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The Role of the Caucasus Muslims Board in the State Building of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

By Fuad Aliyev (Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy University, Baku)

Abstract

This contribution discusses the role played by the Caucasus Muslims Board, a formal religious institution, during the state building process of post-Soviet Azerbaijan and its potential for supporting democratization in the country. The contribution argues that this institution has served as a regulatory body for Muslim communities and Islamic activism and has been dependent on the state for its operations. It claims that there is little chance to engage the board in the democratization process, though it still should be included in relevant public debates given its potential ability to influence Azerbaijani society and impact the country's political agenda in the long term.

Introduction

After the collapse of 70 years of official atheism, religion started to revive and play an important role in the societies of post-Soviet republics of the South Caucasus. The only Muslim-majority country in this region, Azerbaijan, has seen the building of new and modernizing of old mosques, an increasing number of Islamic study centers, schools and universities and thousands of pilgrims going to Mecca for Hajj every year.

Religious revival has played an important role in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Since Islam does not separate the secular life from the spiritual, it implies more active involvement in political events. The concepts of "Islamic" and "national" are closely intertwined in Muslim identities. During the years of Soviet atheism, people continued to follow some Islamic customs and rites, understanding them as national and not religious (Aliyev 2004).

While preaching aggressive atheism, the Soviet Union realized the importance of religion as a tool of social mobilization and popular culture and thus tried to control and utilize religion for its own benefit (Swietechowski 2002). This required the presence of and cooperation with formal religious institutions. Since Islam does not recognize the institution of the church, the Soviet authorities followed the practices of the Russian Empire by recreating various formal institutions and cultivating homegrown religious leaders. Azerbaijan also had an institution known as the Religious (Spiritual) Board, which continued its operations after the collapse of the Soviet Union and became an important contributor to Islamic revival and state-religion relations.

This contribution will focus on the Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB) in Azerbaijan and its role in Islamic revival and state-religious relations in order to explore how it could actually take part in state building. It will also determine if there is any potential for this organization to support the democratization process in the

country. The contribution argues that the CMB, while a non-governmental institution, has played the role of a regulatory body for Muslim communities and Islamic activism; as a result, unlike churches in Armenia and Georgia, it did not have any independence. Although Dr. Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Board, is an influential person in the political establishment, he does not have any independent stance on democracy-related issues. The contribution concludes that there is little chance to engage this institution in democratization; however, including it in public and political debates could help the institution broaden its perspectives and increase its significance. In the long term, the CMB could potentially become an asset for democratization in Azerbaijan.

The Caucasus Muslims Board: Institutional Background

During Soviet rule and the time of militant atheism, official "independent" Muslim religious administrations continued to operate; these included the Muslim Religious (Spiritual) Board for the European USSR and Siberia (centered in Ufa in the Bashkir ASSR); the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the Muslim Religious Board for the North Caucasus (in Buinaksk and later in Makhachkala, Dagestan); and the Muslim Religious Board for Transcaucasia (Baku, Azerbaijan). These boards did not oppose Soviet rule and even tried to find similarities between the communist ideology put into practice after the October Revolution and Qur'anic values, such as the equality of nations and sexes, freedom of religion, security of honorable work, ownership of land by those who till it, and more (Saroyan 1997).

During the Soviet era (until Gorbachev's reforms), the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, located in Tashkent, was at the head of Islamic affairs. This religious body had more rights

and advantages than other boards. It issued the only official Muslim journal, “Muslims of the Soviet East,” and was responsible for other literature and publications about Islam. In fact, a Muslim administrative elite emerged and developed around this board that tried to promote its own authority and undermine any alternatives (Saroyan 1997). The Muslim Religious Board for Transcaucasia, the predecessor to CMB, and its leader since 1980, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, were also part of this administrative elite.

Perestroika, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, brought fragmentation and regionalization to Soviet clerical elites. In 1990, an assembly of Muslim clerics in Alma-Ata declared the establishment of a Muslim Board for Kazakhstan. Central Asian boards based in Tashkent did not recognize the legitimacy of this new board, but others followed the same fragmentation path, including the institution in Baku, which was officially reborn in 1992 as an Azerbaijani national institution.

While rebranded and reorganized after Azerbaijan attained its independence, the CMB differs little from its Soviet predecessor in terms of concept or structure. It also lost any formal influence and connection to the Sunni-dominated Board of the North Caucasus.

In the meantime, the rapidly changing political environment created conditions for new forms of Muslim religious associations to emerge. In the past, Muslim religious boards could rely in part on the coercive power of Moscow to prevent the emergence of independent Muslim religious centers (Aliyev 2004). Subsequent independence and liberalization allowed new Muslim religious movements and actors to emerge, some of which were supported externally and some of which were even radical (Aliyev 2007). This milestone can be considered the official start of the so-called “Islamic revival” in Azerbaijan.

In contrast to other boards, Transcaucasus Muslim elites have operated under slightly different conditions. Aside from its jurisdiction over Muslims in Armenia (before they were massacred or deported at the beginning of the Azerbaijan–Armenia Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and Georgia (where in any case most Muslims are ethnic Azerbaijanis), the Baku religious board is staffed by Azerbaijanis and serves an Azerbaijani community (Aliyev 2004). The administration can be characterized as an Azerbaijani national institution.

Overlap between religious and national customs and identities is very common, since “Muslim” is coterminous with “Azerbaijani” (Motika 2001). Another important factor is that the Baku board was also heir to a religious administration established during the Tsarist period (first in Tbilisi), with the Sheikh-ul-Islam serving as the

leader of Azerbaijani Shias and his deputy Mufti as the leader for Azerbaijani Sunnis. Thus, there is some historical precedent for Azerbaijanis. Probably even more important, however, is that Azerbaijan’s Muslim community is predominantly Shiite. In contrast to Sunni Islam, formal religious hierarchy is not foreign to the historical development of this branch of Islam. Thus, the existence of official institutions regulating religious life can be seen as part of Azerbaijan’s Shiite heritage (Saroyan 1997).

State–Religion Relations in the Republic of Azerbaijan

Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the CMB, played a significant role during the pre- and post-independence years. He openly opposed the massacre by Soviet troops in Baku in January 1990 and personally orchestrated the use of the funerals of victims as mass protests against the government’s brutality. It required courage and national patriotism on his part, which the general public appreciated, to stand up to the Soviet government. Dr. Pashazade’s peace-making efforts during the war in Karabakh also furthered the respect and legitimacy of the CMB and associated him with it. In this regard, the CMB’s contribution of popular mobilization and support for independence and nation-building in the initial phase of Azerbaijan’s post-Soviet experience is undeniable. However, as the Islamic revival continued, the prestige and influence of the CMB started to evaporate, while that of some other members of the unofficial Muslim clergy was on the rise (Aliyev 2007). Islam became a rallying point for the dispossessed, impoverished and unemployed and even simply for those Azerbaijanis who rejected many aspects of Western culture (Aliyev 2007). For reasons discussed below, however, the CMB could not respond to these changing and growing popular needs.

As far as the relationship between the government and Islam is concerned, it should be noted that the CMB has never opposed any government in power since independence. It has turned into the unofficial forum for regulating Islamic activism in the country. Although the government adopts some external trappings of Islam and defends it as a part of national identity, it does not welcome any Islam-related activity over which it has no control. The CMB is instrumental to the successful implementation of this paternalistic policy, aiming to ensure that all religious activity is subject to government control. It looks like a pact between the stronger state and the weaker CMB: its clerics support the government, and the government takes care of them.

This contribution’s author worked as an evaluator of the US government-funded Islam in a Democratic

Azerbaijan program implemented by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) in Azerbaijan in 2007–2008. This aim of this program was to build productive relationships among religious organizations, secular NGOs and local community leaders for engaging in constructive dialogue to address issues facing their communities. Despite attempts by the US Embassy in Baku and EPF to reach out to the government and the CMB to acquire their support, no large-scale cooperation ever occurred. We determined that CMB leadership had been very opposed to foreign and especially Western attempts to ‘democratize’ Azerbaijan, presumably by manipulation through Islam, and probably saw an anti-government conspiracy in this program. The government’s reluctance to cooperate was a crucial sign for the CMB leadership to formulate such a position. This case is demonstrative of CMB’s operational status and complete dependence on the state.

The CMB’s quietist and completely pro-governmental position negatively affected young religious people, who disagreed with the status quo and considered the CMB ‘hypocritical’ and of no value for Islam and Muslims. Liberal as well as nationalist opposition and protesting youth also saw this institution as a Soviet relict, serving the interests of the government but not society as a whole.

With the spread of religious knowledge among the population resulting from an Islamic revival, many religious Muslims (both Shia and Sunni) came to understand that there was no formal place for the CMB in Islamic religious doctrine and law and that it was rather an institution historically imposed by Russia to control Islamic activism. Religious Muslims follow teachings and rulings by prominent Islamic scholars from abroad as the only legitimate sources of emulation. Indeed, none of the CMB clerics have the necessary status and recognized authority to issue a fatwa, a ruling on a point of Islamic law. Furthermore, according to some experts, Azerbaijan’s official Muslim clergy represented by the CMB has a reputation for low levels of religious knowledge; the CMB is thus not seen by religious Azerbaijani Muslims as a trustworthy Islamic institution or source for reference in religious matters (Yunus 2012).

The government subsequently came to the rescue, given the common interests of the state and the CMB.

About the Author

Dr. Fuad Aliyev is an adjunct faculty member at Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA) University in Baku. His research and teaching expertise focus on Islam in post-Soviet countries and Islamic political economy.

Further Reading

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The new law on Freedom of Religion of 2009 and related legislative amendments made it more complicated for independent Islamic communities that are not approved by the CMB to actually operate and compete with the official clerics. The law also restricts independent religious education, limits religious activity to approved venues, forbids any religious preaching by non-residents as well as residents educated abroad without state permission, etc. The attempts of the government to get full control of Islamic activism increased the status and value of the CMB, allowing it to monopolize this area.

Conclusion

Given the history and underlying philosophy of the major formal Islamic institution the CMB, it would be naïve to believe in any independent contribution to the democratization of Azerbaijan. It follows the lead of the authorities and has never produced any different or independent position as far as state building and democratization are concerned.

During its most active phase in the 1990s and early 2000s, Islamic revival in Azerbaijan produced a new range of independent actors who undermined the role and prestige of the CMB. Rising religious awareness of Azerbaijani Muslims also helped to question the doctrinal validity of this institution. However, along with the strengthening of the state, a more centralized approach to the religious sphere emerged, requiring the cooperation of the CMB and its leader, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade. The latter, an influential person in Azerbaijan’s political establishment, has the necessary potential for engaging in the state-building process.

The CMB has become stronger institutionally in recent years and may continue to do so in the future. Given that all Islamic actors understand that they cannot ignore its influence and must cooperate to be able to operate in existing spaces of opportunity, it is likely that the status of the CMB will increase in importance. Therefore, including the CMB in public and political debates, if they take place, could help the institution broaden its perspectives and increase its significance while also turning it into a valuable asset for the democratization process due to its potential to influence Azerbaijani society and impact the country’s political agenda in the long term.

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The Orthodox Church in the Democratization Process in Georgia: Hindrance or Support?

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Abstract

Some changes within the democratization process in Georgia have challenged long-held beliefs and traditions in the society and have often become the subject of public debate, which powerful groups seek to influence. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is one such group. Repeatedly named as the most trusted institution in the country, the GOC’s stance on democracy-related issues and reforms has already impacted political decision-making on a number of occasions. This immense power gives the GOC the potential to enhance democracy, or, on the contrary, to significantly inhibit it if it so desires. This paper analyzes the attitudes, values and behavior of the GOC in the context of their compatibility with democratic values and explores the potential to engage the GOC in the reform process as well as to include it in public and political debates.

The GOC: Influential Institution in the Country

Within Georgia’s fragile division of church and state, the role of the influential Georgian Orthodox Church has become all the more important for the country’s democratization process. The GOC is capable of not only disseminating its position throughout society but also, to some extent, influencing the political agenda.

The GOC’s authority is based on the Georgian public’s increased religiosity. One of the top five most religious nations in the world, 82% of the Georgian population considers themselves to be members of the Orthodox Church according to the 2015 Caucasus Barometer survey. Of those who view themselves as members of the GOC, 94% believe that religion plays an important role in their lives. Even more telling, the younger generation—aged 18–35—tends to be more religious than people over 35 (see Figure 1 on p. 9).

The GOC’s special status in the Georgian Constitution adds to its role. In 2002, the Georgian Orthodox Church was granted multiple privileges, including exemption from tax, under an agreement known as the

Concordat. The deal extended to education and culture and outlined the state and the Church’s obligation to “jointly care” for the country’s cultural heritage. In addition, if schools or other educational institutions opt to teach Orthodoxy, it is the GOC’s prerogative to set the agenda and select the teachers. The GOC has signed subsequent agreements with the education and justice ministries to implement the powers set out in the Concordat.

The GOC and Democratic Values: Level of Compatibility

Due to the GOC’s high degree of authority, it can either significantly contribute to or hinder democratization. The Church may be divided about different aspects of democracy; however, most of the traditional values that it holds in high esteem clash with the idea of liberal democracy.

The Georgian Orthodox Church primarily exercises influence through its discourse on national identity, which gives excessive emphasis on traditions and customs within the confines of the Orthodox faith. For instance, Patriarch Ilia II proposed that the national