafis Abazov

Impact Of External Influences

For decades the Soviet authorities feared the negative influence of non-communist ideas and ideologies from the countries to the south of Central Asia and from the Middle East. On the eve of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, western scholars also expressed their concerns that radical militancy, Islamic revolutionary fundamentalism and anti-western sentiments would find their ways into public life in Central Asia and might become a part of the political vocabulary and political culture in the region.

Yet those fears did not materialize and Central Asian republics accepted some important features of the globalization process. For example, we can find the most pro-western groups among Kyrgyzstan's elite, with strong adherence to political changes and market oriented economic reforms. In fact, Kyrgyzstan's policy makers ambitiously experimented with democratization, as they introduced a multi-party political system, allowed independent mass media and NGOs. The Republic has regularly held parliamentary and presidential elections and allowed independent observers from international organizations to monitor them. In addition its government conducted major market oriented economic reforms under the supervision of the IMF.

There were many reasons for this metamorphosis. The case of Kyrgyzstan might offer some explanations common to all the Central Asian republics, although the political experience and political environment of other countries might be different. Let us not forget that the current elite in power itself was a product of external influences. It was Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* which implicitly targeted removal of hard line communists from office and brought directly or indirectly many incumbent leaders to office. These elites accepted the need to abandon the iron curtain and open their countries to external influences in a hope that new ideas and changes would help them to overcome negative consequences of the Soviet political experiment. Besides, the political views of the elites have been changed under these external influences, although these changes did not necessarily lead to changes in their political habits. It was external support that helped NGOs and political organizations to establish themselves in Kyrgyz society and to maintain pressure on the government for transparency and further changes.

In addition the Central Asian elites have been convinced that there were obvious economic gains from international assistance. The ruling elites came to a consensus that in the modern world the state cannot isolate itself from the powerful forces of globalization. They understood that they would benefit directly and indirectly from economic and political liberalization if the republic were competitive in the international arena. But a republic can attract international investment only if it offers a competitive economic and political environment. Also, political liberalization allowed the ruling elite to legitimize their position in power. This step gave significant advantage to the existing leadership and its entourage, as the ruling elite retains control over the public institutions and resources.

However, these changes did not transform into sustainable democratization in the country, as there were obvious domestic political and social constraints for strengthening the institutions of the democratic society. The case of Kyrgyzstan shows that there are limits which the domestic environment imposes on external influences.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan has undergone a radical transformation during the modern era. For much of the 20ᵗʰ century, the republic developed within Moscow's orbit of political, social and economic influence. The Kremlin's leaders tried to implement the Soviet type of modernization, which, if successful, should have transformed Kyrgyz society and promoted its sustainable development. Yet Moscow failed to erase some important features of the pre-Soviet society (such as kinship, tribal and clan identities and affiliations), devotion to the people's cultural heritage (such as Islamic values), etc and failed to resolve the tensions and conflicts which have existed within the society for generations. In the post-Soviet era, the legacies of the past inevitably interacted with the domestic and external influences.

In this environment of significant political changes, the political culture could not be constant and rigid. We could see that what was absolutely unacceptable during the Soviet era is acceptable these days. Some features, such as multi-party competitive elections, were not known in the republic, but became a norm in the 1990s. Obviously, the ruling elite uses all means, including authoritarian measures, if it feels that its positions are threatened by the democratic process. Yet there are some limits in imposing authoritarian actions beyond which society is ready to resist.

There are no clear-cut answers about whether the western institutions can successfully work in this environment without adapting to the local realities. Political development in the post-Soviet era produces mixed results. Clearly, external influences played an important role in the transformation of the Central Asian societies, their opening and in promoting some forms of liberalization. At the same time, the example of Kyrgyzstan shows that the domestic environment imposes limits on any attempts to implant external values and institutions into the local soil and to transform local political culture quickly. It is impossible simply to transfer political institutions from the developed democracies, which grew in their specific environment over long periods of time, into the very different environment of Kyrgyzstan without some adjustments. However, the question is how viable are those adjustments and if those adjustments undermine the nature of the democratic institutions.

There are many critics of globalization in Kyrgyzstan, as in many other parts of the world. However, the simple fact is that globalization is already at work in the republic and Kyrgyzstan cannot and will not isolate itself from external influences. The question is how long it will take for the forces of globalization to penetrate the traditional institutions of the society and to establish the delicate balance between universal values promoted by adherents of globalization and established political cultures of the republic and of the region.   But one of the most important facts is that globalization forces are slowly but steadily transforming the political culture in the republic.

ENDNOTES

¹   Gleason, G, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1997, pp36-39.
²   Ibid, pp180-181.
³   See for example: Kubicek, P, Authoritarianism in Central Asia: Curse or Cure?, *Third World Quarterly*, March 1998, pp29-43.

Rafis Abazov

4   Akiner, Shirin, 'Post-Soviet Central Asia: Past is Prologue', in: *The New Central Asia and Its Neighbours,* Peter Ferdinand (Ed), London: Pinter Publisher, 1994, p16.
5   Huskey, Eugene, The Rise of Contested Politics in Central Asia: Elections in Kyrgyzstan, 1989-1990, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol 47, No 5, 1995, p821.
6   Gleason, G, ibid, p94.
7   *Kyrgyz Respublikasynyn Konstitutsiasy,* Bishkek, 1996, pp19-41.
8   *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 7 December 1994.
9   *Slovo Kyrgyzstana,* 14-15 December 1995.
10   IRIN report, 28 March 2002.
11   The meaning of the word 'mafia' in the Central Asian context does not necessarily correspond with the meaning of the word in English.
12   Luong, Pauline Jones, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in post-Soviet Central Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp51-74.
13   There was no clear classification of the middle class during the Soviet era. However, we can use the average income of the population as a simplified measure. In this regard I consider the middle class as the population with income of above 100 roubles a month in 1989 (in 1989 prices). In 1989 about 45 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population had income above 100 roubles. See: Narodnoye Khozyaystvo SSR v 1989 godu. Moscow, FiS, 1990, p91.
14   See observation: Polyakov, S, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*, New York: ME Sharpe, 1992.
15   Dobson, Richard, 'Islam in Central Asia: Findings from National Survey', *Central Asia Monitor*, v2 (1994), pp17-22.
16   Ibraghimzade, Sunnatollo, 'Wahabism i Islamskaya Partiya (Wahbalism and Islamic Party)', Komsomolets Tadzhikistana, 26 December 1990.
17   Pravda Vostoka, 5-6 July 1990.

The Political Culture Of Modern Syria:
Its Formation, Structure & Interactions

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh[1]

No introduction to the political culture in a given country could be more suitable than a quick review of its modern history and regional context. This general principle seems to apply more specifically to Syria, since there was no such country prior to the end of WWI, with the exception, that is, of the secret maps of the French and the British.

Moreover, this situation seems to be related to Syria's inability, to date, to reach stability as a fully sovereign national state for reasons pertaining to its geographic location at the heart of the Middle East, and for special considerations related to its formation in accordance with the plans of its European occupiers.

Syria: The Formative Experience

The region of the Arab East that contained Natural Syria (including the contemporary states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel[2]) and Iraq formed a political unity, administratively pluralistic and, up until the conclusion of WWI, subject to the control of the imploding Ottoman Empire. History then gave the opportunity to the French and British to dominate that critical moment when the Ottomans were defeated and the weak Arabs began to feel their way towards independence and the establishment of their own special political entity.

This meant that these two European powers were now occupying the most suitable position to steer the various international and regional interactions into a direction that is more commensurate with their own particular interests and to bestow upon the "primordial Arab plasma" certain convenient forms.

Syria endured for two years as an independent Arab kingdom ruled by Faisal, a son of Sherif Husain, the Governor of Hijaz, who cooperated with the British against the Ottomans in creating what was to be known, undeservedly, in the Syrian historical literature as the Great Arab Revolution. In 1920, however, the French came to occupy the country in the aftermath of a battle in which the Syrian War Minister himself, Yusuf Al-Azmah, was killed.

Shortly thereafter, the French conqueror of Syria, General Gouraud, transferred the jurisdiction over four Syrian provinces to Lebanon, which, prior to that, had only encompassed the area of Mount Lebanon, with a population made up solely of Druzes and Maronites. This move by the French, however, did not generate much sorrow in Syria at the time, since the Syrian national elite considered the ancient region of Lebanon Minor as being part of Syria itself.

57

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

In the meantime, the British bestowed the territory that would later be known as Transjordania on another of Sherif Husain's sons, Abdallah, who ruled Transjordania until his assassination in Jerusalem in 1948 amid allegations of collaborating with the Zionists.

As for Palestine, the British had already promised in 1917, that is, even before they had wrested control of the land from the Ottomans, to establish a national home for the Jews therein. This promise would in fact be fulfilled in 1948, following the end of WWII, spurred on by the feelings of sympathy and guilt on part of the Westerners vis-à-vis the Holocaust.

Even "Syria Minor", or, according to Ghassan Salameh,[3] "the state of what was left", was further divided by the French on the basis of superficial sectarian considerations into four states, which were not destined to survive. In the following decades Syria witnessed many revolutions against the French, and the Syrians offered many martyrs. Still, in 1939, the French ceded control of the Alexandretta Province to the Turks. But Syrian maps to date still show the "annexed province" as part of the country. The annexation spurred another wave of refugees, that was not the first and will not be the last, to the "state of what was left".

Nonetheless, French occupation of Syria came to an end in 1946 in the aftermath of WWII and the major international changes that it had wrought. A year before, Syria had already taken part in the founding of the Arab League, which the British wanted to use as the organizational framework for their continued hegemony over the Arab part of the Middle East.

In 1947, a party destined to rule Syria for four decades and counting, beginning in 1963, was formed. It is the Arab Socialist Baath Party – a dogmatic Arab nationalist party whose ideology is based on the assertion that Arabs belong to a single nation and that Arab unity constitutes the primary goal for Arab struggle.

In 1948, the Zionists occupied 78% of the Palestinian territory and created a diaspora of 750,000 Palestinians scattered all over the Arab world. In 1949, Syria witnessed the first of a series of military coups (three of them took part in that selfsame year) reflecting popular discontent over failure to prevent the Palestinian tragedy. The frailty of the country became more manifest with the increasing tension in the Middle East due to various regional and international pressures associated with the early days of the Cold War.

With this, the formative phase of the history of modern Syria comes to an end and a new phase, no less unstable, begins: the phase of Syrian patriotism with its strong ideological affiliation with Arabism (in fact, more so than any other Arab country). This phase signalled the onset of the crystallization of Syria as a distinct entity.

Throughout the 1950s, Syria distanced itself from the western circles supporting Israel and which clearly had hands in organizing the various military coups the country witnessed. In this manner Syria found itself, according to the logic of international polarization, entering, unwittingly perhaps, into multi-dimensional relations with the then Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries.

In 1958, and under the increasing influence of Arab nationalist sentiments and by way of a forward-escape from the acute internal strife within the ranks of Syrian ruling elite,[4] Syria entered into a merger-type union with Nasserist Egypt, which had already set the foundations for a popular political paradigm far removed from

and totally antagonistic to the pluralistic and competitive liberal paradigm[5] that had previously set the tone for political activity in the two countries, and that had failed to address a number of critical issues, including dealing with the acute problems faced by the peasantry in both countries, showing a convincing response to the Israeli challenge, guaranteeing the political stability of the country, and launching an active developmental programme.

Another factor which could be added in retrospect is the impact of modern Syria's formative experience itself, as an experience with separation and downsizing on the one hand, and foreign hegemony and occupation on the other.

In 1961, the hasty union broke up. Two years later, Arabists, of mostly Nasserist and Baathist persuasions, took over the rule of the country. But within the same year, the Baath Party turned against its former allies and usurped the reins of power to itself. Under the Baath, the problems with the peasantry that had begun to be addressed and resolved in Union times, found a more integrated solution. But the price paid, as the years will show, was too great: Syria was transformed from a multi-ethnic society with a plurality of religions, sects and affiliations into a one-party state.

The most important development in this period, however, a development that also marked its end, was the June 1967 war which ended with the utter defeat of the Arabs and the occupation of Egyptian and Syrian territories, in addition to what was left of Palestine. Three years after this defeat, whose impact on the consciousness of modern Arabs plays a role similar to the concept of original sin in Christian theology, Minister of Defence Hafiz Al-Assad took over the reins of power in the aftermath of the eighth military coup that the country had witnessed in 21 years.[6]

The reign of Hafiz Al-Assad lasted until his death in 2000; that is, it was longer than the period that had elapsed between the country's independence and his accession. For this reason, the state-monopolized media always focus on the political stability that marked the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad, contrasting it with the days of continuous coups and instability.

With the death of Hafiz Al-Assad, his son, Bashar Al-Assad, simply inherited the rule of the oldest of all Arab republics, a matter that testifies to the success of he one-party state in voiding Syrian society of the very concept of politics per se, and public opinion.

Many Syrians can only remember now, with a mixture of nostalgia and sad pride, the statement attributed to Syrian President, Shukri Al-Quwatli, made to his Egyptian counterpart, Gamal Abdul Nasser, on the eve of the establishment of the Syrian-Egyptian Union in 1958: "You have no idea, Mr President, of the immensity of the task entrusted to you … You have just become a leader of a people all of whom think they are politicians, half of whom think they are national leaders, one quarter that they are prophets, and one tenth that they are gods. Indeed, you will be dealing with a people who worship God, Fire and the Devil."[7]

Syria is currently surrounded by five countries: the non-Arab states of Turkey and Israel, both of which occupy Syrian territories, and the Arab states of Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Moreover, Syria's relations with its Arab neighbours have gone through many phases of tension and changes and are not fully stable.

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

But the most tense relations throughout the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad (until the mid nineties) were undoubtedly those with Iraq. For both countries are being ruled by the same party that adopts an extremist political and ideological culture.[8] This imposed political reality does not correspond to the deep pluralistic nature of both Syrian and Iraqi societies. Fear with regard to any potential American dabbling or experimentation with this Baath-dominated plurality, lest this dabbling proves to be a mere dress-rehearsal for eventual dabbling in Syria itself, among other countries of the Arab East, is exactly why the Syrian regime is so worried about current American and British preparations for the invasion, "de-Baathification" and regime change in Iraq.

Syrian-Jordanian relations have also been through many ups and downs, alternating between short warm intervals and long lukewarm periods. The choices made by the ruling elite in both countries were often conflicting. Jordan has always been closer to the Western camp and Syria to the Soviet bloc. Moreover, Jordan has generally distanced itself from the Arab-Israeli confrontation while the Syrian ruling elite has elected to shoulder the burden. Even on the eve of the Second Gulf War, the choices made by the two countries diverged. This time, however, they did so in a manner unexpected considering the ideologies to which each country has traditionally subscribed, with Jordan standing by Iraq and Syria joining the international alliance led by the United States.

As for Lebanon, Syria has been maintaining a military presence in that country since the breaking of the Lebanese war in 1976. Lebanon embodies more than any other neighbouring country the particularity of the Syrian political and social system, and its loathing of private initiative, although it likes to absorb it somehow. For despite the many failures of Lebanon's own political and social system, it has, nonetheless, maintained a good measure of respect for basic freedoms, especially freedom of expression and the media. It is for this reason perhaps that a strong security concern imposed itself on Syrian-Lebanese relations, especially after the signing of the Taif Accord in 1990.

Nevertheless, the most important constituent of the Syrian geopolitical system must surely be its closeness to Israel,[9] and the Israeli occupation of Syrian lands since 1967.

The second important constituent is Syria's closeness to NATO member Turkey, which has chosen, ever since its modern reformulation in the 1920s, to distance itself from its Arab and Islamic environment, allying itself with the West. This notwithstanding, Turkey has been occupying Syrian territory for more than six decades now, and has, little less than five years ago, threatened to wage war against Syria within the framework of various regional complications associated in particular with Kurdish affairs, but connected as well with water issues, various regional and international alliances, and the particular choices of the ruling political elite.

This brief review, however, will not be complete unless we draw the reader's attention to the fact that Syria lies in the heart of that part of the world called the Middle East, whose modern existence and future seems to rest on three main pillars:

- maintaining the stability of oil production, and ensuring the safety of oil transport routes and maintaining the stability of its prices.

The Political Culture Of Modern Syria: Its Formation, Structure & Interactions

- maintaining Israel's central role and guaranteeing its immunity with regard to international law, as it seems to represent this region's unique pole, just as the US is currently the world's only pole.

- Ensuring that no regional power of consequence could emerge or that any merger between the region's countries could take place, developments which could offset American and Israeli regional hegemony.

For all these reasons, the Middle East remains the most internationalized part of the world and the least stable one. Undoubtedly the two facts are connected.

On the other hand, the Syrian formative experience does not speak for itself. Rather, its influence is filtered through a set of interlocking and interacting factors that no researcher should ignore: the collective memory of the country and its cultural heritage and traditions, the country's various educational, political and social institutions, and the choices of the acting political and cultural elite.

We will quickly consider each of these factors in the next couple of pages. But it will be of use to mention here that Syrian political culture has much in common with the political culture in other Arab countries, a fact that does not simply emanate from the commonness of the historical experience, but also from similarities in the patterns of this experience, especially in modern times, and the choices made by the various ruling elites involved. This is also related to the fact that the modern international order seems to ascribe similar marginal positions to these countries.

Whenever the word heritage is mentioned, minds quickly recall the Arab and Islamic heritage in the Golden Age. For the ancient past made many vital contributions to the experiences of the modern era, including a certain manner of discourse, and certain perceptions and symbols, which helped in giving it its particular shape. The most important contributions are probably: the notion of the centrality of justice,[10] a sense of deep pride and commitment to Islamic culture, and an endemic popular suspicion with regard to authority, although the "higher Islamic culture" has always favoured an unjust authority over "trial".[11] This pre-modern past will always be taken by the Arabs as one of two comparative frameworks when it comes to the present (the other framework being the modern West).

But the living and decisive memory that has entered in the making of the contemporary Arab consciousness, that is the formative experience of this consciousness, must be the interaction, with varying degrees of violence, with the emerging industrial and colonizing West. The essential aspect of this experience is that the West, to the modern Arab, comes out as both a source of threat and of renewal. It undoubtedly represents the superior civilization, but he is, also undoubtedly, the colonizing aggressor. With time, and the repeated collisions between these two worlds, the political unconscious of the Arab will form and will devolve around this experience, and some Arab intellectuals will indeed begin to speak of the "Andalus Complex"[12] which has been affixed in the Arab spirit, first by the European conquest of the East, and then by the loss of Jerusalem. This is why the Arabs began speaking of the Crusades when George Bush Jr spoke, shortly after September 11 2001, of an American crusade against terrorism and its protectors.

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

Ever since the beginning of this West-dominated phase of the East-West interaction, each call for renewal and each attempt to change or call for openness had to justify itself and establish its legitimacy by showing its usefulness in responding to external threats and fortifying the country in the face of dangers.

This deeply ingrained constant operates on all levels, including the political unconscious, culture and ideologies, down to the level of simple daily demands at times. Its constant and permanent presence reflects the true reality of a country that has lost its sense of immunity and security. But it also proved quite useful for the ruling political elite, as we shall see.

It is not a rarity to see this constant operating as a passport for some Arab opposition to enter into the narrow political field in some Arab countries.[13] But, more often, it works as a justifying dogma for the ruling regime and a means for muzzling dissent and waylaying active political opposition. Indeed, here we stumble upon a major pillar of contemporary Syrian political culture: the alarmist and mobilizationist pillar.

But there is another pillar to the contemporary Arab political heritage. For inasmuch as the task of dealing with backwardness and catching up with the civilized world asserts itself as the decisive mission for all activists in the region, it also contributes to the centralization of power in an attempt to decrease the time-span required and speed up the process. This creates the necessary setting for a "revolutionary" situation (in the old sense of *role-reversal*) where the ruling elite monopolizes the only effective role while ascribing to the society the role of the "primordial plasma" (to be fashioned) or the "white page" (to be written on), just as European colonizers had done before. All ideologies in modern Syria seem to be based on this tendency, thus transforming the state into the only active centre for initiative. We shall call this second pillar the "Revolutionary" Pillar.[14]

For their part, the institutions responsible for the political education of the "masses," especially the official ones, including the school system, NGOS, or what has become known under the reign of the Baath Party as the Popular Organizations, and the media (most notably TV), have actively worked to consecrate the first pillar, thus helping to develop and promote a persecution complex vis-à-vis the outside world and a narcissistic one vis-à-vis the country itself.

This paranoid tendency became more pronounced during the rule of "the eternal leader", President Hafiz Al-Assad, who is quoted in the 8th Grade National Social Education textbook as saying: "Syria is fighting a multi-faceted battle, a patriotic and national battle, a battle for building and development, and a battle for self-defense and liberation."[15] One can find similar statements on a daily level in all Syrian media, and in the various speeches of officials from different levels.

These very institutions, however, serve to implant conservative values quite antagonistic to change, and quite paternalistic in nature, linking everything from the people to the state and, of course, the Party to the person of the President, without giving up its revolutionary role, which had given it birth. We should never misunderstood these endlessly repeated mobilizationist calls, for they are a tried and true means to turn the people into a homogenous flock, borrowing from the Arab and Islamic heritage all those factors that can help those in position of authority ensure the obedience and the submission of the populace.

There are, nonetheless, two institutions for social and political habilitation that are as impossible to cancel as they are difficult to commit to the official discourse, namely the family and the mosque.[16]

The Syrian family, in general, is quite suspicious of politics, if not downright antagonistic to it. The main lesson it tries to convey to its children is "to leave politics to its people" and shy away from opposition parties. This quietist attitude emanates quite simply out of fear of the authority, especially in the aftermath of the bloody events of the 1980s, the Decade of Syrian Terror. But, at the heart of it, there lies as well the ancient Arab suspicion with regard to political authority, mixed with a deep Islamic pessimism regarding the possibility of establishing a just state,[17] and the original constant of the Bedouin political culture (in some parts) innately antagonistic to the very concept of authority.

Therein lies the real source of frailty for all contemporary Arab states, Syria included. For, while these young states cannot hope to achieve certain critical levels of political and cultural development and stand firm in the face of the challenges posed by regional and international transformations without attracting the majority of their peoples to the field of public work, letting them partake in the making of their future, the ruling elite in these countries behaves as if the state is its own private enterprise which they refuse to share with anyone.

Insisting on the concept of one-party state whose very constitution names the Baath party as the leader of state and society, came as the Syrian "solution" for this paradox and a way for hiding it as well.

The Syrian family has thus managed to become a fort in the face of the state, but the price of fortification was this negativity and withdrawal from the public domain and the destruction of the notion of public interest.

While the mosque remained outside the control of the state throughout the history of modern Syria, the era of the Baath Party inaugurated a conflict between state and religion beginning in 1964, and recurring in 1972, 1979 and 1982. Indeed, the page of this conflict has not been turned to date, and it has long become a national crisis in which thousands of people have fallen victims. Still, one of the main results of this conflict was the extension of state hegemony over the religious institutions, especially the mosques.

This is the problem with this approach: putting mosques under state control does not only diminish the independence of society, but is a main factor for stultifying Islamic religious thought. This takes place in two ways: first, by abolishing the freedom of opinion and expression, and hence the freedom to think, as part of an overall project for domination by the one-party state, and, second, by re-ascribing to religion the task of legitimizing authority, which makes entering into a religious debate too dangerous an undertaking.

It seems, in this regard, that the best way for a renewal of Islamic thought is to separate the ruling party (or family) from the state, and to bestow back on the state its proper public and national identity.

It should not be understood from the above that we mean to imply that the political culture is merely a direct outcome of the choices of the controlling elite in the political and social systems. Rather, political culture represents a set of values,

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

stands and attitudes regarding politics, which, in an unstable country like Syria, tend to be more influenced by the choices of the controlling elite.

The Basic Characteristics Of Syrian Political Culture

- The first characteristic of the Syrian political culture is its hyper-sensitivity with regard to all that is external, and the constant and heavy presence of an inside/outside dichotomy therein, with the implied outside here being mostly, though not exclusively, the West. This situation is mainly the product of the colonial experience (around which modern Arab consciousness had been formed), and the continued western (especially American) support for Israel.

  One of the major manifestations of this hyper-sensitivity is the rejection by the various Syrian human rights and NGO activists of any form of financial aid from the outside. Another variation on this theme, perhaps more related to the sense of Arab Islamic pride we alluded to above, is the early schism within the ranks of the Syrian Communist Party in 1972, with one independent faction gradually moving towards more democratic alternatives, while the other faction affiliated itself simultaneously with Moscow and with the Baath regime in Damascus.

  Suspicion of the West in the Arab World expresses itself in a variety of discourse forms: a Marxist discourse (calling for resisting imperialism), a nationalist discourse (calling for liberation from the occupiers), and a religious discourse (calling for Jihad against the international evil-mongers). Today, we can also add an anti-globalization discourse.

  In this regard, it is quite difficult to determine to what extent the growing anti-globalization discourse poses a real and present danger against the social and economic policies related to globalization, and to what extent it comes merely as a continuation of an older discourse reflecting a certain hyper-sensitivity with regard to the outside world. What makes this a legitimate question is the all too general tone of the Syrian anti-globalization e-bulletin, whose specific stances tend to be mere quotations of European and international anti-globalization activists.[18]

- The second characteristic of Syrian political culture is the distinct alarmist or mobilizationist aspect that imbues all speeches and political ideologies in the country. The Arab Nationalists, be they Baathists or Nasserists, the Communists and the Islamists all exhibit this unique extra-ideological tendency to draw attention to the "critical nature of the current phase", the "looming danger", or "the burgeoning conspiracy that threatens the safety of the homeland". The enemy is forever at the gates, it seems.[19]

  This particular discourse reflects the internationalized and unstable character of the Middle East where the people are not in control of their destinies, a condition that suits the ruling elite, be they in a position of power or members of one of the clandestine opposition parties. It also helps justify the continuation of the longest declared state of emergency in the history of the world, which has been in force ever since the usurpation of power by the Baath Party in 1963.

The Political Culture Of Modern Syria: Its Formation, Structure & Interactions

This state of affairs also furnishes a fertile soil for the spread of conspiracy theories, which means, in the context of Syrian politics, personifying the West and looking at it as a source of threat. In their turn, conspiracy theories reflect the major role that the "outside" (once again the West) has actually played in the shaping of the contemporary Middle East. Their spread also suits the authorities, which thus do not need to invent as many enemies.

- Another constant of Syrian political culture is the treatment of homogeneity as a high and quintessential virtue, while difference and plurality are dismissed as occasional and ephemeral phenomena. Indeed, the children of the 8th Grade learn that Arab culture "is a homogenous culture, all existing differences between its children are temporary and false. They will all disappear as soon as Arab conscience is awakened."[20]

  In this regard, some authors go as far as considering "homogeneity as one of the Images of the Arab historical mind", with image here used in its Kantian sense.[21] Here, the interests of, and choices made by, the ruling and leading elites meet with the objective need of the youthful societies to show greater solidarity and homogeneity.

- Syrian political culture is also distinguished by its strong "statist" character. The concept of state is well-nigh synonymous with that of politics and social and public life. Moreover, each political strand of thought, including opposionist thought, is, in the final analysis, a thought about the state.[22] This element probably reflects the total presence of the state in all aspects of life and societal interactions even when they have no connection to politics. The result is the exclusion of civil society from engagement in the political and intellectual life of the country. Indeed, the difficulties faced by emerging civil society organizations, which sprang to life after the passing of President Hafiz Al-Assad, come perhaps as reflections of this statist political culture.

  The phenomenon of statism manifests itself in the circles of the opposition as well, albeit in a passive manner with excessive criticism of the political authority often reflecting unreasonable expectations on the part of the opposition, or demands for the redressing of the sort of problems that are not in nature state-related. As such, we find such demands as the release of all political prisoners and the lifting of the state of emergency and martial law listed side by side with demands for "constructing new channels for dialogue among the Syrians ... and pushing all files and programmes tabooed through the controls established by societal traditions into the forum of public debate".[23]

- We have pointed out earlier how each demand for renewal cannot justify itself except by using a patriotic discourse and by stressing its potential ability to strengthen the national fibre and help consolidate the national stand and fortify national unity. This in effect weakens the stand of the democratic opposition, which finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place: the oppression of the one-party states which monopolize patriotism, and the false calls to democratization issued by certain international powers concerned only with maintaining an open Middle East, true to its enduring strategic, economic and security vulnerability.[24]

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

The response of our generally weak political culture vis-à-vis this statist patriotism, combined with the presence of a relatively real foreign occupation, including the Israeli occupation, and the preferences and interests of the dominating elite serve the interests of the latter and could compel the democratic forces to try to outdo the established authority in this regard.[25]

- Both the mobilizationist and the revolutionary factors, with all the statism and collectivism they inspire, contribute jointly to the weakening of the chances for growth of liberal elements within the Syrian and Arab political culture. Indeed, there is always a strong need for a powerful internally interventionist state in our part of the world, but perhaps it is time we established a state based on a social contract and a guarantee of pluralism and individual liberties.

 What stops this development is not so much the nature of the political culture as the density and the power of current international wagers in the region and the lack of stability therein, ever since it was fashioned by its European creators, a situation which fosters the formation of an internationalized and consolidative political culture. This situation, well-maintained by the US and its Israeli agent, all but dooms the possibility of sprouting the liberal seeds, those which already exist in the Islamic tradition and those received by modern Arab culture through its difficult interaction with western culture. This becomes more like challenging fate.

- Finally, and as we might expect, there is a strong utopian and salvific tendency in Syrian political culture, manifesting itself in a variety of forms: secretive, militant, extremist, party-centred, and ideologically centred (Marxist, Arabist and Islamic). Still, all these forms are currently receding, as we shall see.

The Transformation Of Syrian Political Culture

It is still difficult to speak of any change in the popular political culture in Syria, for all the activities witnessed by the country since June 10, 2000, took place within the ranks of a narrow and elitist framework. Moreover, popular culture changes at a much slower pace than high culture. The culture of the elite, however, did witness some changes, including the retreat of the militant ideological character and the mobilizatinist function. But this retreat is more due to the breaking up of the ideologies that conquered and fed our culture than to any independence declaration vis-à-vis these ideologies.

We can also note, with the beginning of the period called "the Damascene Springtime", the introduction (or the return) of new concepts and tools, such as civil society (which became both a political slogan and a tool), human rights, and semi-public forums. The Internet has also helped in the creation of virtual communities, which has so far managed to escape state control, especially seeing that they failed to add any article to the Publication Law (declared in September, 2001) punishing the use of the Internet for the expression and exchange of ideas and information.

By personally following the development of these activities, I find in it a clear shrinking of the utopian, salvific and revolutionary elements, and a visible aversion

The Political Culture Of Modern Syria: Its Formation, Structure & Interactions

with regard to secrecy (which used to reflect a militant and ideological political culture inasmuch as it was a means for protection). Still, I did not sense any meaningful change in the statist tendency nor a strong participation by the liberal elements.

I have also noticed a larger acceptance of Syrian patriotism expressed in the majority of the Syrian intellectual writings in the last few years.[26] Naturally, this development has its own particular meaning, seeing that the ideologies of the Syrian ruling elite used to be based on a non-acceptance of Syria as a legitimate national state, or "the final state for all its children". Should the domestic and regional circumstances become more acceptable, and I would not necessarily say good, Syrians will perhaps learn to accept their country in a sound manner and become reconciled with themselves without isolating themselves from the Arab World.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Translated by Ammar Abdulhamid. Caution: the titles of foreign books was translated directly from Arabic, so they may not be identical with original titles.
[2]   The ancient Arabic name of Natural Syria was Bilad Al-Sham.
[3]   Salameh, Ghassan, State and Society in the Arab East, (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1987), 1st edition, p59, (in Arabic).
[4]   Seale, Patrick, The Struggle For Syria, Tr Sameer Abdo & Mahmoud Fallahah, (Beirut Dar Al-Kalimah, 1980), 1st Edition, p104ff. Barut, Muhammad Jamal, Power Polarizations among Syrian Elite 1918-2000, Dar Sindbad, Amman, forthcoming 2003.
[5]   Barut, ibid.
[6]   Modern Syria witnessed ten military coups throughout its history. The last two of them came against the late President, Hafiz Al-Assad, but failed.
[7]   Laurence, Henry, The Great Game: the Arab East and International Schemes, Tr Abdulhakeem Al-Arbad, (Bengazi, Dar Al-Jamhiriyyah, 1993), 1st Edition, p238.
[8]   Article 52 of the Party's constitution drafted in 1947 (not to be confused with the country's constitution) says that the principles of the Party are "unchangeable and lay no foundation for future revision or amendment. They have been decided by a certain generation and should not be changed." Of course, the article was never truly implemented, but does reveal the existence of a certain political culture that lifts ideology, constancy and extremism to the highest level.
[9]   Whose existence, security and qualitative lead over all Arabs put together is guaranteed by the very power that makes sure that Arabs can never come together, namely the US.
[10]   In this regard some scholars often refer to the temptation of the idea of "the just despot" in the Islamic political tradition. *Al-Jabiri, Muhammad Ali. The Arab Political Mind: Its Limits and Revelations,* (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1990), p356. Here Al-Jabiri returns the temptation posed by the idea of "the just despot" to the fact that "the Arab political mind is fashioned on the basis of identification between the roles of God and the Prince, which implants in the political consciousness that idealistic paradigm for rule which has been alluring in the Arab political mind ever since antiquity to this very idea: the paradigm of the Just Despot."
[11]   Ie popular unrest or civil war.
[12]   The Arabs having ruled the Andalus (in South Spain) for eight centuries. In Arab culture, the Andalus always invokes a vision of beauty and nostalgia.
[13]   On this score, see my article "Syrian Opposition: Sometimes Late, Sometimes Wrong," in the Annex to the Lebanese newspaper Al-Nahar, dated 17 February 17 2002.
[14]   The 9th Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2002-03, quotes a definition of the Bath Party taken from its 1949 constitution: "a national popular revolutionary movement fighting for the sake of Arab unity, freedom and socialism", p29. Moreover, my article "The Crisis of Syrian Opposition: No opponent but an enemy," published in Al-Nahar on 4-5 June 2002, should be consulted.

Yasin Al-Haj Saleh

---

[15]   The 8th Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2001-02, p13.

[16]   We will point out shortly how making the religious establishment succumb to external pressures leads to the emergence of more rigid forms of Islamic thought.

[17]   This while constantly accepting the necessity of the state.

[18]   We are referring here to the e-bulletin *Al-Badeel* prepared by a group of Syrian anti-globalization activists: www.moaten.com

[19]   The recent book by the long-standing Vice-President of Syria, Abdulhaleem Khaddam, begins with this sentence: "In this difficult phase of the life of the Arabs …" Khadddam, Abdulhaleem. The Contemporary Arab order: Current Reality and the Future Prospects, (Beirut: the Arabic Cultural Centre), 1st Edition, 2003.

[20]   The 8th Grade Textbook on National Social Education for the year 2001-02, p15. This instructional statement comes within the framework of "Establishing an Ideological Baathist Generation". But the real product of this system is an alienated, deeply apolitical and easily corrupted generation, because the Baath had long ceased to be an actual political Party becoming more an instrument of power and its immediate interests.

[21]   Al-Azmeh, Aziz, Secularism from a Different Perspective, (Beirut: The Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1992), 1st Edition, p324.

[22]   Ghalyoun, Bourhane, The Assassination of the Mind, (Beirut, Dar Al-Tanweer, 1985).

[23]   "Together towards a Modern and Democratic Syria". A Manifesto of the Party for Syrian Modernity and Democracy, published on the 16 September 2001. It does not occur to the mind of the Party here that calling upon the state to interfere in such matters leaves the doors wide open to inquisition, rather than opening the "tabooed files". The Party seems also unaware that it cannot combine the call for separating state and religion with the demand that the state should interfere in matters of religious and social beliefs.

[24]   Such as "the American Middle East Partnership Initiative" launched by US Secretary of State Colin Powell on January 2002.

[25]   The discourse of the Syrian semi-declared opposition party, the National Democratic Assembly, falls back on calling to democracy so that the country could withstand external storms. See in this regard: "Cultural Papers: An intellectual political non-periodic book", issued by the Information Council in the National Democratic Assembly (npd).

[26]   There is no research effort to date that examines this issue, but most of the intellectual and political contributions seem to imply it. See for instance: Bourhane Ghalyoun's lecture: "The Future of Reform and Change in Syria: Towards a new National Covenant". This lecture was delivered as part of the National Dialogue Forum on 5 September 2002. See also the documents of the Syrian Modernity and Democracy Party, although this later refers to Syrian patriotism within a militant ideological framework that ignores Arabism.

Freedom Counts
The Project For Identifying, Assessing & Quantifying Obstacles To The Process Of Democratization In Syria: The Basic Outlines

Ammar Abdulhamid

Introduction

In my country, Syria, the older generation of intellectuals often bemoans the demise of the "very promising democratic experience" of the late fifties, an experience forcefully aborted through the Baath Party coup of1963, and, later, through the internal Baath coup of 1970, known as the Corrective Movement.

However, the success of the coups themselves, the fact that the sole opposition to these coups came out of Nasserist, communist and fundamentalist groups (that is, from other ideological groups), the constant fragmentation of these groups, and the role that religious and ethnic minorities played in all this, testify, if anything, to the absence of any deep appreciation of liberal democratic and civil values, on a mass level at the very least.

Thus, the result of the two Baath coups was a reversion into the traditional cultural mode of deeply-ingrained political apathy, and a re-strengthening in the people's psyche of the deep dichotomy that traditionally existed between ruler and ruled. A short period of democratic experimentation from the top coming in response to the expectations of a small class of intellectuals, professionals, and their zealous adolescent followers,[1] was, unsurprisingly, insufficient to challenge and change the basic cultural underpinnings of how legitimacy is gained in the Arab world with regard to political authority.

Some might, and do indeed, argue that, had the said experiment lasted longer, it would have created the necessary conditions for cultural change and, thus, for successful democratization of the country. But this is quite a simplistic argument. In reality, this experiment, as we have noted, did not succeed due to the lack of a real appreciation of democratic ideals among the intellectual and professional classes themselves, coupled with an equally fateful lack of grass-roots support for democratic experimentation, the importance and necessity of which had yet to seep into "popular imagination".[2] In an environment where there is no popular endorsement of democracy and democratic institutions, democratic experimentation from the top, no matter how sincere it happens to be, is bound to fail.

For democracy, in the final analysis, is the product of "negotiations" between ruling and ruled classes through the application of grass-roots pressure to obtain concessions from the "top". It cannot take place any other way, it cannot be handed over on a silver platter and cannot be achieved in one single coup de grace.

If the experience of the developed part of the world teaches us anything, it is that democracy is a continuous process, and that, as soon as the people show any apathy towards the political process, the rulers almost immediately succumb to the temptation of autocratic practices.

Even in the best of times, the ruling class attempts to extend its authority through a number of methods pertaining to the dissemination of information: access to information could be denied in certain cases under the guise of national security, or too much information could be provided so as to hide the facts in tons of meaningless details. Occasionally, especially in times of war or preparation for war, disinformation provides a powerful tool, not only for deceiving the enemy, but also for deceiving one's own people as well, luring them into supporting certain actions they may not otherwise be inclined to support.

Democracy, then, is quite problematic even in the most developed and seemingly democratic of countries. Questions pertaining to whether democracy can flourish in times of poverty and economic crises, not to mention times of war, are all too legitimate questions to ask here. Western experience in this regard is ambivalent to say the least. And apathy is a notable phenomenon even in the western world.

But while western apathy is the result of a relative affluence, in the Middle East, it emanates from the persistence of a medieval cosmology or worldview, that is, from the continuing prevalence of certain cultural and intellectual idiosyncrasies that have not been internally challenged yet on a broad enough scale. For, though it is true that the challenges posed by modernity have rocked the faith of the peoples in the Middle East (the Arab world in particular) to its very foundations, the fact remains that, because modernity was introduced from external sources and was not the result of internal socio-economic and political dynamics, it was met by grass-roots rejection and a reversion to traditional modes of thoughts and organization, a phenomenon that was later ideologized, giving birth to various forms and manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism, among other isms.

Indeed, Modernity itself seems to have imposed itself upon the Middle East, in the form of various isms, such as Arab or Syrian nationalism, Socialism, Communism, Baathism, etc.[3] This development, naturally, made matters even worse. For ideologies in their very nature, and regardless of where they had first been conceptualized, cannot accommodate democracy. Thus, Modernity itself, in the form of *Modernism*, that is, in its ideologized form, seems to have helped thwart the possibility of establishing viable democracies in the region, at least in the short and intermediate term.

For all these reasons, the region was, and continues to be, caught up in a tragicomic dilemma of sorts, where the very possibility of democratization is impeded by all actors, internal and external, albeit armed with promises of freedom and progress. Considering all this, it would be an understatement indeed to say that the challenge of democracy-building in the Middle East will not be easily met. But, for the interest of freedom and human dignity, if these things still mean anything today, the challenge must be met, regardless of the odds.

This is indeed what *Project Freedom Counts* is trying to help accomplish in connection to one Middle East Arab country, namely Syria.

Research Problematic

Project Freedom Counts has been envisioned as part of an overall regional project seeking to determine the Global and Regional Influences on the Democratization Process in South Caucasus, Central and West Asia. *Project Freedom Counts* will focus in particular on Syria and will be conducted by Etana Press, a Syrian publishing house acting as an unofficial NGO concerned with civil society development in the country.

The *Project* is still in the initial phase. The formation of a proper research team and the establishment of a more detailed work plan are still pending, as funding applications to various institutions are still being considered. But, we expect that the *Project* will be officially launched before the end of 2003.

The *Project* will attempt to identify and measure the impact of various internal and external factors and constraints influencing the process of democratization in Syria. Special attention, however, will be given to internal factors, since they have often been neglected in previous related studies, or treated in an all too broad and general manner, leading to a failure in the production of vital statistics and indices that can help bring matters into greater focus.

Moreover, the impact of the Arab-Israeli struggle and the current American interventionism in the region will not be directly considered in the *Project,* seeing that enough studies, articles, books, and monographs dealing with these issues have already been published. Still, and while one can point to a lack of vital statistics in this area as well, addressing this issue is simply too large an undertaking and should be the subject of an all together separate project.

Nonetheless, one of the studies that will be commissioned as part of *Project Freedom Counts* will focus on popular perceptions of the regional and global situations, and will, therefore, provide some coverage of the "perceived" impact of certain regional and international developments, including the Arab-Israeli struggle and American interventionism, on the process of regional democratization.

Research Dynamics

Project Freedom Counts will consist of three separate yet interrelated phases, each lasting for a year:

- **Phase One** will involve the commissioning of special studies on a number of specific factors (listed below) to be conducted by researchers operating individually and conducting their own research and field studies, within the limits of the allocated budgets.

- **Phase Two** calls for the establishment of a special team of experts (involving some but not all of the researchers above) who will work to create certain questionnaires based on Phase One studies. The questionnaires will be completed with the help of special groups of volunteers operating all over the country. The idea is to poll a critical number of "average citizens", chosen randomly, on the issues outlined in Phase One studies, in the hope of producing statistics and indices that can either support or throw doubts on the various conclusions reached in

these studies.[4]   The length of Phase Two is mostly due to the fact that polling activities are frowned upon by the Syrian regime, and will have to take place quietly.

- **Phase Three** will involve the following activities:

    1. generating statistics on the basis of the questionnaires completed in Phase Two,
    2. amending Phase One studies on the basis of the new statistics,
    3. disseminating the results of the overall study through the establishment of a special website, in print form, and through special informal workshops and forums aimed at civil activists in the country and the region as a whole.[5]

The Studies

The studies that will be conducted during Phase One will focus on the following topics, each posing its own specific set of challenges to the process of democratization:

1. Describing the contemporary political culture, and providing a historical framework for the current internal political situation.
2. Outlining the role of the army in contemporary political life.
3. Identifying the various constitutional and legal constraints.
4. Identifying the various constraints posed by existing religious traditions, institutions and laws, and assessing the role of existing folk culture on understanding such concepts as democratization and civil society.
5. Assessing the impact of macroeconomic factors, especially with regard to the oil and natural gas sector.
6. Assessing the impact of microeconomic factors, especially the role of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
7. Assessing the impact of the rural-urban divide.
8. Assessing the role of the status of women in society.
9. Assessing the role of the existing educational system.
10. Assessing the role of the sectarian and ethnic makeup of the country.

1) The making of the contemporary political culture in Syria
Many factors enter into the making of the political culture in modern Syria. In fact, many of these factors are listed below and will be considered separately. Still, an overview can always help put things into a larger and clearer perspective. Although this first study may not directly lead to the generation of statistics, it will, nonetheless, help clarify the approach and can help underscore the various questions and issues that need to be addressed in the other more specific studies. This is why this study will be conducted first and will be discussed in a special informal meeting of experts that will mark the launching in earnest of *Project Freedom Counts*.

2) The role of the army
Any observer of contemporary Syria will be able to tell that the army plays a very central role in managing the affairs of the state. In fact, the country is ruled by a military junta derived mostly from the country's minority Alawi sect. The role of this shadow government became increasingly more crucial and problematic in the

aftermath of the passing of Syria's late president, Hafiz Al-Assad, on 10 June 2000, and the appointment of his son, Bashar Al-Assad, as his successor.

The young president, however, is believed by most observers to be only a figurehead, with the actual power residing in the hands of a small group of army generals who are struggling amongst themselves for control over the country. The struggle continues unresolved to date, putting the country in stasis, with various reform laws (mostly economic in nature) being occasionally issued but often not implemented.

This situation is not exactly new. Armies, often composed of ethnic and religious minorities, have always played an important role in the shaping of Syrian political life and culture, a fact that goes a long way in explaining the prevailing popular political apathy.

Still, the situation has never been quantified. That is, we do not have any statistics that can show, for instance, whether the current situation exists due to a lack of a deep enough popular civil awareness, or whether popular disdain of the current regime does indeed reflect an actual sense of frustration vis-à-vis army and/or minority rule.

The study focusing on the role of the army in contemporary political life in Syria should, therefore, conclude by attempting, among other things, to formulate certain questions that can help measure the popular understanding of the "natural" role that armies should play in modern states and societies.

3) The constitutional and legal constraints

The Syrian constitution was revised a number of times since the country's independence on April 17, 1946. The most drastic constitutional change, however, took place in the aftermath of the Corrective Movement, which led to the introduction of a new socialist constitution that was ratified in a popular referendum in 1973.

As is the case with socialist constitutions, the Baath-introduced document is rife with paradoxical articles that both promise to safeguard basic freedoms while simultaneously working to nullify them by linking them to the ever so vague and expansive interests of the "masses".

This notwithstanding, the constitution itself remained a meaningless document, as the country continued (and continues still) to live under the state of emergency first declared in 1963 in the aftermath of the Baathist coup.

The first major legal constraint to the process of democratization that needs to be addressed in this regard is, therefore, the lifting of the state of emergency itself. For only then could one truly begin to grapple with the process of constitutional and legal reforms. There are no indications, however, that such a development is likely for the foreseeable future.

As for the judicial system, it is indeed quite corrupt, inefficient, and far from being independent (constitutional assertions to this effect notwithstanding). But, one has to ask, is there really enough popular awareness of the need to maintain an independent judiciary? And how deep an inroad did the very notion of equality before the law and constitutionalism make in connection to popular understanding? These are some of the questions that need to be examined.

4) The role of the religious culture

Such is the hold of religion and religious traditions over the minds of the people of Syria that even the 1973 constitution, introduced and imposed by a supposedly secular regime, could not but assign a role to the Islamic Shariah in the law-making process in the country, treating it as one of the main sources of legislation. Still, the constitution fell short of declaring Islam as the official religion of the state, as is the case in most other Arab countries.

This created a paradoxical situation where the country could simultaneously be considered as both secular and Islamic. Secular, because it was in effect declared socialist. Islamic, because religious law still regulated major sections of civil life: including marriages, divorces, custody rights and inheritance laws, among other things.

More importantly, the political situation in the country in the mid seventies and early eighties virtually voided any attempt at introducing civil laws to replace the existing religious ones. The violent clashes that took place between the military junta and the extremist Muslim Brotherhood Movement created a climate that would have proved, by government reckoning at least, quite inimical for the introduction of civil laws.

Popular culture, on the other hand, is influenced by many factors, and not only religious traditions. Popular interpretations of religion, and popular vistas onto internal, regional and global affairs can also establish certain constraints with regard to disseminating notions of a civil nature.

To which degree do religious values serve to impede the process of civil society building and democratization in the country? And what is the role of popular culture in this regard? These are some of the questions that the study on the role of religions and popular culture will attempt to answer.

5) Macroeconomic considerations

The issue of macroeconomic consideration relates in particular to the way the country's oil and natural gas supplies are being handled by the government and the sort of impact they had over such issues as corruption, centralization and openness to criticism.

If the government's handling of the oil supply over the last three decades is any indication, we can only conclude that Syria's natural wealth is in many ways a major obstacle to democratization. For the oil wealth has been run over the last three decades as a family affair, and corruption in the oil sector is rife. In fact, only with the accession of Syria's new president to power did oil revenue appear as part of the country's national budget. Prior to that, no public discussion or mention of this issue was permitted.

Even now government facts and figures in this regard are offered without comments or explanation. Moreover, the fact that the oil reserves in the country are dwindling receives only a casual mention, with the discovery of huge natural gas reserves in central Syria serving to offset and alleviate any related fears, public or private.

This discovery, however, and on the basis of the aforementioned oil experience and the government's continued rejection of any public questioning of its conduct and any kind of public accountability in general, promises, if anything, to make matters even worse in the future. The greed factor is simply too strong in this regard.

Furthermore, and due to the absence of accurate official records and estimates with regard to the handling of the oil and natural gas supply in the country, one can only rely on the guesstimates of various scholars. For this reason, our study will focus more on measuring the popular perception of the government's handling of the country's oil wealth, an issue that may not prove any less important than the reality involved.

6) Microeconomic considerations

One of the main assumptions underlying the entire Project is the belief in a linkage between the process of democratization and the shift towards a more market-oriented economy. Privatization, or at least encouraging a greater contribution by the private sector to the GDP, is seen as a corollary to the shift towards free market economics.

The study here will, therefore, attempt to assess the seriousness of the Syrian government's commitment to allowing the private sector, and hence SMEs, to play a greater role in the country's economic activities. The nature of the recent reforms will be discussed and the various areas where changes, legal and/or procedural, have been introduced will be monitored and the impact of the changes will be assessed.

The government's commitment to joining such international organizations and agreements as the World Trade Organization and the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement will also be considered.

In the meantime, current indicators divulge a lack of serious commitment to economic reforms. The very concept of privatization is still being dismissed, to the degree that no discussion on the subject is actually allowed to take place. Even the one year old yet-to-be-implemented law allowing for the establishment of private banks imposes simply too many restrictions on the operations of these banks to the extent that most experts have already expressed grave doubts regarding their eventual viability.

The fact that Lebanese banks seem to be the only ones interested in opening branches for themselves in Syria at this time speaks volumes about the matter. For Lebanese banks, due to the prolonged Syrian military presence in their country, have long succumbed to the dabbling and influence of Syrian army generals, many of whom can be considered as the *de facto* owners of these banks. As such, the new private banks will come as another extension of the ruling regime's reach into the pocket of the ordinary citizens, and should not, therefore, be construed as a real sign of openness.

Indeed, this tendency to economic and financial castration seems to doom *a priori* the great majority of reforms introduced by the Syrian government. Nonetheless, attempting to quantify the situation will allow us to leave all these generalizations behind and will enable us to present a more clear picture of the overall economic situation in the country on the micro level.

The study should also attempt to determine whether there is a real public understanding of such issues as privatization, accountability, and supporting the role of SMEs and SME development in the economy, etc.

Ammar Abdulhamid

7) The Rural-Urban Divide

Is democratization viable when half of the population of the country is living in backward rural communities growing in an unplanned manner and under the shadow of continuing governmental neglect?

One might be tempted here to cite the case of India as proof positive that, even in situations where the rural-urban divide is quite great and visible, democratization is still possible. This assertion, however, in itself raises a host of related questions, the most important of which perhaps pertaining to the very legitimacy of making a comparison between the situations in Syria and India, two very politically, economically, socially and culturally distinct countries.

Still, the answer here seems to be more complex than to allow for the adoption of all too facile assumptions and assertions. What is needed is a more scientific approach that can help determine the readiness of rural populations to accept the basic notions involved in democratization and civil society building.

The study here should attempt to explore potential popular receptivity to a trade-off of sorts, whereby greater governmental concern and support of the local communities could offset the potential impact of introducing some liberal laws touching upon religious and societal mores and traditions.

8) Women's Issues

Can democratization take place without seriously addressing the need for improving women's status in the country and supporting the case for gender equality? The obvious answer here is 'No'. But, then, one can cite the India example here as well.

What should be obvious, however, is that democratization as a process can begin without completely resolving such issues. For the resolution of these issues is indeed part of the process itself. After all, we are not talking about a package deal but about a process, most likely a very long one.

Still, listing the legal and social obstacles standing in the way of women's empowerment can help put things into a clearer perspective. So can the attempt to generate more accurate statistics on such issues as public attitude towards socially and politically active women and women in positions of power and authority. For, despite the fact that Syria is a country where women can be ministers and parliament members, no actual statistics measuring popular attitude towards this phenomenon are currently available.

Other issues where statistics could also be of help in this regard involve attempts to measure popular understanding (and potential reaction) to issues such as civil marriage, allowing women an equal share in inheritance law, and female circumcision (not widespread in Syria).

9) Education

Over the last three decades, Syrian children and adolescents have been almost systematically deprived of the benefits of a humanist educational system. All governmental priorities were given, verbal assurances and promises aside, to maintaining and strengthening the hold of the current regime on power and, allegedly, to meeting the various challenges posed by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The result has been a mediocre and outmoded educational system based on traditional learning and rote memorization. There is nothing in the current

curricula that could help foster civil and democratic values. On the contrary, the students' minds are being filled with two kinds of ideologies, socialist and Islamist (Islamic and socialists studies being part of the curriculum since childhood).

The emphasis on rote memorization is another way to stifle the spirit of inquiry among students. Teachers' attitudes also play a negative role here, since teachers are underpaid and have to take on an enormous workload. For this reason, teachers are often unready to deal with bright and inquisitive students.

Corruption, favouritism, nepotism, sectarianism and the continuing dabbling by the Baath Party apparatus in the educational system have led over the years to the further degradation of the system by driving away its able and dedicated cadres and stuffing it with unqualified teachers and administrators.

Still, to which degree does the educational system help mould the thinking and identity of the students? Here lies the main focus of the study, which will attempt to generate a list of questionnaires that will help provide some statistical data gauging the role of the school system in the processes of identity formation and creating generations that are (more) receptive to democratic ideals.

10) The Ethnic and Sectarian Question
Despite the fact that more than 80% of Syria's population are Sunni Muslims and of Arab descent, the population of Syria is often considered too diverse in terms of its religious, sectarian and ethnic makeup.

This sense of diversity seems to be based on the fact that each major minority sect or ethnic group (most notably the Kurds) seems to occupy a distinct geographic area. For example, the Alawites are located mostly in the Lattakia mountains in North Syria, the Druzes in the southern mountains, the Christians in the central valley (known as the Valley of the Christians) and the Kurds, with the diversity of their religious sects, in the northeastern parts of the country along the Iraqi and Turkish borders. Of course, this picture is not very accurate, for all major religious sects tend to be heavily represented in Damascus, and the Christians and Alawites have strong presence in all major Syrian cities as well, especially Aleppo.

The issue of minority rights, therefore, is one question that Syrians need to address as part of any democratization process.

For, despite the fact that violent episodes are a rarity in contemporary Syrian history with regard to inter-communal relations, mutual acceptance has yet to be achieved. Its secular pretensions and the fact that its founders were Christians notwithstanding, the Baath Party leadership fell under Alawite control shortly after the formation of the Party.

The Baath coups, especially that of 1970, brought Alawites to power in Syria for the first time in their history. The continuing dependence of the regime on its Alawite base of support especially in the army, shows very clearly that the situation of minority rule is far from being addressed, not to mention resolved, at this stage.

Another important consideration here is the Kurdish question. Indeed, can Syria move towards democracy without addressing the rights of its Kurdish minority? Many of Syria's Kurds are living without any proper identification cards, and the various Syrian governments, ever since independence, have always been wary about the intentions of the Kurdish population.

Various containment policies have been used in this regard, including the creation of an "Arab belt" to surround and isolate Kurdish areas, a policy that eventually proved a failure. Conversely, more and more Kurds continue to move from Turkey and Iraq into Syrian held territories, buying up lands from Christians who, at one point in the late eighties and early nineties, were emigrating en masse to Sweden and the Benelux countries, depicting themselves as refugees fleeing religious persecution.

The current situation in Iraq will probably raise the issue of Syria's Kurds again. Though, it has to be noted that Syria's Kurds, for the most part, are not demanding independence or even autonomy, but, paradoxically enough, Syrian citizenship for those that are still deprived of it, certain cultural rights, and an end to governmental negligence of their territories.

Conclusion

The whole issue of the sectarian and ethnic makeup of the country seems to be related to an even larger question, namely: do Syrians accept and identify with the current borders of their country? After all, the borders were created by the French and the British through the Sykes-Picot agreement and not by the Syrians, regardless of how they might define themselves.

In a sense, the whole process of democratization seems to be related to this important issue of "national" identity (of course, this applies to other countries in the Middle East as well). *Project Freedom Counts* will therefore be addressing issues that go to the heart of Syria's future and promises to set the grounds for more research efforts and studies to be commissioned at a later date. Should its results be heeded by the government, it could help address some of the country's basic political, economic, and socio-cultural problems.

Admittedly though, this last point depends a lot on the government's desire to change and its readiness to pay the price for change in terms of loss of "absolute" control over a whole range of issues and institutions, and becoming more and more publicly accountable. No less important in this regard, of course, is the readiness of the Syrian people to begin clamouring for the rights, abandoning their traditional apathy and quietism and showing the necessary resolve to face the necessary governmental crackdown.

Finally, nothing could indeed be achieved these days without the involvement of external pressures upon the Syrian government demanding, if not downright imposing, change. These pressures could come within the framework of ongoing Syrian-European Association negotiations (Syria is expected to sign the Agreement sometime in 2003) and the recently declared US-Middle East Partnership Initiative.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Most of which were simply too ideological, or prone to ideological thinking, to reflect in their behaviour a true appreciation of democratic ideals.

[2]   A problem related to the failure of the intellectuals to address the "masses" and to their disdain of these masses, on whose behalf they, paradoxically, often spoke.

[3]   And let's not forget in this regard the role of colonialism and imperialism which had, of course, paved the way for the aforementioned isms.

Freedom Counts

---

4 Hence the insistence on including only some of the researchers involved in Phase One, since they might tend to be biased towards supporting their own conclusions.

5 This insistence on informality is meant to alleviate any potential backlash by the Syrian authorities.

<u>Disclaimer</u>

**The views expressed are those of the
Author and not necessarily those of the
UK Ministry of Defence**