

Azerbaijan's Contemporary History in the Interpretations of Politicians: Abdurrahman Vazirov – Part II

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The Government, the Opposition, and the Intelligentsia

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Vazirov identifies the republic's principal social problems and notes that he initiated the implementation of a range of projects within a relatively short period of time. His first priority was to reduce social tensions by addressing the problems that had generated acute dissatisfaction among the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). To this end, a new outpatient clinic and hospital were constructed in the region, the local furniture factory was expanded, the construction of a reservoir on the Badara River improved the water supply to residential areas, and a regional television service was established.

During the same period, construction began on private residential houses, thirty-one hospitals, medical facilities, and public bathhouses in various regions of Azerbaijan. The acceleration of construction work made it possible to demolish all barracks in Sumgait in 1989. These barracks were typically one- or two-story lightweight structures with shared kitchens and sanitary facilities, originally intended for the temporary accommodation of military personnel, patients, or workers. The supply of natural gas was also extended to numerous regions.

In 1989, production of *Korvet* computers began at the radio factory. Vazirov recalls that his social initiatives were not received uniformly by society. The construction of public bathhouses, for example, was misunderstood by segments of the population, and he was criticized for building bathhouses instead of resolving the Karabakh conflict. Vazirov, however, believed that addressing social problems could reduce public discontent and thereby contribute to ending ethnic confrontation and territorial claims.

Vazirov also emphasizes that he actively sought to combat bribery across various sectors and notes, in this context, that admissions to higher education institutions were conducted in a transparent manner. He states that internal duties were introduced in order to curb monopolistic practices in trade, which, according to him, resulted in an increased supply of fruit and vegetables in Baku's markets. Vazirov further writes that his campaign against monopolistic actors in the commercial sector generated considerable discontent and that Isa Gambar warned him about the dissatisfaction this policy was provoking.^[i] "One person told me that those who had organized this operation had lost as many as 200 million rubles in revenue over the course of two weeks. They said, 'We are prepared to pay any amount necessary, but Vazirov must not remain in power until next summer.'"^[ii]

Vazirov regards the establishment of a direct link between the authorities and the public as the most significant achievement of his tenure. He notes that, for many years, the party leadership had remained largely detached from the population: When senior officials travelled to the regions, roads were closed, and citizens' complaints were not heard by the authorities. In other words, the institutions of a state that formally claimed to represent workers and peasants were, in practice, accessible to neither.

Vazirov describes himself as a democrat by conviction and states that he believed government should serve the people. To

this end, he sought to make the authorities more accessible to the public, abandoned the practice of closing roads during official visits, and attempted to establish closer contact with ordinary citizens. He also ordered the publication of the telephone numbers of all senior officials, including his own, and required responsible officeholders to listen directly to the concerns of the population.[\[iii\]](#) Vazirov states that he “wanted, in the future, all those represented within the structures of government to be accountable to the people.” At the same time, however, he did not seek to ensure that the only elections held during his tenure—the March 1989 elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR—were conducted under democratic conditions.

In his memoirs, Vazirov reflects at length on the Karabakh conflict and on the roles played in it by Moscow, the leadership of the Armenian SSR, and the Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsia. Looking back at the historical background, Vazirov writes that during the Soviet period there were three attempts to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. According to him, the first attempt was prevented by Mir Jafar Baghirov, while the second was blocked by Nikita Khrushchev. Vazirov states that in 1962, when Armenians invoked the idea of a “Greater Armenia” and expressed their desire for the Armenians of Turkey and Karabakh to be united with Armenia, Khrushchev responded that he was prepared to provide buses and trucks to all Karabakh Armenians who wished to relocate to Armenia.[\[iv\]](#) Vazirov writes that Moscow failed to respond promptly and adequately to the Armenians’ third attempt. In his view, the principal reason was the pro-Armenian position adopted by members of the Central Committee who were close to Gorbachev, particularly Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev.

Vazirov states that, having met with the Armenian leadership on several occasions, he sought to resolve the conflict through peaceful means; however, he emphasizes that the Armenian leadership adopted a hostile position toward Azerbaijan. Vazirov explains the Armenian leadership’s support

for the separatist activities of the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh in terms of the struggle for political power between the Karabakh Committee and the Armenian communists. He writes that the leader of the Karabakh Committee, Levon Ter-Petrosyan believed that the conflict would facilitate their rise to power.

According to Vazirov, a similar view also existed within the Azerbaijani opposition. He recalls the words of Vagif Samadoghlu, one of the founders of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF): "The democratic processes taking place in Armenia should not be obstructed." Vazirov interprets Samadoghlu's statement as follows: What was described as a democratic process in Armenia amounted, in his view, to the demand for the incorporation of Karabakh into Armenia. Consequently, by characterizing this demand as part of a democratic process and encouraging it, the APF was, according to Vazirov, effectively lending support to the separatists. Vazirov particularly emphasizes that not only Armenia but also opposition forces in other union republics, as well as external actors, had an interest in the escalation of the Karabakh conflict. He writes that "Lithuania's Sajūdis,^[v] Ukraine's Rukh,^[vi] the Popular Fronts of Moldova and Estonia, and the national movements in the Central Asian republics were interested in the victory of the Armenian separatists," because they believed that such an outcome would contribute to the dissolution of the USSR. According to Vazirov, external actors and international broadcasters, including *Radio Liberty*, the *BBC*, *Radio Free Europe*, and the *Voice of America*, were also actively involved and, through what he characterizes as provocations, contributed to the escalation of the conflict. ^[vii]

Vazirov further stresses that, at the outbreak of the conflict, approximately half a million Armenians were living in Azerbaijan and argues that neither the separatists nor the Armenian leadership showed concern for their fate. He also maintains that Armenian leadership disregarded the decisions

adopted by Moscow.

In his memoirs and interviews, Vazirov discusses in considerable detail his attitude toward Azerbaijani opposition. He recalls that, one month after he came to power, the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) held its founding conference. Thereafter, he states, various political forces in the republic, together with representatives of the shadow economy, "united against me against the backdrop of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict." [\[viii\]](#) Vazirov writes that the radical wing of the APF was led by Abulfaz Elchibey, its left-wing faction by Zardusht Alizadeh, and its liberal faction by Isa Gambar. He emphasizes, however, that the movement also included what he describes as provocative and unscrupulous elements, noting that these groups later began engaging in looting in Baku, ransacking shops and damaging privately owned vehicles. Vazirov specifically states that, before Fuzuli was occupied by Armenian forces in 1993, his uncle's house had been destroyed by members of the APF. At the same time, he does not deny that there were also intelligent and prudent individuals within the ranks of the APF.

Although Vazirov was critical of the opposition, he considered banning it to be of little practical value and states that he preferred cooperation, particularly seeking to establish a constructive dialogue with opposition forces over the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Vazirov writes that he permitted the official registration of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), authorized the publication of its newspapers, and allowed its representatives to appear on television.

In April 1989, Vazirov met with members of the APF and attempted to unite their efforts in a common struggle over Karabakh; however, according to him, the APF was unwilling to cooperate. At meetings of the APF strike committee, workers were called upon to participate in mass strikes, which were presented as a means of defending Karabakh. Vazirov writes that he could not understand how such strikes were supposed to

contribute to the defense of Nagorno-Karabakh. He also dismisses as implausible reports that claimed that more than one million people participated in strikes held in Baku. He notes that the capital's total population at the time was only approximately 1,2 million. He further maintains that employees of industrial enterprises did not participate in these demonstrations and instead sought to preserve public order. [\[ix\]](#)

Vazirov argues that the opposition's irresponsible slogans had tragic consequences for Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis. In his account, the opposition's frequent calls for unification with Southern Azerbaijan soon prompted Tehran to support Armenia, while demands for autonomy for the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabakh ultimately resulted in the complete expulsion of the Azerbaijani community from the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKA0).

Vazirov further maintains that the deployment of Soviet troops to Baku in January 1990 was also a consequence of what he regarded as the irresponsible actions of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF). He recalls that in December 1989 the buildings of the Jalilabad District Party Committee and the local militia were destroyed, after which local authority was seized by APF representatives. In Nakhchivan, sections of the border installations along the frontier with Iran were dismantled, while railway lines were blockaded. According to Vazirov, in January 1990 the APF overthrew Soviet authority in Lankaran and proclaimed the establishment of a Talysh-Mughan Republic, while slogans calling for a "Baku without Armenians" began to be voiced at demonstrations in the capital. He further states that the APF subsequently formed illegal armed detachments.

Vazirov writes that Soviet leadership interpreted these developments as an attempt to overthrow legal authorities. According to his account, what ultimately prompted the military to take decisive action was the perceived possibility

that armed APF units might attack storage facilities containing nuclear munitions in the vicinity of Baku. Vazirov therefore argues that the events of January 1990 were the consequence of the ill-considered and irresponsible policies pursued by the APF leadership.

Although the APF leadership interpreted the January events as an attempt to prevent its possible victory in elections scheduled for the spring of 1990, Vazirov dismisses this interpretation as inconsistent with reality. He believed that the APF had no realistic prospect of achieving electoral success. Vazirov also writes that, when he returned to Baku some time after these events, his first act was to visit the Alley of Martyrs; however, he states that he did not find the grave of a single APF leader there.

The reason the deployment of troops to Baku and the ensuing bloodshed in January 1990 did not generate a significant international reaction was that the Soviet operation was presented as an attempt to prevent an ethnic massacre. In 1989, during talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker reportedly stated that, "if Soviet leadership took firm measures in Baku to bring the situation under control, the U.S. administration would view such actions with understanding."[\[x\]](#) Speaking of the attitude of the international community toward Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis, Vazirov writes that when the entire Azerbaijani community was expelled from Armenia, neither international organizations nor Soviet leadership condemned these developments.

Vazirov does not regard the APF's rise to power as the outcome of the national liberation movement; rather, he argues that the rise became possible because of weakening state authority in the USSR. He emphasizes that when the state is unwilling to exercise its right to use force, others appropriate that right, after which it becomes exceedingly difficult for the state to reassert control.[\[xi\]](#) Vazirov makes this argument

regarding the Soviet authorities' unwillingness to take firm measures against Armenian separatists: "the state did not exercise its right to use force; this right was appropriated by the separatists and by forces that described themselves as the opposition." According to Vazirov, these forces soon became instruments in the hands of mafia groups. On this basis, Vazirov argues that the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation was neither a religious nor an ethnic conflict, but rather a conflict of a fundamentally political character.[\[xii\]](#) He also notes that, because of his familiarity with the region, he understood that any attempt to partition it would be unworkable.

Vazirov states that by 1992, twenty-two competing groups had emerged within the ranks of the APF. Although each of these groups included the word "national" in its name, he argues that they showed little genuine concern for either the nation or the national interest.[\[xiii\]](#) Vazirov explains the support extended to the APF by displaced persons and those expelled from Karabakh, as well as their trust in its leaders: "These people were being manipulated by forces seeking to come to power through the APF." In his view, those who followed the APF constituted a mass, while the APF, seeing the crowds behind it, came to believe that the whole world stood behind it. It failed to recognize, he argues, that the real political actors were those manipulating the masses and that the latter were, in effect, being mobilized to bring those politicians to power.[\[xiv\]](#) Vazirov particularly emphasizes that he expressed these views directly to Abulfaz Elchibey during one of their meetings. According to Vazirov, Elchibey initially paid little attention to his remarks but later acknowledged that Vazirov had been correct.[\[xv\]](#) Vazirov identifies two reasons for the APF's rapid loss of power. First, the public came to realize that it could not govern effectively. Second, it failed to defend Karabakh, and territories were lost as a result.

In his analysis of the participation of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia in the opposition movement of the 1980s and

1990s, Vazirov writes that, from 1985 onward, organizations such as *Oghuz*, *Taraqqi*, and *Varlig*, composed primarily of representatives of the younger intelligentsia, were active in the republic and sought to reassess prevailing interpretations of history. A segment of the intelligentsia joined these organizations and, according to Vazirov, was concerned with the positions its members might obtain.

Vazirov emphasizes that those who became active in the opposition were individuals who had been unable to achieve success within Soviet society. He further notes that some intellectuals only later came to recognize the tragic consequences to which this movement could lead. [\[xvii\]](#)

Vazirov also argues that, in the field of scholarly research, Azerbaijani intellectuals, particularly historians, had been outperformed by their Armenian counterparts. He maintains that scholars of the Armenian Academy of Sciences had for years directed their efforts toward what he describes as the falsification of historical facts and the intellectual justification of separatism. By contrast, he regarded the weakness of Azerbaijan's scholarly capacity and the ineffectiveness of its academic community as readily apparent. Vazirov recalls that, in seeking a resolution to the Karabakh conflict, he wanted to understand the views of the intelligentsia and to secure their support. He states, however, that his meetings with intellectuals produced no tangible results and that, at virtually every meeting, their discussions focused primarily on changing the names of streets and public squares. "Before meeting with members of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR, I asked what initiatives Azerbaijani scholars had advanced over the previous five years concerning the republic's socio-economic and moral development. It turned out that there had been no such initiatives. The meeting with members of the Writers' Union was equally unproductive. It became clear that their potential had not been utilized and that they were preoccupied with minor issues. A people confronted with the

tragedy of Karabakh needed a strong intelligentsia, yet it turned out that the intelligentsia itself had become a creator of divisions within society.”[\[xvii\]](#)

Vazirov included in his memoirs responses to a number of questions addressed to him by Azerbaijanis. In one of the letters, he was asked about the reasons for his allegedly negative attitude toward people from Nakhchivan. Vazirov writes that he had many friends among Nakhchivanis, had never divided Azerbaijan along regional lines, and was firmly opposed to regional favoritism. He nevertheless acknowledges that certain developments during his tenure generated dissatisfaction among Nakhchivanis. According to Vazirov, however, these developments were not the result of decisions taken personally by him, but rather of policies adopted by the Communist Party. He writes that, beginning in 1988, Moscow began reducing in the party and state administrative apparatus. In Azerbaijan, a substantial number of senior positions were eliminated. As a result of the cuts, the number of departments within the Central Committee was reduced from fifteen to five, while the number of employees in the central apparatus was cut by 50 percent. Vazirov further states that, because a significant proportion of senior positions in Azerbaijan were held by members of what he calls the “Nakhchivan clan,” a considerable number of Nakhchivanis lost their posts as a result of the restructuring. In his account, this circumstance gave rise to their dissatisfaction.[\[xviii\]](#)

In his memoirs, Vazirov reflects on the nature of political power and leadership. He argues that countries are often governed by individuals who come from the provinces. In his view, such figures are prepared to do whatever is necessary to advance their careers and possess a distinctive ability to promote themselves and rise through the political hierarchy.

Vazirov also seeks to explain how individuals from provincial backgrounds can attain positions of power in societies with well-established elites. He argues that elite groups generally

resist admitting outsiders into their ranks. However, when divisions emerge within the elite, competing factions are often unwilling to allow one of their own to gain predominance and may instead bring in an outsider with the assumption that such a figure will be easier to influence and control.

According to Vazirov, however, the elite often fails to anticipate the consequences of this strategy. Once an individual from the provinces enters an unfamiliar political and social environment, he seeks to protect and consolidate his position by bringing in people from his own region or local network. With their support, he gradually strengthens his political position and ultimately succeeds in establishing a durable base of power.

Conclusion

Abdurrahman Vazirov was a characteristic representative of the Soviet nomenklatura. Although he had opportunities from a young age to travel to developed countries in Europe and the United States and to become closely acquainted with Western culture, society, and political systems, he nevertheless regarded Soviet society and Marxist-Leninist ideology as more attractive and just. Vazirov was a committed communist who believed in the ideals of the Communist Party and supported its social projects as well its strict system of governance. Although he described himself as a democrat by conviction, he regarded Stalin's methods of rule as a historical necessity and believed that Communist Party propaganda and ideological education had produced the ideal Soviet citizen. Vazirov considered the moral and ethical decline that affected both the party leadership and Soviet society during the final years of the Soviet state to be a profound tragedy.

Vazirov can hardly be held responsible for the crisis that already existed in the republic when he was appointed to its leadership. During his tenure, Azerbaijan did not lose any territory, nor did he play a role in the decision to deploy

troops to Baku in January 1990; that decision was taken without consulting him. Vazirov interprets the intervention as a provocation by Soviet leadership against him and subsequently refused to continue cooperating with the authorities.

At the same time, Vazirov's retrospective analysis of his relationship with the Soviet system is disingenuous. When criticizing the Soviet authorities, he presents himself not as one of their representatives and a member of the state nomenklatura, but rather as an external observer. Although he maintains that he had never wished to be a conformist, he had in fact benefited from the extensive privileges that the Soviet system made available to members of the bureaucratic apparatus. At the same time, he was unwilling to acknowledge the causes of the moral and ethical degradation of Soviet denizens oppressed under Soviet rule, deprived of their rights, and rendered entirely dependent on the will of the state.

Although Vazirov is aware that the individuals whom he described as members of "mafia groups," were themselves senior officials in party and state institutions and also controlled the shadow economy, he does not acknowledge this. Likewise, although he recognizes that a profound divide had existed for years between Soviet authorities and Soviet society, he largely avoids examining the underlying causes of this estrangement.

Nevertheless, Vazirov believed that the Azerbaijani people deserved better governance, more capable leadership, and improved social conditions, and he rejected the notion that democracy was alien to Azerbaijani society. He maintained that he had sought ways to make government more accessible to the population and to subject the activities of those in power to public oversight.

The first part of the article:

Modern Azerbaijani History in the Interpretation of Politicians: Abdulrahman Vezirov (Part-1)

Notes and References:

[i] Везиров А. Х. В первых рядах партера, Художественная литература, 2018, 236.

[ii] 0 событиях 20 января 1990 года в Баку. 215 KL.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AyJsX07XLg>

[iii] Vazirov, 2018, 192.

[iv] Ibid, 208-9.

[v] Sąjūdis ("Movement") was a socio-political organization active in the Lithuanian SSR between 1988 and 1990.

[vi] Rukh (the People's Movement of Ukraine) was a political organization established in the Ukrainian SSR in 1989.

[vii] Vazirov, 2018, 198.

[viii] Ibid, 200.

[ix] Ibid, 201.

[x] Ibid, 229.

[xi] Ibid, 256.

[xii] Ibid, 212.

[xiii] Ibid, 203-4.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid.

[xvi] Ibid, 199.

[\[xvii\]](#) Ibid, 194.

[\[xviii\]](#) Ibid, 225.