The Modern History of Azerbaijan in the Interpretation of Politicians: Abulfaz Aliyev (Elchibey) – Part I

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Every year on 15 June, Azerbaijan celebrates *Milli Qurtuluş Günü* (National Salvation Day). On that day, the media reports on spectacular fireworks and a grand concert featuring prominent cultural figures on the boulevard. Various posts dedicated to *Milli Qurtuluş Günü* are shared on social media. Opposition forces regard this day as the beginning of the problems of the modern era, an authoritarian revanche. Discussions about the reasons why Abulfaz Elchibey transferred his presidential powers to Heydar Aliyev, the then newly elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet, a former communist leader and KGB general, become relevant once again. The activities of Abulfaz Aliyev (Elchibey), the only dissident of post-Stalin Azerbaijan and its first president to come to power through democratic elections and lose power in an armed coup, are viewed differently by Azerbaijani society. One part of society regards him as a herald of democratic change and a defender of human rights and justice, while another sees him as a staunch nationalist and the person responsible for authoritarianism in modern Azerbaijan.

Abulfaz Aliyev did not write any memoirs or autobiographical works about his political activities. However, in 1992, a book entitled *This Is My Fate*, consisting of his interviews and speeches, was published.[i] Although he did not write the book himself, he read it, made corrections, and confirmed the

accuracy of the views presented in it. After returning from Kalaki, a book entitled *Thirteen Hours Face to Face with Elchibey*, based on interviews he gave to his adviser Adalat Tahirzade in 1999, was published.[ii] In addition, during the period when Abulfaz Aliyev served as leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) and chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), he gave numerous interviews and delivered many speeches, most of which were collected in Adalat Tahirzade's three-part book *Elchi Bey*.[iii] This article is based on these materials. It presents how Abulfaz Aliyev, Azerbaijan's second president, interpreted the formation of opposition to communist rule, the APF's struggle for power, and its removal from power. Examining Abulfaz Aliyev's attitude toward the political processes that took place in the early 1990s, his political position when analyzing these processes, and the strategy developed by the Azerbaijani opposition to achieve its goals in the political struggle makes it possible both to investigate the causes of disagreements and divisions within the opposition and to clarify the reasons behind changes in Abulfaz Aliyev's own political views and positions. An analysis of Abulfaz Aliyev's interviews and speeches shows that, despite occasionally expressing contradictory views and adventurist ideas, he was, above all, a defender of human rights and an advocate of democracy.

Abulfaz Aliyev (who adopted the pseudonym Elchibey in 1990) was born in 1938 in a family engaged in semi-nomadic farming at the Khalil Yurd summer pasture near the village of Kalaki in Ordubad. His worldview and social priorities were shaped by the circumstances into which he was born. Ethnically Turkish on both his paternal and maternal sides, Abulfaz Aliyev came from, on his father's side, a family of religious scholars and devout believers who had migrated from the town of Kukamar near Tabriz to the Qafan region of present-day Armenia. His maternal ancestors belonged to the Turkmen tribes of Anatolia and most likely migrated to the Qafan region during the

Safavid period. During the Armenian-Muslim conflict of 1918, both families left the village of Pirdavudan in Qafan and sought refuge in the village of Kalaki in Ordubad.

Abulfaz Aliyev grew up under his mother's care. Aliyev had no memory of his father, who was killed in WWII. After completing seven years of schooling in the nearby village of Unus, he continued his education at Ordubad School No. 1. Having graduated from school in 1957, Aliyev entered the Arabic Department of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Azerbaijan State University. After completing his university education in 1962, he spent several months undertaking practical training at the Baku branch of the USSR Institute of Hydrology. From January 1963 until late 1964, for almost two years, he worked as an interpreter at the construction site of the Aswan Dam in the Arab Republic of Egypt, which was being built with Soviet assistance. Since all Soviet citizens working abroad underwent rigorous screening by the KGB, it is fair to assume that Aliyev was at least outwardly loyal to Soviet ideology at this time.

Upon returning to Azerbaijan, Elchibey enrolled in postgraduate studies at Azerbaijan State University, defended his Candidate of Sciences dissertation under the supervision of Ziya Bunyadov, and began working as a lecturer in the university's Faculty of History. In 1975, Aliyev was arrested by the KGB for nationalist and anti-Soviet propaganda. Released from prison in 1977, he remained unemployed for several months before securing a position at the Institute of Manuscripts of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR, following instructions from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan.

Elchibey was the only dissident in post-Stalin Azerbaijan to receive a prison sentence. The ease with which he obtained employment at a state institution after his release later gave rise to rumors that he had collaborated with the KGB. However, it is reasonable to assume that these rumors were unfounded.

Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB at the time, had abandoned a hardline approach toward Soviet intellectuals who had been imprisoned or faced the threat of imprisonment because of their political views. Instead, he favored the use of softer methods of influence to change their anti-Soviet positions. In Azerbaijan, there were virtually no intellectuals who openly expressed anti-Soviet views. For this reason, making effective use of Aliyev's knowledge and abilities, rather than taking a hard line against him, appeared more reasonable to KGB leadership.[iv] Unaware that this was an instruction from the central government, Elchibey presented it as an example of Heydar Aliyev's liberalism in an interview with the newspaper *Azadlig* in October 1991.[v]

In 1988, following the outbreak of the separatist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh, Elchibey joined the opposition forces critical of the government and was subsequently elected chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front, which united the opposition. Having won the presidential election held in June 1992, Abulfaz Elchibey transferred part of his powers to Heydar Aliyev, who had been elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet, and departed for the village of Kalaki one week after completing his first year in office. Aliyev returned to Baku in 1997, when his presidential term formally ended, and continued serving as chairman of the APFP until his death.

The Azerbaijani Dissident of the Post-Stalin Era and Leader of the Opposition

Aliyev's political views are reflected in his interviews and speeches addressing several issues: his attitude toward Soviet political leadership and the Soviet political system; Azerbaijan's history of statehood, Azerbaijanism, and the country's future political structure; the formation of opposition forces against Soviet rule; and separatism in Nagorno-Karabakh. On these issues, Aliyev expressed views characteristic of a typical Soviet scholar. The reasons for this should be sought in the censorship that existed in the

Soviet state and in an educational system shaped by ideological influence. An educational system in which critical thinking and access to alternative information were prohibited did not enable Soviet intellectuals to approach social processes from a broad perspective, analyze political questions from different angles, or substantiate cause-and-effect relationships. Elchibey's political views were shaped by the sources available to him, primarily the works of Soviet and Eastern authors. Like every Soviet intellectual, Elchibey lacked access to Western academic literature, particularly research in history, politics, and sociology that did not conform to Marxist-Leninist ideology, studies devoted to the analysis of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, and archival documents classified as "secret." This prevented him from moving beyond the framework of Soviet ideology when analyzing sociopolitical problems. It can be assumed that Aliyev's critical attitude toward the methods of Soviet governance and the Soviet political system developed under the influence of his personal observations and his two years in Egypt.

Since Elchibey's family engaged in semi-nomadic farming and the Soviet government had set themselves the goal of eliminating such forms of economic activity, one can assume that his family faced serious financial difficulties. Elchibey personally witnessed and suffered from the indifference of the Soviet state and its officials toward impoverished sections of society. In interviews he gave to the press in the early 1990s, Elchibey acknowledged that he had experienced financial hardship and injustice both during his childhood and his student years.[vi] Although Aliyev recognized that the unconstructive methods of governance he had encountered from an early age, the injustice and unlawful actions of government officials, and corruption contradicted the Soviet Union's image as a social state, he had difficulty understanding the causes that made the totalitarian system possible and the mechanisms that sustained it. These gaps in his understanding

created serious obstacles to Elchibey's political activities. He was unable to assess correctly the material and political influence of the party nomenklatura and the state bureaucracy, and in many cases believed that cooperation with representatives of the Soviet government was possible.[vii] In interviews and speeches at Azadlig Square before his presidency, Elchibey demonstrated a moderate attitude toward the Soviet leadership of Azerbaijan. He blamed USSR leadership rather than Vazirov and Mutallibov for the adoption of harsh decisions.[viii] Although he referred to the destructive activities of individuals whom he called the "mafia," he did not discuss their connections with the party nomenklatura and the state bureaucracy. On the contrary, he stated that pressure from the APF had brought the people and the government closer together.[ix] Elchibey said that he opposed the resignation of Vazirov – whom he viewed as a friend – and regarded him as a person with humanistic and democratic views.[x]

Elchibey criticized violations of human rights within the Soviet political system, Moscow's failure to respect Azerbaijan's state sovereignty, and the lack of rule of law.[xi] According to Elchibey, democracy meant a state governed by law, in which all people, regardless of religion, language, or ethnic background, should be subject to the law, while the government should be placed under popular control.[xii] Elchibey viewed the perestroika reforms initiated in the USSR positively. He described Mikhail Gorbachev as a great democrat and the Soviet army and the KGB as the greatest enemies of democracy.[xiii]

There is no doubt that his two years of experience in Egypt played an important role in shaping Elchibey's views on democracy, human rights, and nationalism. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came to power following the revolution of 1952, achieved a degree of social revival unprecedented in Egyptian history, and hundreds of thousands of ordinary people were provided with housing, employment, education, and medical care. The

Nasser era, known as Egypt's golden age, was a period in which many social projects were successfully implemented. Effective agrarian reforms and the nationalization of major sectors of the economy revived the national economy, enabling Nasser to support other Arab states within the framework of pan-Arab nationalism, while Egypt's prestige among Asian and African countries rose dramatically. Elchibey admired the achievements of the socialist system in the Arab Republic of Egypt and most likely considered it possible that Azerbaijan's national leadership, if freed from Moscow's control, could achieve similar social progress for its citizens. During his stay in Egypt, Elchibey became acquainted with new sources on Turkism and the Azerbaijan Republic of the early twentieth century, observed the harmful consequences of colonialism, and developed an even stronger commitment to nationalism and the idea of a nation-state.[xiv] Appreciating the role Egypt played in the Arab world, Elchibey believed that a united Azerbaijan would also have considerable potential in the Middle East.

Elchibey's views on Azerbaijani statehood, Turkism, a united Azerbaijan, and nationalism were both confused and contradictory. One reason for this was his limited knowledge of the history of Azerbaijani statehood and Iranian history (Elchibey was not a professional historian but an Orientalist and philologist), while another was his commitment to the ideology of Turkism. Although Elchibey repeatedly claimed that he was neither a nationalist nor a pan-Turkist ("I am not a nationalist, I am a revolutionary")[xv], his statements ("We must build a system in which Turkishness is instilled in children on a mass scale")[xvi] prove the opposite. In his historical analyses, Elchibey frequently engaged in speculation, speaking as a nationalist politician rather than a scholar. He described the Ilkhanate as a powerful Azerbaijani empire,[xvii] called the regime established by Stalin in Southern Azerbaijan during the Second World War a "democratic republic,"[xviii] and claimed, when discussing

Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities, that the Tats and Talysh had emerged from a mixture of Persians and Turks.[xix]

Elchibey expressed his belief that the idea of a united Azerbaijan would become a reality in the near future. His sensitivity to the issue of Southern Azerbaijan was connected to his family's southern origins and his childhood memories. In 1946, when the Soviets withdrew from Iranian Azerbaijan, the founders and representatives of the Azerbaijani republic were also forced to leave their homeland to escape persecution. Some of these families crossed the Aras River and sought refuge in the village of Kalaki in Ordubad. Elchibey's family temporarily accommodated some of these Iranian refugees in their home. The condition of these people, who were suffering from poverty and hunger, made a profound impression on eight-year-old Abulfaz. Later, he explained their plight not in terms of their political activities but as a consequence of the hostile attitude of Iran's ruling circles toward Turks.[xx] Elchibey believed that a united Azerbaijan would be a stronger and more influential state and that other countries in the region would have to take it into account. A staunch opponent of Iran's religious regime, Elchibey considered a federal system of government more effective for the country.[xxi] Acknowledging that he did not possess sufficient information about the economic situation in Southern Azerbaijan and that it was therefore difficult to discuss its political character, Elchibey cited the reunification of Germany as an example and considered the reunification of Azerbaijan in the near future a realistic possibility.[xxii] While promoting the idea of a nation-state, Elchibey also took a positive view of the idea of a federation of South Caucasian states.[xxiii]

Although the concept of Azerbaijanism is currently associated with Heydar Aliyev, it was Elchibey who brought this idea to the political stage in the late twentieth century.

Unlike Heydar Aliyev, who used Azerbaijanism as a means of

assimilating ethnic minorities, Elchibey believed that every ethnic group should have the right to receive education in its own language, that every group's identity should be respected, and that ethnic identity should be recorded in official documents.[xxiv] In July 1991, speaking at the first congress of the APF, Elchibey called for the promotion of Azerbaijanism as a response to the KGB's policy of "divide and rule."[xxv] Elchibey envisioned the political system of the United States and the economic model of Turkey in a future united and independent Azerbaijan, and considered employing specialists from Turkey and Hungary to advance toward this goal.[xxvi] Although he described the USSR as a military-police state in his speeches and interviews and envisioned Azerbaijan's future political structure as a democratic state governed by law, Elchibey was unable to free himself completely from the influence of Soviet and colonial ideology. His contradictory statements about Azerbaijan's future political system were also connected to this. For example, Elchibey considered the politicization of schools acceptable, believed that Azerbaijanis were distant from social-democratic ideas, and associated political regimes with the psychology of peoples.[xxvii] While stating that the future path of Azerbaijan was the Western path, the path of democracy, Elchibey simultaneously claimed that "our people do not have a European mentality" and that, for this very reason, "social democrats will not be the leading force on the democratic path."[xxviii] Elchibey, who claimed that the political consciousness of the Azerbaijani people was "even lower than that of Black Americans," stated that the elections to the Supreme Soviet held in September 1990 demonstrated that the people were not ready for democracy and did not want to abandon the dictatorship of the Communist Party.[xxix]

Elchibey stated that opposition to the Communist Party and the Soviet regime in Azerbaijan had begun to form among students and young scholars at institutions of higher education, and in this connection recalled his own imprisonment for his

nationalist and anti-Soviet views. The growing idea of a sovereign nation-state among young people under Gorbachev's perestroika policy resulted in the establishment of organizations such as *Chanlibel, Varlig, Ashig Alasgar, Ozan,* and *Yurd* in the mid-1980s.[xxx] Elchibey stated that he was one of the founders of the *Varlig* organization. Unaware of the first rally held against the separatist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh, Elchibey actively participated in subsequent demonstrations and was arrested on 5 December 1988, when Azadlig Square was cleared of demonstrators.[xxxi] Elchibey claimed that the principal objective of the mass protest movement that began in response to separatist activities in Nagorno-Karabakh was to establish democracy and create a state governed by law, while he regarded achieving Azerbaijan's sovereignty within the empire as a difficult undertaking. Elchibey specifically emphasized that the Popular Fronts established in all the Soviet republics were government projects and that Gorbachev intended to protect the democratic process he had initiated through these organizations from the pressure of the powerful party bureaucracy. The Azerbaijan Popular Front was the only popular movement in the USSR that had not been established by the government. Elchibey claimed that this organization had been created from below, by the people, and that it was precisely for this reason that Moscow did not support its activities and instead, sought to bring it under control.[xxxii] Moscow demanded the removal of radicals and nationalists from the ranks of the APF as a condition for supporting it and declared that it was prepared to negotiate only with an APF consisting of democratic forces.[xxxiii]

Elchibey believed that it was Moscow that had directed the Nagorno-Karabakh protest movement toward nationalism. When the government realized that they could not control the movement, they sided with the Nagorno-Karabakh separatists and thereby succeeded in further inflaming the ethnic conflict. Elchibey stated that the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation had dealt a severe blow to Azerbaijan's democratic movement.[xxxiv] By the

enemies of the popular movement, Elchibey meant a transhistorical conglomeration of the Russian Empire, Armenian lobbyists, and Azerbaijanis who had been reduced to a state of servitude by the Soviet Union.[xxxv] Elchibey emphasized that young people and women were the groups among Azerbaijanis who most strongly supported and believed in the popular movement, while speaking negatively about intellectuals.

Notes and References:

[i] Elchibey, A. *This Is My Fate*. Ganjlik, 1992.

[ii] Tahirzade, A. *Thirteen Hours Face to Face with Elchibey*. Tanitim, 1999.

[iii] Tahirzade, A. *Elchi Bey*. Jumhuriyyet, 1999.

[iv] See: "On the Pardon of A. D. Sinyavsky. Extract from Protocol No. 4 of the Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, May 19, 1971." http://bukovsky-archives.net/pdfs/dis70/pb71-1.pdf

[v] *This Is My Fate*, 142.

[vi] Ibid., 6, 28, 158–159.

[vii] Ibid., 26.

[viii] Ibid., 23–24, 56–57, 70–71, 118–119, 125–126.

[ix] *This Is My Fate*, 12, 14, 31–33.

[x] Ibid., 118–119.

[xi] *This Is My Fate*, 20, 30–31, 39–41.

[xii] *Elchi Bey*, 194–197; *This Is My Fate*, 80.

[xiii] Ibid., 189–194.

[xiv] *Elchi Bey*, 8–9.

[xv] *This Is My Fate*, 37–38, 47.

[xvi] Ibid., 153.

[xvii] *This Is My Fate*, 61.

[xviii] Ibid., 170–171.

[xix] Ibid., 237.

[xx] Ibid., 158–159.

[xxi] Ibid., 60.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Ibid., 85.

[xxiv] Ibid., 80.

[xxv] Ibid., 238.

[xxvi] Ibid., 193.

[xxvii] Ibid., 75.

[xxviii] Ibid., 200–201.

[xxix] Ibid., 10, 220.

[xxx] Ibid., 48.

[xxxi] Tahirzade, *Elchi Bey*, 32.

[xxxii] *This Is My Fate*, 118–119.

[xxxiii] Ibid., 70–71.

[xxxiv] Ibid., 16.

[xxxv] Ibid., 120–121.