

# Political Excommunication

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It is extremely difficult for political opposition to strengthen or even survive under authoritarian rule. In such situations, the opposition must expand its ranks by defining the sufficient conditions of *being an opposition*. If we assume that every member of an opposition group is against any form of authoritarian rule, then we can say that being an opposition member necessarily means being a democrat. This means that the opposition must expand its ranks by defining unexpansive yet sufficient conditions for being a democrat. My aim is to provide those conditions.

I argue that it is not right to excommunicate democrats, under my forthcoming definition, from the opposition. One excommunicates a potential member of the opposition when one accuses them of not being an ideologically correct democrat, that is, of intentionally or unintentionally benefiting the government. Unfortunately, however, political excommunication is widespread in the Azerbaijani opposition, which houses both cultural liberals and cultural conservatives, and as the differences between these two groups have deepened, the practice of political excommunication has also expanded. In this article, I will show how important it is for the opposition to renounce political excommunication. But before defending my claim, I need to clarify some important terms – cultural liberalism, cultural conservatism, and democracy – as much as possible.

In Azerbaijan, there are no sharp boundaries between cultural liberals and cultural conservatives (but if it turns out that such boundaries exist, approximate identification of these groups are sufficient for my argument), and each group is itself divided into moderate and radical wings. As can be seen from the public debates, the main issues that separate cultural liberals and cultural conservatives are women's

rights, LGBT rights, and, sometimes, ethnic minority rights. Roughly speaking, cultural liberals advocate for the rights of these groups, while cultural conservatives do not, or worry that claims of oppression or marginalization are exaggerated.

I do not stand above these two groups; in fact, I position myself in the radical wing of cultural liberals. For example, I believe that the state should fulfill its obligation and protect women's rights by using all its resources (it should take additional measures to ensure the safety of women who are subjected to violence or threats); that same-sex marriage and heterosexual marriage should have the same official status; that Azerbaijan should become a federal state and give political autonomy to all ethnic groups as well as historical and cultural regions. Cultural conservatives do not accept such views, but despite all these differences, we – cultural liberals and cultural conservatives – should accept each other's democratic identity and avoid political excommunication.

Who is a democrat? In Azerbaijan, it is generally believed that a *democratic person* must be, at least, a moderate cultural liberal. For example, a *democratic husband* believes that his wife can hang out with her friends without him; a *democratic father* does not interfere with his children's clothing style, etc. However, these are not the relevant definitions for my purposes because I am interested in whether people are democrats with respect to their relations to the state and their fellow citizens. In this regard, when I say *democrat*, I mean a *democratic citizen*. And it is precisely in this sense – that is, in the political sense – that being a democrat is not necessarily connected to cultural liberalism or cultural conservatism.

A person can be a democrat by belonging to either the cultural liberals or conservatives. For example, (1) trans-exclusive feminists, (2) LGBT rights activists, (3) devout Muslims, and (4) those who cherish traditional values (i.e., those who

believe that women and men have different roles in the family and society, that marriage should be only between a man and a woman), (5) libertines (who do not accept any traditional boundaries in sexual relations) can be democrats in my definition because my use of the term does not define a position on cultural issues but on relations with the state. Persons belonging to many other groups that I have not listed can also be democrats. My purpose in listing so many diverse groups is to show that we need to adopt a definition of a democrat that would, in principle, include the members of these groups.

I propose the following definition of a democrat, and I deliberately keep the boundaries of this definition somewhat imprecise because it is very difficult to give a satisfactory answer to the question of *who is a democrat*. Therefore, we should start with a definition that will partially satisfy everyone, but at the same time is somewhat open to interpretation and will encourage people to discuss:

A democrat is a person who believes (1) that the government and parliament should be formed through free and fair elections, (2) that every citizen has the right to vote and be elected, and (3) that the state has an obligation to equally protect the basic rights of every citizen.

I take this is the sufficient definition of a democrat. Note that I do not understand democracy simply as "rule of the country according to the wishes of the majority." For example, more than half of the population may support the idea that "the party that wins the election should shut down other parties" or that "all atheists should be killed," but a democratic state should not realize such wishes. When I say democracy, I do not mean the tyranny of the majority or the dictatorship of the majority. In fact, the third clause of the above definition is precisely aimed at preventing the tyranny of the majority.

However, liberals, socialists, nationalists, religious people, and conservatives can accept this definition because this definition allows for flexibility with regard to various means towards democracy within certain limits. What does it mean? For example, the first condition does not take a definitive position on the electoral system. That is, free and fair elections can be applied both in majoritarian, proportional and mixed electoral systems. Thus, the first condition allows for a diversity of beliefs on how the condition is best accomplished.

A person accepting the second condition may argue that, along with citizens, foreigners with permanent resident permits should be given the right to vote in some local (for example, municipal) elections. However, it is possible to accept this condition and claim that the right to vote and be elected should be limited to citizens only. Or it can be argued that people under and over a certain age (i.e., 35 and 70, respectively) should not be eligible for high political positions. Similarly, this position can also be opposed. Thus, the second condition is also open to well-intended interpretation.

The third condition is more open to interpretation because each state can grant its citizens numerous positive rights in its constitution or laws. But since I am concerned with the sufficient conditions of being a democrat (hence, indirectly, the sufficient conditions of democracy), by basic rights I mean negative rights, that is, those rights that concern freedom from certain types of interferences. Many of these rights are currently reflected in the constitution of Azerbaijan. For example, the right to life, the right to property, the right to move freely within the country and to leave the country, the right to privacy, the freedom of expression, the right to free assembly and association, and the presumption of innocence. These rights are fundamental and every democrat must defend them. However, each of these rights is open to limitation and expansion within certain bounds. For

example, under what limited conditions can people be denied the right to leave the country? Or what are the limits of freedom of expression? Such questions should be open for discussion in a democratic society. Thus, the third condition is also open to interpretation.

These conditions, as I emphasized, are open to interpretation *within certain limits*. No democrat can defend the idea that citizens should be discriminated by the state based on their sex, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle, religious beliefs, political opinions, and financial situation. In their personal lives, democratic persons may refuse to relate to a certain group of people, to love them, to think that they are morally wrong. To put it bluntly: as a democrat, you can loathe homosexuals, religious people, libertines, conservatives, and refuse to associate with them or even greet them. Others may be equally disgusted by you. As a democrat, you have no obligation to love any group of people, and others have no obligation to love you.

The only requirement to be a democrat is to accept the above three conditions. That is, religious democrats may think that homosexuality is immoral and they may promote religiosity among homosexuals. At the same time, atheist democrats may consider religion to be nonsense and promote irreligiosity among religious people. Such acts are not anti-democratic. The main thing is that religious or atheist democrats accept that those who do not share the same views with respect to religion or homosexuality are nevertheless citizens who enjoy equal rights. Democrats understand that all citizens are their fellow citizens and they are all equal before the law. Any democrat can engage in any kind of advocacy as long as they accept the three conditions described above.

Anyone who accepts the above three conditions is a democrat. In authoritarian states, the main adversary of democrats naturally should be authoritarian rule. In such a situation, democrats should expand their ranks as much as possible;

therefore, they should avoid the practice of political excommunication. If being a democrat is accepted as the sufficient condition of membership in the opposition, then cultural liberals and cultural conservatives can form a coalition, even if temporarily, and unite their forces.

Democracy is perceived as a positive feature by almost everyone, therefore, everyone is eager to identify themselves as a democrat and their values as *real democracy*. For example, liberals sometimes present liberal principles as conditions of democracy and argue that a true democrat must be a liberal. However, liberal principles – for example, the harm principle, the small government, anti-paternalism, the free market – are not always entailed by the democratic principles. A person can be both a liberal and a democrat, but to claim that the two are the same thing is an ideological sleight of hand. If liberals claim that liberalism is the same as democracy as the easiest way to convert others to liberalism, or that true democracy is liberalism, then they are either disingenuous or ignorant of political theory. Others, such as leftists, nationalists, or statist, often employ the same tactic to increase the popularity of their ideology.

Members of an opposition should not use this ideological sleight of hand and accept the notion of democracy defined here under the three tenets such that their numbers increase. If culturally liberal opposition members insist that every democrat must defend LGBT rights (such as same-sex marriage) or equality between men and women in non-political spheres, then a cultural conservative, someone who accepts our above definition of a democrat, may abandon democracy for authoritarianism, thinking that democracy means more than they would countenance.[\[1\]](#) Similarly, if cultural conservatives accuse LGBT citizens, feminists, liberals, pacifists, etc., of treason, immorality, and not loving Azerbaijan, then these insulted groups may fall into despair and leave a potentially united opposition, thinking that cultural conservatives share the same values as the authoritarian state, that they are both

the same thing. For a viable opposition, we should not allow this. Everyone who accepts the three conditions of being a democrat should be received as a democrat *and* an opposition member. Democrats, unite!

**Note:**

[\[1\]](#) What is the *political*? [Elsewhere](#), I have defined the political as follows: “any matter in which the state actually intervenes, legally may intervene, or claims it must intervene is political.” For example, a cultural conservative may believe that housework should be done by women and that women who do not do housework cannot be considered women. Are these ideas political or not? It is impossible to know. If a cultural conservative thinks that women who do not do housework should somehow be punished by the state, then these ideas are political. But if the cultural conservative adds that the role of a woman in the family is a matter of tradition or culture and that the state should not punish such women and that we all are equal before the law, then this issue is non-political and the person expressing these views is a cultural conservative *and* a democrat.