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## Islamic Activism as a Social Movement. Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Azerbaijan

Fuad Aliyev, Baku

### Abstract:

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan has been moving through a process of Islamic revival for more than two decades. This revival in itself has not been a homogenous process, having its ups and downs, changing dynamics and multi-dimensional characteristics. Radicalization, sectarianism and state–civil society–religious relations are the issues at stake. A recent trend of more control over faith-based activism with ongoing marginalization along sectarian lines is a problem that must be addressed.

In Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet secular republic sandwiched between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia's unstable North Caucasus region, more people have followed the natural trend of turning to religion and Islamic revival after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that Islamic activism in the form of religious communities, informal networks and faith-based organizations has been concurrently rising and has become an integral part of civil society, although it is not accepted by the latter. This rising activism has led to suspicion among the authorities and the general public, who fear the increasing influence of Islamism and the possibility that religious groups may act as non-progressive barriers to the country's secularism.

### Islam in Soviet Azerbaijan

After the fall of the independent Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in 1920 when the Bolsheviks came to power, weak Soviet authorities did not suppress, and even cultivated relations with Muslim clergy as well as local intelligentsia in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis were given recognition of national identity, which included Islam as one of its components (Swietechowski 2002). In the meantime, the Soviet regime was attempting to weaken this component, promoting Azerbaijani national consciousness as a substitute for identification with Islam.

The Soviets initiated "modernization," which included the expropriation of *waqfs* (charitable foundations), shutting down Islamic civil courts and schools, banning public religious ceremonies, closing down some mosques, and the obligatory unveiling of women (Swietechowski 2002). However, the real fight against Islam, along with other religions, was launched in the late 1920s. This fight featured a change in alphabet from Arabic to Latin and then to Cyrillic to eliminate the influence of clerics and Muslim intellectuals, as well as dampening the influence from religious literature on the masses; new laws banned and established severe punishments for many public religious practices and traditions; massive mosque closings; arrests, deportation and executions of clerics (*ibid.*).

This pressure lessened during World War II, when the Soviet government tried to mobilize all possible forces to unite its people in the face of foreign intervention and war. As a result, despite the ideology of militant atheism, official "independent" Muslim religious administrations were allowed: the Muslim Religious Board for the European USSR and Siberia (centered in Ufa, Bashkir ASSR); the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the Muslim Religious Board for the North Caucasus (in Buinaksk; 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 Communist ideology and Islamic values, such as equality, freedom of religion, security of honorable work, ownership of land by those who till it and others that were put in practice after the October Revolution.

The Transcaucasus clerical elite was operationally different from other Soviet Muslim elite. Its jurisdiction was mostly over Azerbaijani Muslims in Armenia and Georgia and it was staffed by Azerbaijanis and served Azerbaijanis. Thus, it served as a type of national institution.

Before independence, there were 54 registered "religious cults", including 11 Shia and 2 Sunni mosques as well as 2 mosques shared by both branches. The number of educated clerics was very low and those educated were graduates of the Islamic University in Tashkent or the Mir Arab College in Bukhara (Swietechowski, 2002). In fact, there were no highly educated Islamic scholars who studied in recognized Islamic educational centers abroad.

### Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

The collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan, with identification with Islam by larger sectors of the population compared to the end of the Soviet period. However, in Azerbaijan, Islam was still mainly perceived as an element of national iden-

tity, whereas Islamic values and customs were an integral component of national culture, with overlapping religion and customs (Motika 2001).

During the first decade of transition, according to Motika, 4% to 6% of the population of Azerbaijan could be called "active" believers, which indicated that they obeyed various Islamic norms; 87% to 92% considered themselves Muslims but complied with only (often quite small) part of the religious rules. Only approximately 3% called themselves atheists (Motika 2001, Faradov 2002). Later studies have not revealed significant changes indicating stabilization of religious dynamics and an end to Islamic revival (Yunus 2012, Balci&Goyushev 2012).

Another important factor was that the Religious Board in Baku was heir to a religious administration established during the Tsarist period and thus may have had some historical legitimacy for the population even during Soviet times. Probably even more important, however, is that Azerbaijan's Muslim community is predominantly Shia. In contrast to Sunni Islam, a formal religious hierarchy is not foreign to the historical development of Shia Islam.

Azerbaijan includes various elements of "Islamic Revival" characteristics of other Post-Soviet republics. There have been radical Salafi/Wahhabi movements that came later and could not achieve the progress they had made in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus. Supported by Iran, other groups were also trying to challenge the existing status quo. However, in contrast to some central Asian states, the vast majority in Azerbaijan supported the idea of a secular state.

As far as the relationship between the government and Islam is concerned, despite adopting some symbols of the religion and defending Islam as a part of national identity, it has not reached a state of Islamic revival and is not ready to welcome any Islam related independent activity. In fact, any type of religious social activism that is not subordinate to, or approved by, the Board is considered "hostile" and "suspicious" by the authorities (Aliyev 2015).

Rising Islamic activism has led to suspicion among government leaders and the general public, who fear the increasing influence of religious leaders and organizations, because there is the possibility that religious groups may act as non-progressive barriers to the country's secular democratic development. Consequently, the potential for religious actors to provide real benefit to civil society is hindered by public misconceptions regarding the motivations of religious activism. Therefore, there is a huge gap between secular and faith-based organizations, secularized and religious people who lack mutual collaboration within the limited opportunities for social activism (Aliyev 2015).

Islamism in Azerbaijan exhibits some geographic differences. Baku and the surrounding regions are more pro-Shia, though Salafis are gaining support in Baku and Sumgait. Salafis are more prevalent in the northern parts of Azerbaijan, where different Sunni Daghestani minorities closely reside. Regions bordering Iran are influenced by the ideas and support of the Iranian model of Islam.

The most serious concern is the spread of religious extremism from abroad, from Dagestan and Iran, but strict police control over the potentially affected areas is supposed to prevent this. On some occasions, this police control has been a concern of human right activists (ICG 2008, p. 20).

The country's legislation emphasizes the secular nature of the state and thus forbids organizations from seeking to promote racial, political, or religious discord. It also goes without saying that national legislation imposes strict government control on foreign religious organizations. Such a strict approach is rooted in the Constitution's Article 18. Given the rising perceived threat of Islamic activism, a new Religion Law was quickly adopted in June 2009, while both the Criminal Code and Administrative Code were amended to introduce new offenses and punishments as well as to require already registered religious organizations to re-register.

Azerbaijan faces immediate threats (whether real or perceived) from various agents that could potentially use Islam as a tool to gain public influence in Azerbaijan (Aliyev 2015). Azerbaijan is geographically close to both Iran and Turkey and has cultural affinity with each, thus making it more "vulnerable" to their cultural and ideological influence and in both, religion is highly significant. This makes Azerbaijan very cautious about Islamic activism and its possible implications.

### **Islamic Activism as a Social Movement**

In this context, Islamic activism as well as religion–state–civil society interactions could be aptly viewed through the lenses of the social movement theory by structuring it into three major dimensions: ideology and contention, resource mobilization, and framing.

These dimensions respectively reflect matters of grievance (issue), resources and frame. Grievance is about "wrongness" perception—something to be addressed, but remaining unaddressed. This is the ideology of social activists and their "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 2002). Resources are about tools of power such as people, organizations, funding, leadership and social capital. Framing represents the way and forms of public communication with the target groups, state and civil society in general.

In terms of ideology and contentions, Islamic activism is quite diverse, ranging from pure post-Islamist

movements such as Gulen to radical Wahhabi jihadists. However, there is a “post-Islamization” trend in the rhetoric and agendas of Islamic activists who want to gain the public acceptance and remain in the mainstream of Islamic activism. A good example is Haji Shahin Hasanli and his “Menevi Dunya” (The World of Morality) organization. Radicals of both Sunni and Shia camps are marginalized more than ever in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The end of Islamic revival, strict government policies, social stereotypes and limited resources resulted in narrowing opportunities for Islamic activism that is too Islamist.

Any social-political activism that is independent from state approval (not to mention Islamist approval) is currently restricted to limited opportunity conditions that complicate resource mobilization and require extra flexibility in terms of operations and fundraising as well as more informal (sometimes even undercover) networks. It is natural that in such conditions many funding of Islamists comes informally from abroad. This makes Islamist movements and their leaders more vulnerable because it is easier for authorities to accuse them of being the agents of foreign interests, illegal activity, fraudulent activities; it also makes it easier for authorities to persecute, if necessary, under relevant criminal charges. This was the case of the Gulenist network in Azerbaijan, which has gone significantly “undercover” since 2014 when a restrictive campaign against it was launched by authorities accompanied by the media (Sultanova 2014).

Even more evident is framing of the “post-Islamization” trend in Azerbaijan. Now, more and more movements, regardless of their sectarian backgrounds, attempt to frame their messages in more societal forms rather than purely Islamist forms, avoiding and not stressing confrontation with the political status quo

and secularism. We can observe such a trend in almost all of the mainstream movements, such as Haji Ilgar Ibrhaimoglu’s ‘Juma Mosque’ Community.

All others (Wahhabis, radical Shia political activists and Nurcu activists) have been fiercely persecuted and neutralized. There have been arrests of the leaders and activists of the pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan since 2011, anti-government religious leaders, such as Taleh Bagirzade, Abgul Suleymanov, or Wahhabi leaders, such as Zokhrab Shikhaliyev, Mubariz Qarayev in 2014–2015, and so on.

### Conclusion

Islamic activism has been on the rise in post-Soviet Azerbaijan as a result of Islamic Revival and social-political developments across the region. This rising activism has been seen as a potential threat by the authorities and secular public alike. There are fears of increasing influence from Islamism and the consequent undermining of secularism. As a result, the government of Azerbaijan tightened legislation and regulation through formal supervisory institutions such as the Committee for Work with Religious Organizations and the Muslim Board of the Caucasus. Independent and / or externally funded faith-based activism has been subject to persecution.

This has significantly narrowed opportunities for Islamic activism in Azerbaijan and has conditioned its development in terms of ideology, resources, mobilization and framing. The existing status quo, unchallenged by any actor other than certain marginalized small groups or terrorists, has shaped ‘post-Islamization’ of the religion–state–civil society discourse as well as the institutional development of Islamic activism in the country.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. Fuad Aliyev is Adjunct Faculty at ADA University and Khazar University in Azerbaijan. He received his PhD in Economics from Azerbaijan State Economic University in 2011. Dr. Aliyev was a Hubert Humphrey fellow in Public Policy in 2005/2005 at the University of North Carolina / Chapel Hill as well as a Fulbright Scholar at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in 2011/2012.

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## A New Public Role of Religion? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Georgia

Ketevan Rcheulishvili, Tbilisi

### Abstract:

This essay discusses the discourse on the public role of religion in Georgia after the collapse of the communist regime. Particularly, it examines the Georgian Orthodox Church’s contribution to national identity and new social values and norms. Thus, this essay assesses the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public opinion building despite the fact that democratic and liberal values to some extent conflict with traditional or/and religious values promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

### Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Social Sciences’ Research

The interdisciplinary study of Orthodox Christianity recently became the subject of systematic research; of particular concern is the public and political role of Orthodox Churches. In this respect, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)—representing the majority religion in Georgia—is an interesting case. The GOC has traditionally had a significant presence in the public sphere. Thus, since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the GOC has become a major focus of social science research about political developments in Georgia.

To adequately understand both religious change and the complex development of the church–state relationship in Georgia, we should take into account several methodological aspects and conceptual ambiguities already noted in various sociological studies.

First, although most authors have agreed that there is no single European model of church–state relations, some authors insist on a coherent European dimension of modernity, emphasizing the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. However, this dichotomy speaks

little about the details and actual position of a specific religious tradition in any particular country. Post-communist countries should not be seen as a homogenous case that contradicts Europe because there are many aspects presented in both Western and Eastern European church–state dynamics that should be analyzed through a comparative perspective of church–state relations in Europe.

Second, religion is no longer seen as a dependent variable that is negatively affected by modernization but is perceived as an active factor in social development. Pluralism and individualization do not automatically weaken the social position of religion. These changes in the theoretical perspectives of sociological approaches may affect any historical narrative and methodological approach in this field of study.

Third, the trend of revitalization, which was widely acknowledged and discussed in the latest studies of post-communist countries (and beyond them), does not appear to be unidimensional evidence. A distinction should be made between “the revitalization visible in the public appearance and role of religion [...] and