

Comparing Azeri Attitudes toward Political Participation in Azerbaijan and Georgia

By Joshua Noonan, Azerbaijan and Georgia Fulbright Fellow '09-'10

Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan and Georgia have followed very different paths of development. Georgia has remade itself into a more transparent, open, and democratically-based country, whereas Azerbaijan has continued the post-Soviet tradition of “single party plus” rule. The historic, political, and social experiences of Azeris in Azerbaijan and Azeris in Georgia have been quite different. The project summarized here seeks to compare the attitudes towards political participation for Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia with the attitudes of Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijan in order to find if and why these attitudes diverge. This article describes and analyzes the key differences and similarities found between the sampled populations of ethnic Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Introduction

The Rose Revolution is an example of one of the most successful “color revolutions” since it harnessed civil discontent for a peaceful change of government in Georgia in the autumn of 2003. This revolution had a profound impact on Georgia, removing many of the policy-makers from the previous regime, increasing respect for democratic processes, and spurring a precipitous drop in corruption due to the active prosecution of individuals involved in bribery, while also nearly eliminating low-level corruption in the police force by dismantling the notoriously corrupt traffic police. As a result of the Rose Revolution, Adjara, a Muslim region within Georgia on the Black Sea coast was reintegrated with the rest of the country in 2004.

In contrast to Georgia’s regime change, Azerbaijan has lived under an authoritarian system since 1993, when Heydar Aliyev took control of the government from Abulfaz Elchibey. Before Aliyev died, the election of his son Ilham as president was engineered in order to continue the political dynasty. Ever since 1993, Azerbaijan has functioned as a “single party plus” system where the ruling *New Azerbaijan Party* has controlled the political agenda while being nominally opposed by several weak and disorganized political parties. Despite the continued occupation of 16% of the territory of Azerbaijan, there has been a high degree of stability enabled through co-optation of any potential opposition, energy-driven economic development, and repression of groups who refused to accept the status quo.

Since Azeris live in both societies, it makes sense to ask how they relate to the two different political systems. In starting this project, my initial hypothesis was that indeed the Azeris living in reasonably democratic

Georgia would relate to the idea of political participation differently than those living in the more authoritarian Azerbaijan.

Methods

To test this hypothesis I developed a survey and administered it to samples of Azeris living in both Azerbaijan and Georgia. The questionnaire was designed with 8 general biographical questions, 4 formal political participation questions, 12 general political questions, and 6 questions concerning attitudes about the government and the efficacy of government.

Based on my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Azerbaijan for more than two years, I choose to use a convenience sample instead of a random sample because I thought that I would get more genuine answers from respondents if they received the questionnaire from someone they trusted rather than an unfamiliar stranger. With more resources, I would have been able to hire a local polling organization to conduct a random sample. Nevertheless, in the circumstances, the most productive way to proceed was by utilizing community leaders in Azerbaijan and Georgia to help distribute questionnaires to local community members. For the majority of the survey collection, the distributors gave the surveys to colleagues, family members, friends, and acquaintances, who after completing the surveys anonymously returned them to the distributors who would ultimately give them back to me. I distributed and collected fewer than 10 percent myself. Finally, fewer than 2% of the surveys were distributed via Facebook and returned by e-mail by participants from Azerbaijan.

There was a 30%–40% return rate for the questionnaires distributed by NGOs and active commu-

nity members. The questionnaire was distributed in villages, regional centers, and the capitals of Azerbaijan and Georgia. A total of 397 questionnaires from Azerbaijan and 262 questionnaires from Georgia were collected.

The sample in Azerbaijan could be skewed with a higher number of people expressing negative attitudes towards the current regime than actually exists in the population, since I utilized my contacts in many local and national NGOs, such as Transparency International as well as counterparts of former colleagues in Azerbaijan. This method of distribution may have led to a more critical and a more liberal group of contacts compared to a randomly sampled group of Azeris in Azerbaijan. Accordingly, the results described below are more impressionistic than conclusive. Nevertheless, they raise questions that can be addressed through more systematic research.

Differences in Party Participation between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

I have found that Azeris in Azerbaijan are 10 times more politically mobilized than their counterparts in Georgia. In Azerbaijan the total number of participants who reported that they were members of a political party was 33% (27% identified with the ruling *Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası (YAP) – New Azerbaijan Party*, 3% opposition, 3% undefined, see Figure 1 on p. 17 for a complete breakdown). In Georgia the total number of participants who reported that they were members of a political party was 3.2% (1.5% identified with the ruling *Ertiani Natsionaluri Modzraoba (ENM) – United National Movement*, 1.7% registered that they were party members, but did not denote their affiliation).

Azeris in Azerbaijan who work as educators, physicians, nurses, and other public sector positions are obliged to become members of the ruling party as well as to participate in elections and obligatory political activities. Furthermore, many Azeris in Azerbaijan see joining the YAP as a way to become employed, whereas party membership does not seem to be a common practice for Azeris in Georgia. The ruling party does not dominate all aspects of life in Georgia as it does in Azerbaijan, so that is one reason why the participation rates in the ENM are lower. Moreover, since many Azeris living in Georgia do not speak Georgian, it is more difficult for them to participate in any part of Georgian society.

Furthermore, the fact that Azeris in Azerbaijan are the majority instead of the minority is a contributing factor for their increased participation, as they know the language of politics and society. By contrast, for the Azeris in Georgia, even parliamentary deputies do not

feel obliged to learn or speak Georgian, and often simply vote with the ruling United National Movement. One Azeri-Georgian stated in an interview, “*We vote for those who are in power, not according to any ideology as we are more concerned about our safety.*”

General Satisfaction with the Government between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

The contrast in overall satisfaction with the government between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia is quite striking, particularly since many more Azeris were dissatisfied with the Azerbaijani government than with the Georgian government. Overall, 21.2% of the respondents in Azerbaijan and 4.2% of the respondents in Georgia reported that they were dissatisfied with the current government. 20.2% of participants in Azerbaijan registered their answers as “rarely satisfied” and 29.0% in Georgia wrote that answer, while 13.1% in Azerbaijan and 16.4% in Georgia were fully satisfied (see Figure 2 on p. 17 for a complete breakdown).

Azerbaijani dissatisfaction may be the result of an uneven allocation of wealth. Though the Gini Coefficient is higher in Georgia (40.8 – 2009 figures) than Azerbaijan (36.5 – 2001 figures), the difference in apparent wealth is more noticeable in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, there is both rampant petty and high-level corruption in Azerbaijan, which also may affect the satisfaction of the population with the government. Moreover, the cognitive dissonance caused by a continual full spectrum barrage of positive propaganda in the face of a reality defined by unemployment, poor infrastructure, internally-displaced persons and refugees from a 20-year-old frozen conflict, and official misuse of funds may also explain the dissatisfaction with the current government.

Despite the anonymity of the research, the Georgian respondents may feel pressure to respond positively, as they are minorities in their country of residence. During the rule of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia from 1991–1992 minorities may have felt threatened by nationalist slogans popular at the time. Many Azeris living in Georgia in the 1990s, most notably in Marniuli and Gardabani, faced overt harassment by the police and Guawdia national guard, who sought payoffs. Other problems included the reported mining of the village of Tekali in Marneuli region, and attacks on other villages.

In recent times, the *de jure* recognition of minority rights has increased and there have been a few attempts to integrate minorities into Georgian society. Nevertheless, even though Georgia is dramatically more democratic than Azerbaijan, Azeri residents have legitimate grievances. Currently, Azeris in Georgia mention the

unconstitutional refusal to allow the construction of mosques and madrasahs, the lack of Georgian language training, and discrimination as major problems. These grievances may not always gain expression in the political system because the members of parliament who represent the Azeri minority feel that it is in their interest to vote in support of the ruling ENM.

Satisfaction with the Opposition's Role between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

Large numbers of Azeris in both countries, 51.6% of the respondents in Azerbaijan and 34.3% of the respondents in Georgia, wrote that they were dissatisfied with the role of the opposition. In Azerbaijan, the problem is that the opposition is split in terms of its policy goals and between those who prefer to work within the system and those who work outside of it with the result that it is ineffective. In Georgia the opposition is more effective since it is more visible. This difference can be seen in the fact that 16.1% of participants in Azerbaijan claimed that they were "rarely satisfied," while 27.9% in Georgia answered in that manner. A meager 2.3% in Azerbaijan and 2.3% in Georgia were fully satisfied with the role of the opposition (see Figure 3 on p. 17 for a complete breakdown).

Attitudes towards the Future of the Political System between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

Azeris living in Georgia are much more positive about the future of their country's political system. Thus, 37.3% of people surveyed from Azerbaijan and 57.3% of people surveyed from Georgia reported feeling positive about the future of their country's political system. In contrast, 19.1% of participants from Azerbaijan and 5.3% of participants from Georgia reported feeling negative about the future of their political systems. Those sitting on the fence included 40.6% of respondents from Azerbaijan and 30.9% of respondents from Georgia who reported feeling neutral about the future of their country's political system (see Figure 4 on p. 18).

Again, the issue of fear among Azeris living as a minority group in Georgia could play a part in the positive answers. This could be due to a fear of being attacked by the majority for responding negatively. Despite that fact, I believe that due to the various reform efforts made as a result of the "Rose Revolution", the population of Azeris in Georgia in fact do feel more positively towards the political system. I believe that these feelings are caused by the more popular nature of the current government in Georgia as well as the still limited,

but increasing, protection of constitutional rights for the citizens in Georgia.

Differences in Sourcing of Political Information between Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

In Azerbaijan 64.4% of participants stated that they received political information from TV and in Georgia the figure was 73.5%. It must be noted that many Azeris in Georgia who live near the border with Azerbaijan watch only Azerbaijani or Turkish TV in Georgia. When non-Georgian speakers need to learn about what is occurring in Georgia, they can read one of the Azeri language newspapers, have informal meetings, or if they are able, communicate in Russian with local Georgians. A large percentage of Azeri-Georgians do not speak Georgian, and this deficiency makes participation in society much more difficult.

With regard to the Internet, 29.8% of respondents from Azerbaijan and 19.5% of respondents from Georgia stated that they used it to collect political information. 3.4% of Azerbaijani people surveyed and 24.0% of Georgian people surveyed stated that they received political information from newspapers (see Figure 5 on p. 18 for full details). I believe that the gap of about 10% in the difference in Internet usage could be explained by the sampling of a higher percentage of villagers in Georgia than in Azerbaijan.

Differences in Attitudes towards Political Priorities for Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia

The greatest policy concern was "Education" for both Azeris in Azerbaijan (63.7%) and Azeris in Georgia (55.0%). The second most important issue was "Human Rights" at 37.8% in Azerbaijan and 27.1% in Georgia. The third biggest policy concern was "The Economy" at 22.8% in Azerbaijan and 16.1% in Georgia. The next two political issues followed parochial problems defined by the country of residence. Just 5.1% of participants from Azerbaijan, but 39.7% of participants from Georgia stated that "Minority Rights" was a policy that needed to be considered. This is a logical selection on the Azeri-Georgians' part, as they are a minority in the country, unlike ethnic Azeris in Azerbaijan.

I expected many of these responses, especially those concerning education and the economy (see Figure 6 on p. 18 for the major issues). Education is valued by many ethnic Azeris for both females and males, though because of families' low earning power and the prevalence of traditional gender roles, education is stressed

more for males than females. Concerning the economy, I speculated that there would be a higher rate of concern than that which was reported. It is possible that Azeris did not know the word for Economics in Azeri, so that could be why there was a lower rate of response for that question. It is also possible that it simply was not important. I was more surprised that the issue of human rights was stressed as important for respondents on both sides of the border.

“Corruption” was selected by 16.7% of respondents in Azerbaijan and 5.0% of respondents in Georgia. I believe that this can be easily understood since in the 2009 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Georgia ranks 61 and Azerbaijan ranks 143 globally. Furthermore, due to the effects of the Rose Revolution, petty corruption has dropped dramatically in Georgia, whereas paying bribes is still a common practice in schools, hospitals, and general governmental offices in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

The biggest differences in attitudes for Azeris in Azerbaijan and Georgia focused on the role of the government and the opposition. There were also differences in the percentage and type of political party memberships and in prioritizing political issues, specifically the differences between stressing corruption in Azerbaijan and minority rights in Georgia. Thanks to the generally positive trajectory of the government in Georgia as well as the positive and more active role that the opposition plays, there is a lower rate of dissatisfaction among the

survey participants than from those surveyed in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, a relatively high level of political party membership can be attributed to the fact that party membership is a requisite for employment, high levels of recruitment during tertiary education, and also a strong centralized party apparatus. In Georgia, the low party membership can be attributed to a weaker party structure, a lower rate of the politicization for public sector employment, and a paucity of knowledgeable Georgian speakers amongst the Azeri minority. The Corruption Perception Index explains the higher rate of concern for corruption in Azerbaijan. Finally, the attacks on minorities during the early 1990s in Georgia as well as lingering issues of integration and discrimination explain why many Azeris living in Georgia selected minority rights as key a political priority.

Future research on this topic should address the following issues. A survey distributed by local polling firms would allow for a random sample, thus making the data more representative. Also, in order to capture more of the population, it would be useful to have the questionnaire written in Cyrillic for Azeris who studied under the educational system of the USSR as well as in Russian and Georgian and naturally, if expanded to Azeris in Iran, it would have to be printed in Arabic script as well. Nonetheless, despite the limitations of the current survey, I did find differences among the two sampled populations, and I believe that with more resources and rigor, an even more fruitful academic venture can be conducted.

About the Author:

Joshua Noonan is a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Omaha. He has been a Fulbright Fellow in Azerbaijan and Georgia from August 2009 to June 2010 and will study Russian as a Kathryn Davis Fellow at Middlebury College this summer.

Original questionnaires and data for the survey can be downloaded from the following links:

Questionnaire in English

<http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AWOllcvqSHCaZGhqNG1kbnNfMTU5Z3ZuenA3ZnA&hl=en>

Azerbaijan and Georgia Combined Excel Data Set

<http://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0B2OllcvqSHCaMDEzZWfIZTYtNjU5Ni00OTg0LTg0ZDMtNjY4MjA1M2JmMjM5&hl=en>

Azerbaijan and Georgia Combined SPSS Data Set

<http://docs.google.com/leaf?id=0B2OllcvqSHCaYzlhNzVjMTUyYTYyS00MTRlIk4MTMfMGZjNzNjNGJlNDQ4&hl=en>

Original Scanned Questionnaires in Azeri

<http://docs.google.com/leaf?id=0B2OllcvqSHCaNWQ1MWM4ZTkODU1ZS00ZjdlWjkyTUfMDdmNzJkNTEyMzUw&hl=en>