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

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Memoirs and recollections, sources of personal origin, are often considered unreliable and subjective accounts of the past. In such sources, the author stands at the center of the events described, while those events are assessed from their personal point of view. Yet these sources also have a positive aspect: They can provide information about the author himself, his worldview, his social position, and the reasons behind his political motivations.

This article is devoted to how Abdulrahman Vezirov, one of the leaders of modern Azerbaijan, interpreted the political processes of 1988-1990 in his memoirs and interviews. Some regarded him as a farsighted politician, while others considered him a political novice who failed to understand the spirit and language of the people. Vezirov's book *My Diplomatic Service*[1] was published in 2009, followed in 2018 by *In the Front Row of the Parterre*.[2] In addition, Vezirov gave several interviews concerning the period during which he led the republic.[3]

This article is based on the aforementioned materials. Vezirov's memoirs are of interest for understanding how a Soviet politician analyzed the processes of which he was both a contemporary and a participant, how and under what circumstances his political ambitions were formed, and how he responded to political threats. His autobiographical writings present Vezirov to the reader as a loyal soldier of the Communist Party, a propagandist of socialist ideology, and a

patriotic Soviet citizen.

A Brief Historical Background

Abdulrahman Vezirov was born in Baku in 1930 and was of Karabakh descent. As he himself wrote, he descended from Mirza Jamal Javanshir, the vizier of Ibrahim Khalil Khan of Karabakh.[4] His political career began two years after he graduated from the Azerbaijan Industrial Institute. In 1954, Vezirov was appointed secretary of the Azerbaijan Leninist Communist Youth League (Komsomol); two years later, he became first secretary of the same organization.

From 1959 to 1970, Vezirov served in Moscow as a secretary of the All-Union Komsomol. He then worked briefly in the republic between 1970 and 1976, and until 1988 pursued a diplomatic career outside Azerbaijan. He was the first Azerbaijani to be appointed Soviet ambassador to a foreign country.

Vezirov first received an offer to assume a high-ranking position in the republic in 1985. At that time, however, he managed to persuade Soviet leadership, including Mikhail Gorbachev, that he would be unable to serve in that post. In one of his interviews, Vezirov explained this as follows: He knew that various clans in Azerbaijan, by which he meant representatives of different Azerbaijani regions who were represented in the ruling elite, held strong positions, and he understood that he would not be able to struggle against them. Indeed, it was for precisely this reason that, in the 1970s, he had agreed to leave Baku and go to Calcutta. [5]

Gorbachev approached Vezirov with the same proposal for a second time three years later, in 1988, telling him that “the Party needs your help.” After these words, Vezirov believed that it would not be right to withdraw. In May 1988, he was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan.[6] By that time, against the backdrop of separatist mobilization in Nagorno-Karabakh, dissatisfaction with the authorities had already begun to grow

in the country.

Vezirov identifies two reasons for his appointment to this post. The first was that he was originally from Karabakh, knew the region well, and that his family had once suffered from Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Through this appointment, the Party sought to demonstrate that, by giving power to someone who understood the people's concerns, it would soon resolve the problem.

The second reason was that Vezirov had no kinship ties with Heydar Aliyev, whom Vezirov presents as the head of the Nakhchivan clan. Having lived outside the republic for many years, Vezirov was removed from the struggle among local factions and had no connection with the clan led by Heydar Aliyev.

When Vezirov was appointed First Secretary of the Republican Communist Party, Heydar Aliyev had already been relieved of his membership in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union seven months earlier. During this period, Aliyev repeatedly attempted to establish contact with the Central Committee and with Mikhail Gorbachev personally, but without success. Aliyev's attempts to restore contact with the authorities were likely interpreted as a desire to return to power, and that this became one of the grounds for insisting on Vezirov's candidacy.

Vezirov held the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan until 18 January 1990. On that day, by decision of Moscow, he was removed from office and left Azerbaijan. Although he was subsequently offered another position in the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vezirov declined the offer and stated that he did not wish to cooperate with the Soviet leadership.

The Azerbaijan Vezirov Inherited

Abdulrahman Vezirov was the fourteenth First Secretary of the

Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, succeeding Kamran Baghirov in this position. Vezirov's views of Baghirov were generally positive; he appreciated the fact that Baghirov had not been tainted by corruption. At the same time, however, Vezirov found it strange that, amid the tense situation that had emerged in the country, no one criticized Baghirov or demanded an explanation from him.

By that time, there were already large numbers of displaced persons in the republic who had left Armenia, and acts of violence had occurred during the clashes in Sumgait. Although all of this had taken place during Kamran Baghirov's tenure as First Secretary, no one mentioned his name or demanded that he take responsible decisions.[7] Kamran Baghirov both was and was not the leader of the republic. Vezirov regarded Baghirov as a weak-willed communist, since during his tenure the party leadership in the republic made no attempt to undertake any initiative. On the contrary, the rules established under Heydar Aliyev remained in force, and the republic was governed by cadres appointed by Aliyev.

Vezirov's views are confirmed by Vagif Huseynov, who served as chairman of the KGB of the Azerbaijan SSR from 1988 to 1991, in his memoir *More Than One Life*. Huseynov writes that Kamran Baghirov's appointment as head of the republican party committee had nothing to do with either his knowledge or his administrative abilities. Heydar Aliyev, who regarded himself as the master of the republic, considered it appropriate to appoint in his place a compatriot, someone originally from Yerevan. Vezirov, however, was unaware of this.[8]

As soon as Vezirov was appointed First Secretary, he began to collect information about the republic's economic situation and the social problems facing the population. He understood that the reports sent to the center, filled with impressive economic indicators, did not reflect the republic's real economic condition. The growing social tension, in turn, was the result of deeply rooted problems such as corruption,

clanism, and nepotism.

In this connection, Vezirov notes that in 1988 a special commission was operating in the republic, staffed by officials of the Main Directorate for Combating the Theft of Socialist Property of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. This body was widely known among the public by its Russian acronym, ОБХСС.[9]

The commission's report stated that during the period of the "red five-year plans," the shadow economy had flourished considerably in the country, while corruption had become deeply entrenched.[10] Vezirov emphasizes that the main reason social problems in the republic remained unresolved was the continued operation of decisions adopted during Heydar Aliyev's tenure, as well as ineffective governance. For example, since 1971 the construction of private residential houses in the republic had been prohibited, as had the leasing of garden plots in the areas surrounding Baku and on the Absheron Peninsula.[11] Those most affected by these decisions were people living in the provinces. Since the younger generation could not build houses, they were unable to start families and were forced to leave rural areas. In the cities, meanwhile, widespread bribery, clanism, and regional favoritism created serious obstacles to finding employment.

Discussing the active participation of those who had left Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in the political processes of 1988-1990, Vezirov writes that, from 1987 onward, 1,790 people from Armenia had settled in Shusha. They did not wish to move to abandoned villages; instead, they created conflicts and demanded the expulsion of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. This, in turn, aggravated the situation of Azerbaijanis living in Stepanakert/Khankendi.

It had been possible to resettle some of those arriving from Armenia in Tovuz, Lachin, and the Khizi-Altiaghaj region, where the necessary conditions had been created for them. The

majority, however, sought to move to Baku. Yet in Baku there were already 68,000 people waiting for improvements to their housing conditions. Under these circumstances, most of those arriving from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh headed for Baku, further increasing social tension.

Vezirov notes that it would have been possible to prevent the entry of refugees and internally displaced persons into Baku by administrative means, but says that he did not want to do so: They would have had to be placed in wagons used for transporting animals, and he could not agree to that.[12]

Vezirov explained another cause of the growing social tension in the republic from the late 1980s as a result of subversive activities of the party and Soviet state nomenklatura, which had accumulated substantial financial resources but now faced the threat of losing power.

Speaking at a session of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 18 July 1988, Vezirov stated that the demonstrations that had been continuing for fifty-five days in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) were being led by representatives of the shadow economy. These people, he argued, were in fact responsible for popular discontent and for all the social problems. They were not genuinely concerned with the problems of the oblast's Armenian population.

Vezirov described these people as mafia groups but did not address their links with the Soviet administrative apparatus or the Party. At the same time, he recalled that a commission of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs had uncovered 300 major economic crimes. Vezirov did not say that those who committed these crimes held high state and party positions, but he did note that the perpetrators were trying to aggravate the situation and redirect popular discontent elsewhere in order to evade responsibility.[13] Vezirov was also offered the option of reaching an agreement with these mafia groups and using them to eliminate the opposition, but he refused to

accept this proposal.[14] Pointing to the republic's difficult socio-economic situation, Vezirov notes that the main reason he came to power in Azerbaijan was his desire to eliminate the negative socioeconomic conditions he had previously encountered in the republic. Since Vezirov regarded the existing situation in the republic as the result of Heydar Aliyev's misrule, he also clarifies his attitude toward him.

Vezirov worked under Heydar Aliyev's authority for six years. His first meeting with Aliyev took place in January 1970. The purpose of that meeting was to invite Vezirov to work in Azerbaijan. Aliyev offered him several positions and added that issues related to the criminal situation and level of bribery in Kirovabad (Ganja) took up half his day. It was for this reason that Vezirov agreed to serve as secretary of the Kirovabad city party committee.

After working in this position for four years, he was appointed secretary of the Central Committee, a post he held for another two years. It was during this period that Vezirov came to see that Heydar Aliyev's words did not correspond to his actions, and that his public speeches did not match his deeds. He therefore decided to leave the republic. Aliyev, however, did not want to allow Vezirov to leave. For this reason, Vezirov used his contacts in Moscow and, without Aliyev's consent, obtained an appointment through the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs and left the republic.

Vezirov explains this decision with an Eastern proverb: One must either submit to the ruler and herd his camels, or leave the ruler's estate. Vezirov emphasizes that he did not want to become a conformist and turn a blind eye to what was happening around him, and that this was why he left the republic.

Vezirov recalls that after he was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev frequently called him and asked for help in arranging a meeting with Gorbachev. Despite Vezirov's efforts,

however, Gorbachev refused to receive Aliyev. He even reproached Vezirov for trying to dissuade the USSR Prosecutor General's Office from bringing Heydar Aliyev to account.[15] Gorbachev accused Aliyev of falsifying the economic reports sent to the center during the final years of his leadership of the republic. Vezirov writes that, in addition to Gorbachev, Mikhail Solomentsev, chairman of the Party Control Committee of the CPSU, and Boris Pugo, who later replaced him, also wanted to hold Heydar Aliyev accountable for abusing his official powers during his tenure as leader of the republic. However, Vezirov states: "I did not agree to this because I felt sorry for a man who had suffered two heart attacks."[16] Vezirov writes that Aliyev, fearing arrest, decided on the advice of the secretary of the USSR Bar Association to be elected as a deputy in Nakhchivan, thereby obtaining parliamentary immunity. Vezirov's claim that Heydar Aliyev was implicated in corruption, and that for this reason Soviet leadership viewed him negatively, is corroborated by Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, in his book *Confession on a Given Theme*. Yeltsin writes that he came to Gorbachev with a bundle of documents and told him that it was shameful to sit alongside a person such as Heydar Aliyev in the Politburo, and that it was necessary to resolve the matter.[17] Vezirov notes that half of Soviet Azerbaijan's history coincided with the periods of rule of Mir Jafar Baghirov from 1933 to 1953 and Heydar Aliyev from 1969 to 1982. While assessing Baghirov's rule positively, Vezirov describes Heydar Aliyev's leadership as a period marked by abuse of power, clanism, and the depersonalization of individuals.[18]

Notes and references:

[1] Везиров А.Р. Х. Моя дипслужба [воспоминания]. Художественная литература, 2009. 189 с.

[2] Везиров А. Х. В первых рядах партера, Художественная литература, 2018, 278 с.

[3] О событиях 20 января 1990 года в Баку. 215 KL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AyJsXO7XLg

[4] Везиров, А. Х. Моя дипслужба. Художественная литература, 2009.

[5]Абдурахман Везиров: о дружбе с Гагариным, “письме Алиеву” и Карабахе / Paxlava Production. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXAPDex9he0.

[6] Везиров А. Х. В первых рядах партера. Художественная литература, 2018, 185.

[7] Везиров, 2018, 188.

[8] Гусейнов В. Больше, чем одна жизнь. Красная звезда, 2013, книга 1, 369–70.

[9] Везиров, 2018, 197.

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid, 233-4.

[12] Ibid, 224.

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid, 205.

[15] Ibid, 177.

[16] Ibid

[17] Ельцин Б. Исповедь на заданную тему. Средне-Уральское книжное издательство, 1990, 57.

[18] Везиров, 2018, 175.