The Modern History of Azerbaijan in the Interpretation of Politicians: Ayaz Mutallibov – Part I

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Ayaz Mutallibov was an initiator, organizer, or executor of a number of significant processes that took place in the political life of modern Azerbaijan. Several developments that occurred during his tenure had a notable influence on subsequent political processes. Ayaz Mutallibov served as the first President of both the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and the Republic of Azerbaijan. During his presidency, Azerbaijan became a full member of the United Nations. Mutallibov was also an initiator of Azerbaijan's accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Public attitudes in Azerbaijan towards Ayaz Mutallibov as a political figure and towards his period in office remain divided. Some sections of society regard Mutallibov as an incompetent politician and a weak-willed leader who became a pawn in the hands of various political groups, while others maintain that his tenure marked the first emergence of democracy, political pluralism, and freedom of thought in the country's public life. How, then, did Mutallibov himself remember this period, and how did he assess his own tenure?

Mutallibov published two books devoted to the period of his rule in the early 1990s. One of these was entitled *Karabakh: The Black Garden*[1] and the other *Seventy Moments of Seven Years*.[2] Although these works are not generally regarded as

memoir literature, they are important for an analysis of Mutallibov's political career and for clarifying his views on the processes that unfolded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, in the early 2000s, Mutallibov gave interviews to the Russian press concerning the events that took place in Azerbaijan on the eve of the dissolution of the USSR and immediately thereafter. Finally, following his return to Baku, he gave an extensive interview to the newspaper Khural concerning the events that had occurred during his tenure. After returning to Baku, Mutallibov stated that he had renounced some of the views expressed in his books. However, an analysis of the interviews he gave during the final twenty years of his life demonstrates that he continued to reiterate the accounts presented in the books he had written in the early 1990s; in other words, his interpretation of the processes that took place during that period remained consistent and largely unchanged. Only one aspect of his position changed: his attitude towards Heydar Aliyev. This shift may be interpreted as a concession made by Mutallibov to Ilham Aliyev's administration in order to facilitate his return to Azerbaijan. The present article is based on the materials discussed above.

Ayaz Mutallibov: A Representative of the Soviet "Golden Youth"

Although the Communist Party and the Bolsheviks came to power claiming that they would ensure social equality, Soviet society nevertheless contained both privileged and disadvantaged social strata. The privileged strata included senior officials of the Communist Party and state institutions, managers of major industrial enterprises, prominent figures in science and culture, diplomats, and senior military officers. Together, these groups constituted the elite of the Soviet state. The personal financial resources of those belonging to this stratum were not necessarily substantial, and they did not always receive exceptionally high salaries. Their official positions, however, provided them with extensive opportunities and

privileges. These included access to foodstuffs and clothing unavailable to ordinary Soviet citizens through special stores, opportunities to travel abroad, admission to prestigious educational institutions, and, in practice, a degree of immunity from the law. The children of senior Party and state officials also benefited from these privileges and were commonly referred to during the Soviet period as the *golden youth*. Although his parents did not hold high-ranking official positions, Ayaz Mutallibov may nevertheless be regarded as a representative of Soviet Azerbaijan's *golden youth*.

Though his family was from Shamakhi, Ayaz Mutallibov was born in Baku in May 1938 into a family of physicians. His father was a surgeon and his mother a gynecologist. As a member of the Soviet golden youth, Mutallibov was an admirer of jazz music, the American way of life, and Western-style clothing. Frequently criticized for his musical tastes and style of dress, he was described in a wall newspaper as a *stilyaga*—a term referring to a youth subculture that emerged in the Soviet Union and was particularly widespread from the 1940s to the 1960s.[3]

Ayaz Mutallibov's sustained professional ascent began in 1966, four years after his graduation from the Azerbaijan State Institute of Oil and Chemistry, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education not only in Soviet Azerbaijan but across the USSR. In that year, at the age of twenty-eight, he was appointed director of the Baku Refrigerator and Household Appliances Plant. Eight years later, he had risen to the position of Director General of the Baku Refrigerator and Household Appliances Production Association. Following his rapid advancement in industrial administration, Mutallibov sought to pursue a career within the Communist Party apparatus. A member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) since 1963, he was appointed Second Secretary of the Narimanov District Party Committee in Baku in 1977. He later

recalled, however, that Party work held little personal appeal for him. Regarded as a capable administrator, Mutallibov was appointed Minister of Local Industry of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1979, at the age of forty-one. Four years later, he became Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR while simultaneously serving as Chairman of the State Planning Committee.

In February 1989, Mutallibov was appointed Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR. The first serious disruption to what had by then been twenty-three years of continuous career advancement came in the aftermath of the events of January 1990.

Following Vezirov's removal from office after his failure to stabilize the situation in the republic, Mutallibov was appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan SSR. At the same time, he was elected a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), becoming, after Heydar Aliyev, the second Azerbaijani to be represented in one of the highest governing bodies of the USSR. Mutallibov later observed that he was fully aware that his elevation to high Party office had come at an exceptionally difficult juncture and that, rather than bringing personal satisfaction, the appointment was likely to expose him to considerable political risk.[4] Because Mutallibov was not a professional Party functionary, he had little interest in protracted Party meetings and plenary sessions. He also disdained the careerism, patronizing attitudes, and indifference towards official responsibilities that he associated with the Party bureaucracy. Mutallibov maintained that, by this stage, Party gatherings had ceased to serve as effective fora for resolving substantive issues and had become largely ceremonial in character.

Some scholars and political figures have argued that Mutallibov's rise to power was, to a considerable extent,

fortuitous.[5] At least two arguments may be advanced against this interpretation. First, after Vezirov, Mutallibov was the highest-ranking Azerbaijani official in the republic. Second, he had no family ties to Heydar Aliyev, did not originate from the same region, and therefore did not belong to Aliyev's political network. By appointing Mutallibov, Moscow was, for the second time after Vezirov, seeking to remove Azerbaijan from Aliyev's sphere of influence. Several months later, in May 1990, Mutallibov was elected President of the Azerbaijan SSR by decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR. In 1992, following the Khojaly tragedy, he resigned from the presidency under pressure from the Azerbaijani Popular Front. Approximately two months later, however, the Supreme Soviet reinstated him as president. The following day, Mutallibov left Baku. He was able to return to Azerbaijan only twenty years later, in 2012.

Although Mutallibov's career advancement began during the tenure of Vali Akhundov, his most significant professional achievements occurred under Heydar Aliyev's leadership, and he may therefore be regarded as one of Aliyev's appointees. Despite having advanced under Aliyev, however, Mutallibov was not from the same region and thus did not consider himself bound by any particular personal obligation to his benefactor. Mutallibov held a favorable view of his predecessor, Abdurrahman Vezirov, whereas his attitude towards Heydar Aliyev was more ambivalent.

Mutallibov: The Last First Secretary, the First President to Resign

On 18 January 1990, Moscow removed Vezirov from his post as First Secretary. In his interviews, Mutallibov recalled that Vezirov had discussed the possibility of Soviet troops being deployed to Baku, but had been reluctant to believe that such an intervention would actually take place. In doing so, Mutallibov effectively confirmed that the deployment of Soviet troops to Baku in January 1990 had not been initiated by

Vezirov. Vezirov's removal created a power vacuum in the republic. Decisions were taken by a delegation headed by Yevgeny Primakov, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, acting on instructions from Moscow. Formally, however, the republican leadership was represented by Second Secretary Viktor Polyanichko and Ayaz Mutallibov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR. In practice, effective political power lay with the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF).

Five days after the January events, Moscow reached a decision regarding the republic's leadership, and Mutallibov was appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan SSR. In May 1990, he was elected president at a session of the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR. One year later, Mutallibov organized a presidential election in the republic. He explained that the decision had been prompted by the opposition's questioning of his political legitimacy. Mutallibov maintained that he had understood the meaning of authoritarianism from an early age and had never aspired to become an authoritarian leader. He consistently portrayed himself as an advocate of democratic principles.[6] Mutallibov also addressed the question of democracy in his speech at the 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), held in July 1990. He argued that the policy of *perestroika* proclaimed by the Party had brought the Soviet people not the long-awaited democratization they had anticipated, but rather chaos and uncertainty. In a sharply critical assessment of the Soviet leadership, Mutallibov maintained that order throughout the country was being upheld not through laws consistent with democratic principles, but by the military. He further argued that, although the Communist Party had proclaimed the beginning of democratic reforms, it possessed neither a coherent strategy nor a concrete plan for their implementation. Mutallibov also contended that Soviet society itself did not perceive these transformations as constituting genuine democratization.[7] In an article written

twenty years after the dissolution of the USSR, Mutallibov argued that Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* amounted to little more than "promotional propaganda."[8]

Mutallibov wrote that, as a proponent of democratic principles, he had agreed to hold presidential elections in September 1991. Although the election was conducted without an alternative candidate, he nevertheless regarded it as a democratic process. Mutallibov also noted that considerations of international legitimacy had influenced his decision, since, in the absence of an election, he believed that the international community would not recognize him as a legitimate president. Despite describing himself as a democrat, Mutallibov did not view the dissolution of the USSR as a positive development. He argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the United States and other Western states to gain virtually unrestricted access to the world's natural resources. In his view, because the national interests of these states did not necessarily coincide with the aspirations of the peoples of the USSR for democracy, the degree of democratization in the post-Soviet space came to be assessed largely in accordance with the extent of each state's political loyalty to the United States.[9]

A few days after the presidential election of September 1991, Ayaz Mutallibov, in his capacity as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, convened the Party's 33rd Congress. At this congress, a decision was adopted to dissolve the Communist Party. Although Mutallibov was instrumental in initiating the removal of the Communist Party from Azerbaijan's political arena, his attitude towards the Party remained ambivalent. While Mutallibov recognized that the failure of the reforms initiated by Gorbachev was linked to the nature of the Soviet political system, he was not an advocate of political liberalization. He understood that political liberalization would undermine the CPSU's monopoly on power and regarded such a development as potentially

dangerous. In his view, the Communist Party constituted a fundamental pillar of the Soviet state, and the collapse of that pillar would amount to the destruction of the state itself. Mutallibov therefore regarded the Communist Party as the only political force capable of carrying out meaningful reforms in the country. Although he described himself as a democrat at heart, Mutallibov explained his opposition to political liberalization in deeply personal and institutional terms: "I was formed as a statesman within the USSR, and the happiest years of my life were also associated with that state."[10]

Mutallibov regarded ethnic conflicts as having dealt the most damaging blow to the authority and legitimacy of the Communist Party. In Azerbaijan, this erosion of confidence was driven above all by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the events of January 1990. Communist Party members publicly burned their Party membership cards in bonfires. Mutallibov explained the ease with which the Communist Party was subsequently removed from the political stage by a single decision in terms of the authoritarian character of its internal organization: "The fate of a political party in which democratic principles are not respected lies in the hands of its leader." Once the leader decided to dissolve the Party, no one objected. Mutallibov further claimed that the ethnic conflicts that accelerated the disintegration of the USSR had been orchestrated by the central authorities. In his interviews, he stated that he had expressed this view directly to the Soviet leadership:

"On one occasion, I told Mikhail Gorbachev that I had grounds to suspect that presidential training courses for the Union republics had been established at the KGB's Lefortovo detention facility. Two dissidents from the Transcaucasian republics, Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had undergone six-month courses there. One subsequently became president of Armenia, the other president of Georgia. There

were also two individuals from Azerbaijan in Lefortovo: Etibar Mammadov and Rahim Gaziyev, both members of the Board of the Azerbaijani Popular Front. I do not know which of them you are preparing for the role of president."[11]

Mutallibov maintained that, following Vezirov's removal from office, effective political control in the republic had passed to the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF). He further stated that the delegation dispatched from the Soviet center under the leadership of Yevgeny Primakov failed to reach any agreement with the APF leadership on how the prevailing political crisis might be resolved. Although Primakov informed the Popular Front that the Soviet leadership had taken a firm decision to deploy troops to the city unless the demonstrations were brought to an end, the APF refused either to halt the protests or to lift the blockades imposed on key government buildings, including the Central Committee headquarters, the Council of Ministers, and the Baku City Party Committee.

Mutallibov regarded Gorbachev as one of the principal initiators of the establishment of popular front movements in the Union republics, including Azerbaijan. He recalled that the General Secretary would telephone the republican leaders and urge them to facilitate the creation of broad-based national-democratic organizations that would support *perestroika*. As Mutallibov put it, "these informal social movements, legalized by the Kremlin and known as popular fronts, were viewed by the center as organizations in opposition to the CPSU." To substantiate this interpretation, Mutallibov referred to an interview Gorbachev gave during a visit to the Baltic republics. According to his account, when a journalist asked Gorbachev about his attitude towards the popular fronts that had emerged in the Union republics, Gorbachev responded positively: "The popular fronts from below, and I from above, will accelerate *perestroika*."[12] Mutallibov suggested that, in this process of acceleration, it was the leaders of the Communist Party organizations in the

Union republics who were likely to find themselves caught between the competing political forces. His interpretation is also supported by Vagif Huseynov, who at the time served as Chairman of the KGB of the Azerbaijan SSR. Speaking at a plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in January 1990, Huseynov stated that significant changes had taken place within the leadership of the Azerbaijan Popular Front in the preceding months. According to him, the Azerbaijani intellectuals who had founded the movement had been pushed out of its leadership and replaced by more radical forces whose activities, he argued, were fundamentally incompatible with "our principles."[13]

Mutallibov generally spoke of the opposition in positive terms, emphasizing that he met frequently with leaders of the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) and appointed opposition representatives to official positions during his tenure. He also maintained that democratic parliamentary elections were held while he was in office and that opposition candidates secured twenty seats in the legislature.[14] Mutallibov stated that he favored bringing the opposition off the streets and into parliament, with all political dialogue conducted within the parliamentary arena. He acknowledged that, in the early 1990s, the republic was characterized by a weak government and a strong opposition, adding that, had the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF) not been intent on attaining power, the two sides could have worked together to address the country's problems. In his view, however, the APF leadership was interested in gaining political power on their own, not as a coalition or partner. At the same time, Mutallibov acknowledged that the opposition enjoyed substantial popular support. He noted that ordinary citizens assisted those participating in demonstrations, providing them with food and water. Mutallibov attributed the public's support for the APF to the deepening socio-economic problems facing the republic. He maintained that he believed cooperation between the government and the opposition was possible and that he had even contemplated the

formation of a coalition government. The results of the elections to the Supreme Soviet held in September 1990, however, suggest otherwise. Of those elected, 94 per cent occupied senior positions within the Party or state apparatus. Among the first fifty individuals on the list of successful candidates, only three did not hold an official position. One of these was Heydar Aliyev, who at the time held the status of an all-Union personal pensioner.[15]

Mutallibov considered the Azerbaijan Popular Front's criticism of the government for its dependence on Moscow and its tendency to await decisions from the Soviet center to have been misguided. He believed that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict ultimately depended on Moscow and that neither the Azerbaijani government nor the opposition possessed the political capacity or resources necessary to resolve the issue independently. Mutallibov linked both the emergence and the organizational consolidation of the opposition in Azerbaijan to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In his view, Moscow's unwillingness to safeguard Azerbaijan's territorial integrity created the conditions for sustained and organized mass demonstrations. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, he argued, enabled the Azerbaijan Popular Front to broaden its electoral base and enhance its political standing.

Mutallibov interpreted the events of January 1990 as a response to what he regarded as an attempted coup by the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF), and placed responsibility for the deployment of Soviet troops to Baku squarely on the opposition. At the same time, he acknowledged that, although Moscow succeeded in restoring order through military force, it failed to address the underlying cause of the unrest: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In his view, the prospect of a renewed attempt to seize power in Azerbaijan therefore remained very real. Mutallibov also argued that the opposition sought to promote the perception that the deployment of troops to Baku had been initiated by the republican Party leadership

and that the communists had resorted to military intervention in order to retain power. He maintained, however, that this interpretation did not correspond to the actual course of events.[16] The 4th Soviet Army stationed in Azerbaijan was not subordinate to the republican leadership. The authorities of the republic provided Moscow with daily reports on the situation and had also received information suggesting that provocations were being prepared in Baku. At the time, the capital had a substantial Armenian population, while it was also home to people who had been expelled from Armenia, which made clashes between the two communities a foreseeable possibility. For this reason, the republican leadership appealed to the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs for assistance in maintaining public order. Mutallibov stated that, "for reasons unknown even to me, the army remained in its barracks until 20 January, and by the time the troops emerged from their barracks, there were no Armenians left in Baku." He recalled that the republican leadership continued negotiations with the Soviet center until the final moment in an effort to prevent the deployment of troops to the capital. Mutallibov also stated that he warned Soviet Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, who was in Baku at the time, that the use of the army would only exacerbate the situation: "In Azerbaijan, the Soviet Army is associated with the Russian people. Half a million Russians live in the republic, and if troops are deployed, the position of the Russian population will become more precarious." Yazov, however, did not give serious consideration to Mutallibov's arguments.[17]

To be continued…

Notes and References:

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[2] Mutallibov, A. *70 mgnovenii 7 let* [Seventy Moments of Seven Years]. Sovremennik, 2000.

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[4] Mutallibov, A. "Raspad SSSR: istoricheskaia neizbezhnost ili geopoliticheskaia katastrofa? Chast' vtoraia" ["The Collapse of the USSR: Historical Inevitability or Geopolitical Catastrophe? Part Two"]. *Natsional'nye interesy*, no. 3 (2011). https://vsezaros.ru/news/stati/item/372-raspad-sssr-istoricheskaya-

[5] See: Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*. NYU Press, 2003; Alizade, Z., and R. Agaev. *Azerbaidzhan: konets vtoroi respubliki (1988–1993)* [*Azerbaijan: The End of the Second Republic (1988–1993)*]. Granitsa, 2006.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Mutallibov, A. “Raspad SSSR: istoricheskaia neizbezhnost ili geopoliticheskaia katastrofa? Chast’ vtoraia” [“The Collapse of the USSR: Historical Inevitability or Geopolitical Catastrophe? Part Two”]. *Natsional’nye interesy*, no. 3 (2011). https://vsezaros.ru/news/stati/item/372-raspad-sssr-istoricheskaya-neizbezhnost-ili-geopoliticheskaya-katastrofa.html. Accessed 13 May 2026.

[13] “Vyderzhki iz stenogrammy zasedaniia plenuma TsK Kompartii Azerbaidzhana, sostoiavshegosia 24–25 ianvaria 1990 goda. Stenogramma vystupleniia predsedatelia KGB Vagifa Guseinova” [“Excerpts from the Transcript of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Held on 24–25 January 1990: Transcript of the Speech by KGB Chairman Vagif Huseynov”]. *Bakinskii Rabochii*, 18 January 1994, no. 3, pp. 2–4.

[14] In those elections, the Azerbaijan Popular Front secured 30 seats. See: Гаджи-заде Х. “Прощание с парламентом.” *Свобода*, 12 March 1992, no. 11 (27).

[15] “Soobshchenie Tsentral’noi Izbiratel’noi Komissii po vyboram narodnykh deputatov Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR” [“Statement of the Central Electoral Commission on the Elections of People’s Deputies of the Azerbaijan SSR”]. *Bakinskii Rabochii*, 9 October 1990, p. 2.

[16] Ibid.

[17] “Vyderzhka iz stenogrammy zasedaniia plenuma TsK Kompartii Azerbaidzhana, sostoiavshegosia 24–25 ianvaria 1990 goda. Vyderzhka iz stenogrammy vystupleniia Predsedatelia Soveta Ministrov Respubliki A. N. Mutalibova” [“Excerpt from the Transcript of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, Held on 24–25 January 1990: Excerpt from the Speech by A. N. Mutallibov, Chairman of the Republic’s Council of Ministers”]. *Bakinskii Rabochii*, 18 January 1994, no. 3, pp. 2–4.