

Domestic Violence and Political Struggle

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The struggle against domestic violence should be *political* rather than *cultural*, because domestic violence is a *political* issue rather than a *cultural* one. The prevention of domestic violence, the protection of victims by the state, and demanding the punishment or restriction of perpetrators are components of political struggle. Those who argue that the state should take measures to reduce the incidence of domestic violence should frame their arguments in political terms and not cultural ones; at the same time, the public should view those who make this demand not as people who want a *cultural revolution*, but as people who are demanding *civil rights*. I have two goals in writing this article: to demonstrate that domestic violence is a political issue, and to argue that activists should formulate their demands on this issue within the framework of political struggle.

Domestic violence is a political issue

Why is domestic violence a political issue? The short answer is that the Azerbaijani state, like all other states, takes responsibility for protecting its citizens from violence perpetrated by other states and individuals, i.e. the Azerbaijani state must protect the lives and property of all Azerbaijanis from violence and the threat of violence. If the state is unable to fulfill this obligation, it is the right of citizens to demand its fulfillment from the state. Demands placed by citizens on the state are political issues. Azerbaijanis' demands that the Azerbaijani state fight against domestic violence fall within the framework of [citizen-state relations](#) and are a political issue. The long answer is as follows.

Domestic violence is one type of violence: if a stranger uses

violence against me, we call it simply *violence*; if a family member or partner does the same thing, we call it *domestic violence*. Therefore, all of the state's obligations to its citizens that have been subjected to violence should also apply to victims of domestic violence. What are the state's obligations to its citizens who have been victims of violence? Instead of listing and discussing all the obligations defined in the constitution and laws specifically of the Azerbaijani state (a job for legal experts), I will explain the minimum obligations of all states, including the Azerbaijani state. The state is an institution that claims a monopoly on legitimate violence within a particular territory. In other words, the state is an institution which will not allow any institution or individual other than itself to use violence on its territory; every state says *no one can use violence in this territory but me*. In return for this monopoly, the state undertakes one obligation – to protect the property and lives of all citizens. As a state, the Republic of Azerbaijan also assumes this obligation.

All political ideologies [agree](#) on this minimal definition of a state. The historical and theoretical justification of the state is that it is an instrument for preventing anarchy. It is claimed that without a state – that is, an institution that claims a monopoly on legitimate violence within a particular territory – people would kill and rob each other, and everyone would live in fear of being killed and of threats to their property and their lives at any moment. According to this claim, the state exists in order to protect the security of people's lives and property and to resolve violations of the law peacefully (through the justice system). In other words, the state must have an army to protect people from foreign attacks in the territory it considers its own; there must be a state police force to maintain order and protect law-abiding citizens from those who break the rules; finally, the state must have courts, i.e. a justice system, to resolve problems and violations of justice peacefully through predetermined

procedures. This is the concept of the minimal state.

Most political ideologies do not accept the concept of the minimal state and demand a bigger state, i.e. one with more obligations. In this sense, there is currently no minimal state in the world. In addition to these minimal obligations, all states have undertaken numerous other obligations (education, health, etc.). The Azerbaijani state is no exception in this regard. Azerbaijan is a welfare state; for example, Article 16 of the [Constitution](#) states, “The Azerbaijani state cares for the welfare of the people and every citizen, their social security, and a decent standard of living (...) assists in the development of culture, education, health, science and art, and protects the country’s natural environment, as well as the history and the material and spiritual heritage of the people.” I will discuss the minimal obligations of the Azerbaijani state, however, because a discussion of these minimal obligations is enough to show that domestic violence is a political issue.

Azerbaijan is not a democratic country, and as you read what I am about to write, you might ask, “Does the state actually care about the law?” But be patient and keep reading, because my goal in writing this article is not to convince the government to develop democracy in the country, or to make the state fulfill its obligations; my target audience is you – ordinary citizens, and my goal is to show that your claim that “domestic violence is not political” is wrong. This claim is wrong by definition, because domestic violence is political not only in democracies, but in any country, since it is the duty of any state to protect its citizens from violence. But what are political decisions? Or to put it another way: which of the issues that affect our lives are political? In a [previous post](#), I defined *political* as follows: *any matter in which the state actually intervenes, legally may intervene, or claims it must intervene is political*. Right now my goal is more limited, though, and I will narrow the definition and focus on part of it: *any matter in which the state legally may*

intervene or claims it must intervene is political.

The Azerbaijani state claims that it both may intervene legally (providing shelter to victims of domestic violence, punishing the perpetrator, etc.) and must intervene. Therefore, if the Azerbaijani state does not fulfill this obligation and the citizens demand its fulfillment, that demand is political. Therefore, domestic violence is a political issue. For example, murder is a political issue, but not in the sense that all murders are politically motivated; in the sense that the state is obligated to intervene in instances of murder. Suppose that I kill someone (regardless of the crime's motive) – then the state must punish me; if it does not punish me, then the citizens can demand that the state punish me. This demand would be a political demand. Therefore murder is a political issue. Domestic violence is also a political issue in this sense. To say that domestic violence is a political issue does not mean that the state might call someone's husband and say *beat your wife!* or that a husband might beat his wife for voting for another political party. Calling domestic violence political means that the state is obligated to intervene in cases of domestic violence, and if it does not intervene, citizens can demand that the state fulfill its obligations. This demand is, by definition, within the framework of citizen-state relations, and therefore political.

The struggle against domestic violence is a political struggle

In Azerbaijan, especially in recent years, the issue of domestic violence has been widely discussed thanks to the work of activists. The activists, however, have sometimes shifted the struggle from the political to the cultural plane. This is a mistake. First, domestic violence is a political issue and there is no need to shift its discussion to the cultural plane in order to eliminate it. Secondly, when the discussion is shifted to the cultural plane, the credibility of activists decreases because Azerbaijanis are conservative and it is very

difficult to change their cultural worldview. What is the activist's goal? The state should intervene and take measures against domestic violence. There is no need for a cultural discussion to achieve this goal, because these two issues (political and cultural struggle) are different, and shifting the discussion to the cultural plane is a mistaken tactic to achieve the goal. In activism, our goal is first and foremost to improve the situation that victims of violence find themselves in and generally to reduce the instances of violence. This goal can be achieved through political struggle, and to a certain extent it is also easier. Achieving the same goal through cultural struggle is a long and complex task; in current conditions, the latter tactic hinders the achievement of the goal.

Although morality and ethics are sometimes used interchangeably, recently political philosophy tends to distinguish between the two. When we talk about *morality* (sometimes called *political ethics*), we mean answers to the question of *what people can demand from others, i.e. what they can force others to do*. For example, which of our demands can be carried out with violence or the threat of violence? The protection of our lives and property is an example of this; in order to protect our lives and property, the state (and sometimes we ourselves) may use violence against others or threaten others with violence. *If you hit me / enter my property, I will have the police arrest you!* is a threat of violence, and it is legitimate. This is a matter of morality. When we talk about ethics, we mean the answers to non-political (non-violent) questions such as *how people should behave toward others, how they can behave toward themselves, and what makes a meaningful life*. Ethics is broader than morality and is not necessarily a social concept, because if we are not in a relationship with others (for example, if we live alone in the forest), it would be meaningless to talk about morality, but ethics would still be meaningful. Let me offer an example. A moral question: what can I demand from

others using the threat of violence? An ethical question: what is my (noncorrelative) duty to others or to myself? I hope the difference between the two is clear now.

No matter what our ethical views are, we must have an agreed upon morality uniting us in order to live in a healthy society. It is easier to agree on a moral issue – in that case, we are defining the duties and responsibilities of the state, the limits of its power. It is very difficult to agree on ethical issues, because in that case we are answering complex questions about *what a meaningful life is* and *how a person should live*. Someone may accept our moral view and reject our ethical view. For example, we are more likely to convince Azerbaijanis that *the state has a duty to protect its citizens and therefore must intervene in cases of violence* – we can refer to the law, a basic sense of justice, and, most importantly, the concept of the minimal state. Let's call this *elementary morality*. We are extremely unlikely to convince the same people that *free love is just a part of modernity, that a woman who has sex outside of marriage is not a deviant, or that a girl does not have to obey her father*. Let's call this *substantive ethics*.

One can accept the above elementary morality while rejecting substantive ethics. There is no problem there. Theoretically, an activist fighting domestic violence should not have a problem with a person who rejects the above substantive ethics. The activist's position is: *accept elementary morality regardless of your substantive ethical view*. Therefore, to someone who says that *a non-virgin girl is a slut*, instead of saying *no, she is not a slut*, you should say *whether or not she is a slut, neither the state nor anyone else can interfere with a non-virgin girl, use violence against her, or threaten her with violence, because...* In place of the ellipsis you could refer to the law, a basic sense of justice, and the concept of the minimal state. In short, people need to be made aware that they cannot force others to accept their own personal substantive ethical views or punish those who do not. Just as

we cannot force others to accept our religious beliefs, or our tastes in clothing, food, and sports (all of which are part of substantive ethics), we cannot punish those who do not accept our other substantive ethical views. Period. Let the public believe whatever they want, it is enough for them to accept elementary morality.

You might say that those who do not accept the above substantive ethical view will not accept even elementary morality. Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't, I don't deny it. My argument is that it is easier to convince people that these two issues are different and that it is important for them to accept elementary morality. It is more likely that a conservative person will say *a non-virgin girl is a slut, but you ought not to use violence against her, let her stay away from us if she wants to behave foolishly*; in conversation it is easier to convince that person of this idea – elementary morality. However, it is almost impossible to get that person to say that *a non-virgin girl is not a slut*. What do we need most of all from activism? Reducing violence and ensuring that the state intervenes and fulfills its obligations. For this purpose, instead of wrestling on the cultural plane with people who do not accept our substantive ethical view, it is necessary to have the discussion with them on the political plane. Let's not forget that however much we (activists or those who accept the above substantive ethics) hate them, they hate us at least as much. However disgusted we are by their substantive ethics, they are at least equally disgusted by our substantive ethics. Let's not confuse two different issues and conduct our discussions on the political plane.