The “Karabakh Syndrome” and Azerbaijani Politics

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In future histories of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, Azerbaijan will hold a place of particular distinction. The Azerbaijani republic will be remembered as one of the first sites where independent political forces mobilized as a popular movement in the spirit of perestroika. At the same time, Azerbaijan will be recorded in historical annals as the first republic to experience an acute collapse of the Stalinist system of party rule and Brezhnevist stagnation along with the violent repression of political forces militating for a new, Gorbachev-style Soviet politics.

The process of reform initiated by the Gorbachev coalition in Moscow is frequently perceived as a top-down process begun at the center and extending to the periphery. By contrast, the impulse for political change in Azerbaijan came not from Moscow but from Azerbaijan’s own periphery—the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), a largely rural, Armenian-populated province situated on the republic’s western border. Using the Gorbachevian language of perestroika, glasnost’, and democratization, Armenian deputies to the region’s provincial council gathered on February 20, 1988, in the administrative center, Stepanakert, to articulate in legal form their decades-old aspirations for union with Armenia. The ensuing contradictions of change in Azerbaijan, marked by tense political struggle and punctuated with bloody intercommunal conflict, reached a climax with a final round of anti-Armenian violence in Baku in mid-January 1990. The massive intervention of Soviet troops in Azerbaijan’s capital on January 19–20, 1990, brought to a close the initial period of perestroika in Azerbaijan.

This article examines the origins of political change in contemporary Azerbaijan, the troubles attending the efforts to promote a democratizing politics, and the contradictory imperatives of reform in a republic with a multi-ethnic population and competing visions of perestroika. While much of the experience of the past two years speaks to the unique historical and demographic conditions in which a new kind of politics emerged, developed, and ultimately failed in the republic, the Azerbaijani case holds important lessons for the reform process in other Soviet republics.

As in Azerbaijan, politics in the Gorbachev era in all the Soviet republics is a complicated process of negotiation, compromise, and recurring conflict involving the local and central apparatuses of the Communist party, newly forming yet quite powerful independent political associations, and populations that have largely failed to experience the benefits of a democratizing polity and a marketizing economy. Given the multinational composition of the populations in the republics—aggravated by the unequal distribution of political power, cultural prestige, and economic resources—the implications of ethnic differences inform the larger set of complex and troublesome challenges to the success of reform in the respective republics and the Soviet Union as a whole. It is thus the depth of the similarities, and not the equally important differences, that draws attention to Azerbaijan as an example of the ways in which conflicts between the old system and an emergent new politics can result in failed, and potentially violent, outcomes.

Institutional Origins of Contemporary Ethnic Politics

One of the fundamental institutional innovations car-

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On January 19, 1990, in the Azerbaijani region of Khandlar, nationalist activists block the progress of a Soviet column of armored vehicles—part of the force sent to quell ethnic rioting in the republic.

Carried out by the Soviet leadership in the wake of the October Revolution was the linking of ethnicity, territory, and political administration in the process of state-building. Tpered "national statehood," the Soviet image of a new form of the state was put into practice through the creation of a hierarchical system of ethno-territorial administrative divisions extending from the national republic down to the national district (okrug).

The building blocks of the new Soviet federation thus did not simply replicate the geographic divisions existing under tsarist dominion. Rather, the Soviet federal system fostered new, national-territorial formations that would contribute to the consolidation of ethnic identity by institutionalizing nationality at the level of the state.

The Soviet process of nation-building was planned in order to coincide with the formation of the novel national-state structures. Cultural organizations, from state publishing houses and ministries of culture and education to unions of writers, artists, architects, and others, were established to aid in creating new cultures or, at times, renovating ancient cultures. Primacy in Soviet cultural construction was accorded to the "indigenous" national community of the given national-territorial administration, referred to as the "titular nationality" in Western Sovietological discourse.

In Azerbaijan, for instance, the artistic unions engaged chiefly in organizing and regulating the production of a specifically Azerbaijani culture. As a political corollary to the beneficial arrangements provided for the "indigenous" nationality, other national communities living in the republic, irrespective of how long they had lived on the territory of the given republic, were considered "non-indigenous" and essentially excluded from the broader process of republic-based national-cultural development. Iranian-speaking Talysh and

1 For a fuller elaboration of this issue and others discussed in this section, see my "Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia" Soviet Union/Union soviétique (Atlanta), Vol. 15, Nos. 2-3, 1988, pp. 219-31.
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Kurds, and Dagestani groups such as Lezghis and Avars, as well as other smaller ethnic communities resident in the Azerbaijan republic, were assimilated into the dominant Azerbaijan nationality. National cultural development for other communities, such as the Armenians, with their stronger sense of ethnic identity forged in national institutions with a longer history, was frequently restricted or simply neglected.

At the level of the national republic, then, traditional social identities of the “indigenous” community, based on clan, region, urban residence, and even class, gave way under Soviet policies to the formation of a modern, overarching ethnic identity developed through new political and cultural institutions inscribed in the national republic. The state’s role in consolidating nation-building is especially evident in the case of Azerbaijan, where with the exception of the short-lived independent Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920), there was no prior history of independent, specifically Azerbaijani state-building.

Soviet power not only provided the Azerbaijanis with their first long-term and extensive experience in national-state building, but it also gave them their name. In the late 19th century, Azerbaijani intellectuals had engaged in lengthy debates over how to name their nation, since they were variously referred to as Caucasian Turks, Muslims, or Tatars in official tsarist usage, as well as in local Russian and Armenian historical and literary sources. Early Soviet terminology identified them as “Turk.” Beginning in the late 1930’s, however, the indigenous population of Azerbaijan was re-identified as “Azerbaijani” (“azerbaycanl’i”).

A program of “nativization” (korenizatsiya) complemented the nation-building process by fostering the creation of a native ethnic leadership through target programs of recruitment and training for service in the national republic’s political, economic, and cultural administration. Korenizatsiya as a kind of institutionalized program of “affirmative action” for the “indigenous” nationality has resulted in the formation of national elites in the national republics. Nativization also resulted in the political disenfranchisement of so-called non-indigenous groups. This policy proved to be especially important in legitimating Soviet power among the Azerbaijanis of the republic, who in the pre-revolutionary period, had been dominated politically by the Tsarist Russian administrative elite and economically by a mix of mainly Armenian and Russian entrepreneurs.

The establishment of Soviet authority in the region thus served to disenfranchise the Russian and, especially, Armenian elites while it empowered Azerbaijanis in the fields of political administration and economic management. However, these Soviet-sponsored political institutions and practices created conditions for the emergence of ethnic-based conflicts under a more liberalized regime.

Karabakh and the Origins of Political Change in Azerbaijan

Several years into Gorbachev’s program of political and economic reform, Azerbaijan was one of many republics that remained aloof from the processes of renewal emerging throughout the Soviet Union. Kâmrân Baghirov, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, was quite representative of the attitudes of his party organization. In addresses to republic and all-Union party meetings, he barely paid lip service to perestroika, glasnost’, and democratization. In practice, reform touched neither the Azerbaijani party apparatus and governmental administration nor Azerbaijani society as a whole.

Although independent political forces have usually emerged in urban areas, a coalition for political renewal in Azerbaijan first developed among the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh—a remote rural area along the republic’s western border. The fact that the first and most persistentbearers of a glasnost’-style political activism in Azerbaijan emerged not among the majority Azerbaijanis but from within the Armenian population of the NKAO would set the process of political change in the republic along a troubled, contradictory path.

The movement for the union of NKAO with the Armenian republic is often cast in terms of a territorial conflict between the two neighboring republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. And the Karabakh movement did indeed develop into an unprecedented inter-republican crisis that by the fall of 1989 had grown into full-scale warfare between the two republics. However, contrary to Azerbaijani critics who have sought to paint the movement solely as a product of foreign Armenian agitation and intervention in Azerbaijani affairs promoted by nationalist Armenian political organizations operating out-
side the republic and the Soviet Union, the movement for Karabakh’s union with Armenia was initiated—and has been continued—primarily by the Armenians living in the NKAO itself. Given the national-state formation of the Soviet Union as outlined above, Karabakh Armenian arguments for union with the Armenian republic can be seen more as an autocthonomous, rational response to contemporary institutional constraints than as the amorphous eruption of latent, primordial ethnic and religious sentiments.

Indeed, the list of Armenian complaints in the cultural sphere, from underfunding of local Armenian education to the lack of Armenian-language textbooks and television broadcasts, are comprehensible in an institutional context in which the state’s subsidization of cultural development favored the Azerbaijanis over other ethnic communities resident in Azerbaijan. In this regard, the dramatic multiplication of demands for more cultural ties between Karabakh and the Armenian republic reflects the historical lack of attention that Azerbaijani republican ministries have accorded specifically Armenian interests in the sphere of cultural production as much as it does the desire for union with Armenia. In a recent expose on the extent of cultural disenfranchisement in Karabakh, instructively entitled “Why and How All This Started,” an Armenian cinematographer recounted a story of the shelving of a documentary film dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the NKAO. The reason, the film-maker notes, was that the film was considered by authorities in Baku to be “too Armenian” in its content, despite the fact that it recounted the history of a region with a majority Armenian population. A similar pattern was reflected in the complaints of Armenian writers and journalists in Baku, who argued that Armenian national themes were not considered a legitimate field of local cultural expression in the Azerbaijani capital.

The leitmotif of cultural disenfranchisement runs throughout the Karabakh Armenian movement, but this should not turn one’s attention away from equally important issues of political and economic autonomy. In fact, one of the earliest Armenian samizdat texts, originating from Stepanakert in 1962, was much more strident and expansive on economic problems than on cultural issues in the NKAO. The complaints raised in this document range from underinvestment in the NKAO economy to numerous examples of the subordination of local enterprises to the administrative control of organizations and other enterprises located in Baku and in other cities outside the autonomous oblast.

Almost three decades later, these same issues form the nucleus of contemporary Armenian claims to economic autonomy in the NKAO. Manipulating the Gorbachevian language of khozraschet (self-financing and economic self-management), Armenian-dominant enterprises in the NKAO have chosen to develop economic ties with Armenia at the expense of administrative linkages with the Azerbaijani economy. Thus, local enterprises have increasingly sought to produce manufactured goods and other commodities not according to the Azerbaijani state plan but in line with market and planning needs in Armenia.

The virtual independence of economic decision-making emerging in the NKAO has put an ironic twist on economic demands emanating from Baku. While Azerbaijani economists are arguing for greater devolution of economic decision-making to the republic level, the refusal of NKAO enterprises to supply Azerbaijani commodity markets and the negotiation by them of contracts with firms based in the Armenian republic have elicited Azerbaijani condemnation of local economic autonomy in the NKAO as a violation of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and calls for the reassertion of republican control over the production and distribution of goods in Karabakh.

In political affairs, the Karabakh movement threatens the Azerbaijani republic not just with Armenian nationalism but also with independent political activity by traditional organs of the party and state control apparatus. One of the first ethnic-based splits in the Communist Party apparatus under Gorbachev took place between the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and the once-subordinate Armenian-controlled NKAO oblast party committee (obkom). Despite initial hesitation of party organizations in the NKAO, by mid-March of 1988, the NKAO obkom publicly backed the February 20, 1988, request by the NKAO oblast soviet of people’s deputies for union with Armenia. Faced with a lack of
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positive response from Moscow and Baku, NKAO polit-
al authorities have increasingly taken the manage-
ment of local political affairs into their own hands.

Karabkh as Catalyst for Ethnic
Activism in Azerbaijan

The NKAO Armenian movement and subsequent de-
velopment of a political crisis over Karabakh catalyzed
Azerbaijani consciousness not only about events in the
troubled region but also about broader issues facing
the Azerbaijan SSR. Nonetheless, Azerbaijans recognize
the pivotal role that Armenian militancy has played
in informing Azerbaijani national and political self-
awareness. In a revealing commentary given to a Turk-
ish newspaper reporter, an Azerbaijani journalist pro-
vided a concise reflection on this phenomenon:

We had a weak sense of solidarity in the past and
minded our own business. The developments [in the
NKAO, Armenia, and Azerbaijan] have helped to
unite us. A national feeling and state of awareness
have emerged in the community for the first time. We
had not observed this in the past. I can say that Azer-
baijan has changed. It is as if the Armenian attitude
has awakened the people and moved them to safe-
guard their rights.¹³

Even a brief review of the emergence of independent
Azerbaijani politics reflects the deep and decisive way
that the Armenian movement has informed a range of
issues brought up by Azerbaijanis. The reactive, at
times even emotive, character of the Azerbaijani
movement with regard to the Armenians is clear. At pro-
tests in November 1988, for instance, Azerbaijani mili-
tants demanded that some form of autonomy be estab-
lished for Armenia’s Azerbaijanis on the model of the
NKAO in Azerbaijan. Such demands were subsequent-
ally reflected in the arguments of Azerbaijani intellectuals
published in the republic press.¹⁴

The pattern of reaction to Armenian activism at times
led to irony. An Azerbaijani journalist, commenting on
the Azerbaijani response to Armenian efforts to extract
themselves from Azerbaijani rule, argued that the Azer-
baijanis wanted “the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh
to respect Azerbaijani laws. They are acting as if they
were free.”¹⁵ In this sense, Armenian “freedom” was
seen as a direct challenge to Azerbaijani interests in the
republic.

Azerbaijanis often attempted to downplay the actual
stimulus that motivated the candid expression of their
concern by shifting focus from the NKAO to other prob-
lems in the republic. The Azerbaijani poet Hidayat, for
example, contrasted the poor socio-economic condi-
tions about which the Armenians of the NKAO were
complaining to the situation in Baku, which, he argued,
was much more serious than in the autonomous prov-
ince.¹⁶ Similarly, after the massacre of Armenians in the
industrial town of Sumgait in February 1988, the idea of
“Sumgait” emerged in the Azerbaijani imagination not
as a tragedy of anti-Armenian violence but as a mani-
festation of the city’s endemic social, economic, and
environmental problems.¹⁷ Azerbaijani journalists fo-
cused their attention on the destructive effects of indus-
trial pollution in the area and the simultaneous need for
the development of the local economy and the expan-
sion of public services.¹⁸ In the spring of 1989, Azerbai-
janis television broadcast a program on Sumgait that
was much commented on in the republic press.¹⁹ Enti-
tled “Death Zone” (Olu zona), the broadcast ironically
ignored the massacre of Armenians and other civilians
in Sumgait to focus on the fatal effects of industrial pol-
lution on the city’s residents.

The Politics of Party Paralysis

Despite the quick pace of events in early 1988, from
the beginning of the popular movement in Karabakh
and the massacre of Armenian civilians at the end of
February to Moscow’s announcement of a program of
social and economic development for the NKAO on
March 26, Azerbaijani political authorities were slow to
respond to pressures at home for a more active stance
with regard to the Armenian movement. At meetings of
the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azer-
baijan in late April, party activists, led by First Secretary
Baghirov, focused primarily on the serious economic
situation facing the republic and called for more party

¹³Miliyet (Istanbul), Nov. 21, 1988, translated in Foreign Broadcast
Information Service, Daily Report: Soviet Union (Washington, DC—hereafter,
FBIS-SOV), Nov. 26, 1988, p. 65.
¹⁴For examples, see Adabiyyat va Injasanat (Baku), Nov. 25, 1988; and
¹⁶Azərbaycan Qanjlari (Baku), Nov. 5, 1988.
¹⁷In some cases, prominent Azerbaijani intellectuals accused
Armenians themselves of organizing the Sumgait massacre to gain public
sympathy. For example, see Ziya Buniyatov, “Why Sumgait [Happened],”
Azərbaycan SSR Elmlar Akademiyasının khâbârîləri. Tarikh, fəalsəfə, və hüquq
sənəyi (Baku), No. 2, 1989.
¹⁸On environmental pollution, see Azərbaycan Qanjlari, Sept. 10, 17, and
¹⁹For example, Kommunist, May 5, 1989.
Kamran Baghirov, former first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, and Abdulrahman Vazirov, who was named to replace him in May 1988 in an attempt—ultimately unsuccessful—to reform the party leadership and restore the party’s credibility as a defender of Azerbaijani interests.

—TASS from Sovfoto.

control and for improvement in the provision of social services.

But the ongoing political conflict over the status of the NKAO soon fully discredited Baghirov as republic party chief. At a May party plenum, the party named Abdulrahman Vazirov, a former Komsomol official and Soviet ambassador to Pakistan, to replace Baghirov as party first secretary. Vazirov faced a double challenge. On the one hand, he had to revitalize the party organization in line with the general process of political and economic reform occurring in the rest of the country. On the other hand, he had to restore social order and attempt to rebuild the Azerbaijani population’s confidence in a party that seemed to have been incapable of defending Azerbaijani national interests from the threat of Armenian nationalism in the NKAO and in Armenia.

Vazirov’s vision of renewal in both the party and society developed along fairly conservative, almost predictable lines in the following months. The outlines of his strategy were reflected in his address to the 19th All-Union CPSU Conference in July. Almost a third of his speech was devoted to articulating Azerbaijani positions on the Karabakh crisis, but he also focused on the political destabilization brought about by the party’s paralysis and the accumulation of unresolved social and economic problems in the republic. Remarking on the justified dissatisfaction of the Azerbaijani population, he emphasized the need to “strengthen the leading role of the party” and argued that “the Azerbaijani people ties its hopes and future to the Communist Party.” In this regard, one of his proposed solutions to the current crisis was the reinvigoration of the party apparatus. Reminiscent of Yegor Ligachev’s position at the CPSU’s 27th congress, Vazirov stressed the need for cadre renewal through improved recruitment and training and the introduction of cadre exchanges and rotation of duties.

During the late summer and fall of 1988, Vazirov began to pursue his program for the renewal of the party. In a short two and one-half months, 43 secretaries of district and city party committees, including 22 party first secretaries and 17 chairmen of urban executive committees, were replaced. A Central Committee plenum in mid-November adopted a massive reorganization and streamlining of the Azerbaijani party’s central apparatus, to take effect from the start of 1989. The number of Central Committee secretaries was cut from six to five, and—mirroring the reduction of departments of the CPSU Central Committee—Vazirov reduced the number of departments of the Azerbaijani Central Committee from 16 to six. Viktor Polyanichko, formerly a high-ranking Soviet political adviser in Afghanistan, was appointed to the post of second secretary of the Azerbaijani party and named head of its reorganized Organizational Party Work Department. In the course of the restructuring, the party slashed its regular staff by 30 percent—from 194 to 136 functionaries. In addition, as with the CPSU apparatus in Moscow, new Central Committee commissions were established, including an Oversight Commission to monitor the activity of the republic’s city and district-level party organizations. The organizational structure of city and district party committees was also streamlined.

Vazirov sought to renew the party’s leadership in the social sphere by initiating a series of new programs. The most pressing problems involved economic development and investment, especially in the poorer rural and mountainous regions. At the Central Committee’s August plenum, party leaders called for the creation of new jobs in a number of the republic’s districts. In October, the party announced programs for the social and economic development of the Nakhchivan autonomous republic (ASSR), as well as of districts encompassing the plains portion of Karabakh (as opposed to

21 Report by R. Y. Zeynalov, Kommunist, Nov. 15, 1988
22 Vazirov report on restructuring of party, in ibid.
23 The need for more employment opportunities was emphasized throughout 1988 and 1989, including at sessions of the Azerbaijani CP’s Commission on National Relations. See, for example, Azərbaycan Qanjlari, Sept. 20, 1988.
Karabakh’s mountainous portion, the NKAO). The party also devoted attention to the republic’s urban areas. An important new housing program designed to overcome the backlog in the provision of apartments in both urban and rural districts was announced by Vazirov simultaneously with the Central Committee’s plenum of mid-November. One month later, the Azerbaijan Council of Ministers acted on a recommendation from the party’s Central Committee in announcing a five-year program of social and economic measures for Sumgait. The development scheme, with a total price tag of 500 million rubles, allocated nearly 300 million rubles for investment in public housing and social services.

Despite party restructuring and announcements of new social programs, mass rallies erupted in the Azerbaijani capital on November 17, 1988. These stemmed from popular dissatisfaction over a number of issues that the Azerbaijani party and state officials were failing to address, including that of asserting republic control over the NKAO. In particular, Azerbaijanis were angered by the construction of new facilities in the NKAO’s Topkhana forest preserve by an aluminum enterprise headquartered in the Armenian republic. The Topkhana construction, authorized by Armenian officials in the NKAO but not by Baku, was in the Azerbaijani view yet another Armenian violation of the Azerbaijani republic’s sovereignty. A collective letter written by four Azerbaijani intellectuals reflected the public’s demands that the CPSU Central Committee and the USSR Supreme Soviet assure Azerbaijan’s sovereign rights in the NKAO in line with the central government’s confirmation of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity expressed on July 18, 1988. At the same time, Azerbaijani demonstrations were fueled by fears that an upcoming session of the USSR Supreme Soviet on constitutional reform would lay the groundwork for an eventual transfer of the NKAO to the Armenian republic.

The rallies and demonstrations gained intensity and spread in widening circles after the USSR Supreme Court’s November 21 announcement of a death sentence for an Azerbaijani involved in the Sumgait massacre of February 1988. Large meetings were staged in Baku, Kirovabad, Nakhchivan, Shaki, and Zagatala, and smaller rallies and demonstrations took place in Shamkhor, Aghdam, and Gutgashen. News from the NKAO and Moscow and fears of the persecution of Azerbaijani citizens in Armenia proper led to mass dismissals of Armenians from jobs and bouts of violence against Armenians throughout Azerbaijan. In the city of Baku, home to some 50,000 Armenians, Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian neighborhoods and the expulsion of Armenian residents from their homes developed into battles with government troops. A similar pattern of anti-Armenian violence and confrontations with troops was repeated in Baku and other Azerbaijani districts having Armenian minority populations. The result was a mass exodus of Armenians from the republic.

Reasserting Party Control

The “agitated days of November,” as the mass protests and violence came to be known in the Azerbaijani press, reflected the political quandary facing Azerbaijan. A movement of mass protest developed in reaction to Armenian actions in the NKAO, coupled with the reluctance of Azerbaijani officialdom to address contradictory Armenian and Azerbaijani demands, had led not only to the intensification of inter-ethnic animosity and violence but also to a widening gulf between the party and an increasingly activist Azerbaijani society. At the same time, however, Azerbaijani militants were as yet unable to organize themselves into a coherent political movement, and the party was able to take advantage of this to suppress the troublesome independent associations and to reassert itself politically.

Moscow’s establishment of a “special government administration” for the NKAO on January 12, 1989, which came as a belated measure to forestall the continuation of months of inter-communal violence in the region, helped to defuse tensions temporarily in the autonomous oblast as well as in the rest of Azerbaijan. The installation in the NKAO of a governmental commission under the leadership of the Kremlin’s Karabakh troubleshooter, Arkady Vol’skiy, was greeted by the Azerbaijani party as an important measure for bringing greater control to the oblast. Azerbaijani officials emphasized that the establishment of the Vol’skiy commission meant that the NKAO was to remain within the Azerbaijani SSR, and they welcomed the subsequent dissolution of recalcitrant, Armenian-dominated local party and government organizations in the NKAO. These steps gave the Azerbaijan party a brief respite during
which to concentrate on rebuilding itself internally and externally.

On the internal front, the party took its cue from Moscow's condemnation of the involvement of party cadres in the violence and rioting of the November days. Three full and two candidate members of the republic's Bureau, as well as several members of the Central Committee, were retired. Similarly, several leading cadres in the republic Komsomol were stripped of their positions in the youth organization's Bureau and Central Committee. In addition, Vazirov undertook a more broad-ranging purge of the party and security organs during December 1988 and early January 1989. Commenting vaguely on the extent of dismissals from the republic's KGB and Ministry of Internal Affairs, Vazirov noted that 2,532 cadres, including 612 in positions of leadership, were censured by the party and 222 officials were removed from their posts. A total of 65 people were expelled from the ranks of the party and the Komsomol. However, despite the broad criticisms and forced retirements, many party functionaries who had been involved in the unrest apparently remained in their positions.

Preparations for March elections to the new USSR Congress of People's Deputies, a process that in many other republics provided unprecedented opportunities for the exercise of popular power, in Azerbaijan reflected the regime's continued conservatism. Complete election results were never published in the republic press, but party officials boasted of the high proportion of "worker," "peasant," and "women" candidates—in many cases far above the all-Union averages for these categories. This, and the reported 98.5 percent public participation in the March 26 balloting, evoked a Brezhnevist, not a Gorbachevian, image.

Although incomplete press coverage makes it difficult to judge accurately, there appear to have been certain discrepancies between the number of candidates elected at the pre-electoral meetings and those formally registered as candidates in the NKAO by the electoral commissions. A review of local press accounts of discussion meetings and registration of candidates and of election results published in Moscow reveals the overall conservative trends in Azerbaijan's 63 electoral districts. Leading Azerbaijani party and government officials were registered as candidates in 15 districts, and lesser officials ran in five others. With the sole exception of party chief Vazirov, party officials never ran unopposed. Yet in 10 of 11 cases, Communist Party officials won their election campaigns against lesser officials or workers from factories or farms.

Six districts had single-candidate elections: these included the candidacy of Vazirov in the Imishli national-territorial electoral district and of Vladimir Chernavin, commander-in-chief of the Soviet navy and a deputy USSR minister of defense, in the Lankaran territorial district. In the Imishli district, Vazirov's candidacy was discussed with those of two other individuals, the first secretary of the Fuzuli district party committee and the head of the party organization at a local collective farm. Rather than challenge the republic party chief, the latter two nominees withdrew from the contest and backed Vazirov as the district's sole candidate. During the election campaign following the electoral commissions' official registration of candidates, the press highlighted visits by Vazirov and other party-backed candidates to their respective districts for meetings with voters.
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In a number of cases, three and even four candidates ran for a single seat, but most of these were in the 11 districts where contests were among females and often quite young peasants and workers. In the Yevlakh territorial district, which is probably not atypical, electors ultimately endorsed candidates that they considered to lack the necessary qualifications for deputy, including knowledge of the Russian language.

**Toward a Popular Movement**

As the republic party moved to reconsolidate power, independent forces were having trouble establishing themselves on the republic political scene. The first concerted effort to establish independent Azerbaijani political associations seems to have emerged during the “agitated November days” of 1988. In an article published on the first page of the republic’s literary weekly, Babak Ādalātī explained that he and other like-minded individuals had come together to form what he variously referred to as a “people’s front” or a “people’s national front.” Ādalātī’s primary concern was the expansion of relations with Southern Azerbaijan, that is, the Azerbaijani population of northern Iran. The popular appeal of this theme, one never addressed by Azerbaijani officialdom, would eventually exacerbate tensions in an already destabilized Azerbaijan.

This initial attempt at forming a popular front movement was frustrated before it really even got off the ground. Azerbaijani militants active in the protest rallies at the time traced its failure to government repression. After the imposition of martial law throughout the republic in late November, authorities arrested numerous Azerbaijani who had played a central role in speaking to the crowds assembled in Baku’s Lenin Square and charged them with anti-Soviet agitation and other violations of the law. At the Academy of Sciences and other cultural institutions, intellectuals who had helped incite the crowds were subjected to criticism and even dismissal.

The political environment in Azerbaijan was hardly conducive to the formation of independent political associations. Azerbaijani political life was marked by the continued hegemony of an entrenched party elite that was only beginning to be transformed under the party’s relatively new leadership. Party officials condemned the independent activists as “semi-literate, ideologically unprincipled, and irresponsible.” Vāzirov referred metaphorically to the proliferation of independent publishing in the republic as a case of “ideological AIDS.”

Official intransigence was only part of the story. Just as important a factor in the failure of a more effective independent Azerbaijani political movement to emerge was what I would call the “Karabakh syndrome.” The relentless insistence of the NKAO Armenians on self-determination repeatedly called for Azerbaijani reactions and made it difficult for the Azerbaijani movement to shift the focus of its activity and of popular Azerbaijani attitudes toward more broad-based national emancipation, irrespective of the Karabakh crisis.

In March 1989, some two dozen intellectuals organized an “initiative group” for an Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF). The group’s governing council was composed entirely of middle-level intellectuals, including journalists and scientific researchers at the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, all of whom were of Azerbaijani nationality. Most of the remaining members of the initiative group had a similar profile, although it included a sprinkling of workers and two Russians—one an engineer and the other an economist. The advisory council of the initiative group included several prominent Azerbaijani writers such as Ismayil Shikhli, Yusif Şamadoglu, and Sabir Rüstämkhani, but with these exceptions, writers were at first notably absent from the ranks of the APF’s leadership.

The Azerbaijani Popular Front was not an umbrella group for previously existing organizations but rather was composed mainly of individuals. This is an important distinction, since the APF’s formation did not reflect an attempt to build a coalition between organizations that had already worked out their own respective programs and concerns regarding political, economic, cultural, or environmental issues. Rather, as an association attempting to accommodate varying interests and political orientations of diverse individuals, the APF contained within its own internal organizational structure the possibility of sharp political divisions and eventual fragmentation.

A central political aim of the Azerbaijani Popular Front was, predictably, rejection of Armenian claims to

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41 For more discussion of demands with regard to Southern Azerbaijan, see my “Beyond the Nation-State...,” loc. cit. 
42 Unpublished interviews given to the Azerbaijani service of Radio Liberty. 
45 Pravda (Moscow), Apr. 27, 1989. 
46 In this regard, the Armenian national movement in Armenia also originally emerged in response to the Karabakh movement, although the dynamics of relations between the NKAO and Armenia were of an entirely different order. 
47 For a full description of members of the initiative group, see Azərbaycan Xalq Jâbhallisi Təşâbhid Mərkəzinin Bulətini (Baku), No. 1, 1989, pp. 8–9.
self-determination in the NKAO and maintenance of the territorial integrity of the Azerbaijani republic. The APF also envisioned a broad program with respect to political, economic, cultural, and environmental issues in Azerbaijan. In contrast to the popular fronts in the Baltic republics, the APF did not assert near- or long-term claims for the separation of Azerbaijan from the Soviet polity; instead, it focused on enhanced political and economic sovereignty for the Azerbaijani republic within the context of the Soviet federal state.48

The notion of sovereignty, a pivotal concept in the program put forward by the APF, comprised two distinct aims, one with external, the other with internal dimensions. With respect to the federal structure of the Soviet Union, APF activists called for greater devolution of decision-making authority and autonomy to the Azerbaijani republic in its dealings with both the center and the other union republics. Within Azerbaijan itself, the APF program demanded the establishment of sovereign Azerbaijani control over the republic’s political, socio-economic, and cultural life, as well as over the natural resources of the republic. One of the key points of the APF’s program was the extension of Azerbaijani sovereignty to the entire territory of the republic, including the NKAO and the Nakchivani ASSR.

The APF’s vision of sovereignty necessarily called for an end to the violation of the republic’s rights by external forces—namely, Moscow and the Armenian republic—as well as by internal forces—that is, the Armenians of the NKAO. In this regard, APF activists condemned the activities of the NKAO’s special government commission headed by Arkady Vol’skiy as a case of Moscow’s interference in the domestic affairs of the republic. Similarly to the Azerbaijani party leadership and protesters at public rallies, the Azerbaijani Front condemned what it viewed as repeated Armenian violations of Azerbaijani sovereignty, whether the sources of such activities emanated from the Armenian republic or from Armenian militants within the NKAO itself. Thus, the APF’s appeal for the republic’s economic sovereignty implied at once greater autonomy for Azerbaijan in its foreign economic relations—whether within or beyond the USSR’s borders—and the reintegration of enterprises in the NKAO back into the Azerbaijani economy.

Despite the APF’s relatively moderate program of reform in the republic, it was repeatedly shunned by the republic’s political establishment. Official arguments on behalf of democratization of the republic’s political life were often coupled with condemnations of “meeting dictatorship,” a reference to the fact that the independent organizations in Azerbaijan often developed out of participation in rallies held in the republic’s public squares.49 After the formation of the APF initiative group, Azerbaijani activists applied to the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR for legalization. But in conformity with the conservative principles of the Vazirov leadership, the Azerbaijani legislature did not even debate the issue.

In April 1989, top Azerbaijani party officials, including Vazirov, had several unpublilized meetings with representatives of the APF to discuss prospects for the organization’s legalization. These early attempts at negotiation failed. The party condemned the APF’s alleged aspirations to challenge party hegemony in the republic and for the time being refused to have further contacts with the group.

During August and September, the APF organized increasingly large rallies and strikes. Vazirov condemned these actions, arguing that they would only distract from the solution of the republic’s “real” problems and weaken the struggle for Azerbaijani sovereignty.50 As unrest in the republic grew, the party First Secretary eventually began to speak as if he was willing to negotiate with popular forces, but he refused to name as his negotiating partner the Azerbaijani Popular Front.51 The party apparently hoped that the APF would somehow simply disappear from the Azerbaijani political scene if it were not officially recognized. (The authorities dealt more harshly with smaller independent associations, such as Birlik [Unity], a group seeking a union of Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan. Police forcibly dispersed a Birlik rally in early July and arrested leaders of the organization.)52

In the months following the formation of the initiative group, the APF had remained largely an isolated group of intellectuals that failed to win either the active participation of the Baku-based Azerbaijani intellectual elite or effective support from Azerbaijani society at large. This pattern persisted even after the Front’s official founding congress, held in Baku in mid-July 1989. The prominent Azerbaijani poet Bakhtriyar Vahabzadâ argued that “other republics have popular fronts, why shouldn’t we have one?”53 But structural impediments blocking the growth of the popular front in Azerbaijan were stronger than convictions in Azerbaijani support-

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49Kommunist, Feb. 18, 1989.


51Ibid., Sept. 6, 1989.


53Unpublished interview with the Azerbaijani service of Radio Liberty.
The "Karabakh Syndrome" and Azerbaijan

Thousands of people cram Baku’s central square on September 6, 1989, on the fourth day of a massive strike protesting the March 1989 elections and the failure of the Azerbaijan government to reassert its authority over the predominantly Armenian province of Nagorno-Karabakh.

—AP/Wide World Photos.

ing such an organization. In general, Azerbaijani society proved itself to be essentially conservative and failed to share the APF’s dedication to the Gorbachevian ideals of political and economic reform or to lend active support to the movement. Instead, both outside and within the Front, popular participation in Azerbaijani politics remained predicated on anti-Armenian sentiments and an intense interest in the Karabakh crisis.

The relatively conservative spirit of Azerbaijani society was compounded by the influx during the fall of 1988 of nearly 200,000 Azerbaijani refugees displaced from the Armenian countryside, plus numerous refugees from the NKAO itself. The refugees, who flooded into Azerbaijan’s urban and rural districts, had been traumatized by the combination of psychological terror and periodic violence against them and entered a society already strained by high unemployment, an endemic housing shortage, and a relatively poor distribution of social services, not to mention the political crisis over the NKAO.54 In this setting, the refugees often emerged as the most active elements in Azerbaijani society and also the ones most permeated with anti-Armenianism. APF activists could not expect appeals for political and economic reform to resonate strongly with the Azerbaijani population, and faced the unhappy prospect that only an anti-Armenian, NKAO-oriented platform could bring thousands of Azerbaijani supporters into the streets.

In the APF’s internal struggle between efforts to expand the agenda seeking the democratization of Azerbaijan and the temptation to cater to the acutely anti-Armenian orientation of the Azerbaijani populace, the Karabakh syndrome proved the more powerful force. Even Azerbaijan’s intellectual mainstream remained aloof and suspicious of the APF and its increasingly radical political strategies, preferring to play a cautious game by shunning the Front and focusing on...
Karabakh as the republic's primary problem. Thus, in late August, several hundred Azerbaijani intellectuals organized, with official consent, a Committee for Aid to Karabakh that could serve as an alternative to the Front and channel popular discontent toward the narrow goal of securing Azerbaijani rights over the NKAO.

By that time, the political struggle between Azerbaijan and the NKAO had intensified. The series of attacks and counter-attacks that had become common in and around the NKAO were on the rise. And the Armenians of the NKAO, convinced that the Vol'skiy commission was implementing pro-Azerbaijani policies in the region, organized unauthorized elections to a National Council to replace the special government commission. Prevented from establishing direct union with Armenia, the National Council fashioned itself as the only legitimate authority in the oblast and issued a proclamation of independence to add an aura of legality to what had long since become a political fact.

Paradoxically, the Azerbaijanis viewed the Vol'skiy commission with equal suspicion, but condemned it for facilitating the NKAO's union with Armenia and subverting Azerbaijani sovereignty over the region. The establishment of an independent Armenian National Council in the NKAO only exacerbated Azerbaijani resistance to the Armenian movement and catalyzed Azerbaijani popular opposition to Azerbaijan republic authorities, who appeared more and more incapable of restoring Azerbaijani control over the NKAO.

In this context, the APF initiated appeals for a series of industrial strikes in the republic in order both to force the government to recognize the APF as a legitimate political force representing Azerbaijani public opinion and to obtain the reestablishment of direct Azerbaijani rule throughout the republic's territory, including the elimination of the Vol'skiy commission in the NKAO. Beyond these central concerns, the APF also demanded the nullification of the March elections, the lifting of the curfew imposed in response to the November 1988 demonstrations, and the release of imprisoned political activists.

Despite the powerful momentum created by the strike movement, Azerbaijani political authorities continued to shun the Front and its program for a resolution of the Karabakh crisis. In response, APF activists intensified their struggle by calling for a railway strike to prevent the transport of supplies to both the NKAO and the Armenian republic. Although it was termed "economic terrorism" in the Armenian press and was more widely viewed as a "blockade," Azerbaijani activists defended the campaign as a case of "economic sanctions" or "reactive economic measures" against violations of Azerbaijan's national-territorial sovereignty. APF representatives also viewed the railway strike as an important tactic in forcing party authorities in Azerbaijan to legalize the Front and accede to a series of other APF demands. According to APF Executive Board member Abulfaz Aliyev, the Front did not exclude the possibility of organizing a general rebellion.

The APF and the Institutionalization of Azerbaijani Chauvinism

Faced with unabating strikes and rallies at home and with threats from Moscow over its failure to terminate the

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55Azerbaijani intellectuals first made an appeal for an aid committee in mid-August and held a founding congress at the end of the same month. Ibid., Aug. 17 and 31, 1989.
57Despite its condemnation of the National Council as "unconstitutional" (see Bakinsky Rabochiy, Aug. 27, 1989), the Azerbaijani government was unable to take any practical steps to curtail the council's activities.
58For Moscow accounts of strike demands, see Pravda, Sept. 10, 1989; and Izvestiya (Moscow), Sept. 11, 1989.
60Expressed in an interview published with some delay in Tercuman (Istanbul), Nov. 23, 1989, newspaper.
transportation blockade, the Communist Party of Azerbaijan granted a series of concessions to the APF, including an extraordinary session of the republic’s Supreme Soviet in mid-September at which Front representatives were permitted to speak. Fulfilling demands of APF activists, the republic legislature voted to abolish the Vol’skiy commission and to begin drafting laws on Azerbaijan’s political and economic sovereignty.

In spite of the permission granted to the Front to participate in the Supreme Soviet session and the incorporation of points from the APF political platform into state policy, the legal and political status of the Azerbaijani Popular Front itself remained uncertain. According to an APF representative, party chief Vazirov at one point in the legislative debate threatened to have Front representatives arrested. With strikes continuing throughout the republic into October, representatives of the APF and the Communist Party held tense, lengthy negotiations that finally brought legalization of the Front. Although the party leadership acceded to the legalization, it remained deeply hostile to the Front activists. Whereas the legalization of independent political associations in Armenia and the Baltic republics to a great degree marked a watershed in the party’s toleration of organizational rivals, in Azerbaijan, talks over the recognition of the Front were conducted in an atmosphere of crisis and threats of continued strikes.

**The law on sovereignty.** Apart from the initiation of public discussions of a draft law on the republic’s economic independence, one other achievement that followed in the wake of the legislature’s special session was the drafting of a law on sovereignty. This law was promulgated in its final form in late September and published in the press in early October. It established the legal basis for rejecting federal laws that contradict republic laws, but the law was in essence a moderate one, since the Azerbaijan SSR was proclaimed a “sovereign socialist state” within the Soviet federation and not a state independent of the Soviet polity.

The Azerbaijani law on sovereignty is noteworthy for the ways in which it applies the concept of sovereignty within the republic, especially considering the extent to which debates over the law revolved around the Karabakh crisis. Proclaimed as a law of the Azerbaijan SSR’s sovereignty, the law was in fact a proclamation of the Azerbaijani nation’s sovereignty over the republic. The law’s preamble refers to the Soviet Union not as a federation of independent national republics but as a “socialist federation of Soviet nations.” The Azerbaijani language was reconfirmed as the state language, and the republic’s land and natural resources were defined as “national wealth” belonging to “the Azerbaijani people.” According to the law, Azerbaijani sovereignty extends throughout the republic, including the NKAO and the Nakhchivan ASSR. The borders of the republic are not to be changed without approval by a popular referendum, that is, without the approval of the Azerbaijani nation.

In connection with the reassertion of legal authority over the NKAO, the law notes that the republic retains the independent right to resolve all internal problems, and it includes articles by virtue of which the republican government can proclaim martial law in any district of the republic and establish or eliminate autonomous districts within its sovereign jurisdiction. This aspect of the law was in part a response to APF demands that the Karabakh crisis be recognized as an internal Azerbaijani problem that could not be decided in Moscow, Yerevan, or Stepanakert, but only in Baku. Thus, the law established the legal framework for a potential “resolution” of the Karabakh crisis by the imposition of martial law under Azerbaijani auspices in the region or the simple abolition of the institutional-administrative basis of Karabakh Armenian claims to self-determination and separation from the Azerbaijani republic.

**The End of Azerbaijani Reform**

Official recognition of the APF’s status as a representative of the Azerbaijani people had the perverse effect of exposing the Front’s relatively weak authority over the popular movement in Azerbaijan. With only tenuous support from the Baku intelligentsia and relatively little control over the popular movement on whose shoulders it had risen to prominence, Front activists were unable to keep their part of the bargain with the party and convince strikers to put an end to the economic sanctions against Armenia and the NKAO that they had spearheaded.

The continuing Azerbaijani railway blockade of the

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In the foreground, residents of Soviet Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan Autonomous Oblast shout to friends and relatives across the Arax River in Iranian Azerbaijan on January 8, 1989; the crowds destroyed a number of border installations in protest against difficulties in leaving the USSR to visit Iran.

NKAO and Armenia served only to heighten the determination of Armenian nationalists in the NKAO and in Armenia to take control of the oblast. The increasingly intransigent positions of both Armenians and Azerbaijani led to expanded armed conflict between the two rival populations in the NKAO. During the fall of 1989, raids and counter-raids that had become commonplace in and around the NKAO multiplied and spread to the Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Nakhchivan border regions. Although Soviet spokespeople were hesitant to accept inquisitive Western correspondents’ characterization of the conflict as “civil war,” the southern Caucasus was indeed in a full-scale state of war.

Faced with increasingly strident violence, Moscow again intervened with irresolute political measures. At the end of November, central authorities decided to abolish the Vol’skiy commission, which had proven incapable of resolving the local tensions. By reestablishing Azerbaijani rule over the NKAO, Moscow thus returned the region to a virtual status quo ante. A new, republic-level oversight committee, appointed by the Presidium of the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet and staffed primarily by ethnic Azerbaijani officials, was to take over the day-to-day management of the NKAO until local party and state organizations could be resuscitated. To compound its mistake, Moscow reassigned authority for security functions in the NKAO to agencies of the Azerbaijan republic, clearly a dangerous step considering the continuing Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities.

In Azerbaijan, especially among party officials, Moscow’s decision was embraced as a step toward restoring Azerbaijani sovereignty in the NKAO, although in practice the oblast remained beyond the control of Azerbaijani authorities. The Armenian response was proclaimed in Yerevan in a matter of days, when in a

---Reuters/Bettmann---

67As late as mid-January 1990, USSR Foreign Ministry spokesperson Gennady Gerasimov was only willing to refer to the Armenian-Azerbaijani battles as “almost a civil war.” International Herald Tribune (Paris), Jan. 17, 1990.

68The precise composition of NKAO representation was left temporarily unresolved. Kommunist, Jan. 7, 1990.
The “Karabakh Syndrome” and Azerbaijan

The wreckage of the belongings of Armenians litters Lenin Avenue in the Azerbaijan capital city, Baku, after January 1990 rioting by Azerbaijani crowds.

—TASS from Sovfoto.

In the NKAO, the Baku Armenians were nonetheless an easily accessible target for the expression of Azerbaijani frustrations. For almost a week, groups of Azerbaijanis preyed upon the often elderly, defenseless Armenian residents of a city that traditionally prided itself on internationalism and multi-ethnic tolerance.

In the context of armed war in the NKAO, unrest along the Azerbaijani-Iranian borders, and the re-eruption of anti-Armenian violence in the capital, the endemic political paralysis of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan was quickly transformed into acute political collapse. Party appeals for calm and an end to violence in Baku that appeared in newspapers and were broadcast by the republic’s mass media fell on deaf ears among a population that had lost all confidence in the party apparatus. Within the Azerbaijani party itself, officials as high as Bureau member Hāsān Hāsānov publicly condemned the party’s paralysis and political mistakes.

The mounting political crisis and social chaos eventually brought Moscow’s declaration of martial law, first in the NKAO and then in Baku, and the massive introduction of Soviet troops in the republic. It is probably too early to piece together the chain of rapidly unfolding events in December and January and the elements of decision-making that led to the intervention of Soviet

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69 For the text of the decision, see Khorhdayin Hayastan, Dec. 3, 1989.


An Azerbaijani nationalist burns his Communist party membership card at a January 1990 rally in Khanlar to protest the arrival of Soviet troops to suppress demonstrations in the republic. —TASS from Sovfoto.

Irrespective of any purported intent, in practice, Soviet authorities delayed the introduction of troops until the remains of Baku's Armenian population had been killed or expelled. Only then did the central government exercise its prerogative to restore order in Azerbaijan through the often brutal repression of Azerbaijani popular forces, apparently discriminating little between those who were violent and those who were not. First Secretary Vázirov was ousted on January 20, and was replaced four days later by the chairman of the republic's Council of Ministers, Ayaz Niyaz oghlu Mútallíbóv, a research engineer.73

It is perhaps both fitting and ironic that simultaneous with the destruction of Baku's Armenian community, attempts at reform in Azerbaijan were also dealt a fatal blow. The conservative moves toward political reform under Vázirov, promoted as they were in conditions of unabated crisis over the NKAO, contributed to the total disintegration of the party's social authority and organizational integrity. Moreover, the attempts at democratic coalition-building under the auspices of the APF, radicalized by its long exclusion from politics and the increasing power of Azerbaijani chauvinism, collapsed under the weight both of Soviet tanks and the Front's own internal fragmentation and disarray.

The intervention of the Soviet military in Azerbaijan provided the Communist Party of Azerbaijan an opportunity to rebuild itself internally and reestablish itself more firmly in the republic's political life. By the late spring of 1990, the party apparatus, buttressed by the continued presence of the military, allowed the reemergence of independent political associations, including the Azerbaijani Popular Front.74 Nonetheless, party chief Mútallíbóv, who had himself elected president of the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet, has remained intent on controlling the republic's political process, even if displaying greater concern for the defense of Azerbaijani national interests. Under Mútallíbóv, harassment of political activists has continued, and the APF newspaper has been shut down on occasion for "slander" against the Azerbaijani president.75 Elections to the republic's Supreme Soviet hastily scheduled for autumn 1990 have already been postponed once; the results will most likely differ only slightly from those of the Communist-dominated elections of March 1988.

Political change in Azerbaijan emerged with its own particular trajectory, but many of these developments reflect the more general conflicts inherent in any process of radical political transformation in multi-ethnic society. In particular, the contradictory imperatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani national movements in Azerbaijan reflect a more general set of structural conflicts between minority and majority nationalisms that exist in all the Soviet republics with multi-ethnic populations. As the multinational Soviet federation moves into the 1990's, Azerbaijan stands as a reminder of the dangerous potential of ethnic conflict and political change under Gorbachev's perestroyka.

72ln particular, the notion—picked up by Western correspondents—of a conspiracy to dislodge the APF by promoting the Front's radicalization and anti-Armenian violence must be considered with caution. See, e.g., The New York Times, Feb. 19, 1990. 73See Elizabeth Fuller, "Azerbaijani Central Committee Elects New First Secretary," Report on the USSR, Feb 2, 1990, p. 18. According to this report, the republic Supreme Soviet had earlier in January demanded the removal of Vázirov.

In Marxist political analysis, the peasantry's contribution to democracy is, at best, often underestimated. Typically the historical contribution of traditional rural tillers to democracy in numerous and diverse societies, from Sri Lanka and India, to England and Sweden, post–World War II Japan, and Taiwan is overlooked. In China, in particular, the peasantry is commonly assumed by both Chinese democrats and foreign analysts to be dependent and less than rational, incapable of espousing democracy. Likewise, a popular view of the post-Mao Chinese countryside is that the success of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of decollectivization and marketization has made peasants into opponents of the disgruntled, democratically-oriented urban population. “Even some dissidents think that the Communist party could probably count on its organizational network to turn out the peasantry and win a reasonably free election.”

The view that the peasantry is satisfied and supportive of the Communist party ignores the continued power of the command economy, whose bloated urban ministries and anti-rural scissors prices have been, since 1985, undermining the agricultural price gains of the original post-Mao price reforms; it ignores the corrupt party-state nomenklatura that is plundering the rural beneficiaries of the extraordinarily productive early post-Mao reforms; and it ignores the most recent attempts of party conservatives to woo urban workers at the expense of the peasants. Contrary to popular belief, support for the Deng regime rests not on the supposedly contented peasantry but on a coalition of conservative and corrupt bureaucrats and conservative and frightened workers in state enterprises who are anxious over the effects of reform on themselves. In fact, the Leninist party and its policies have alienated the peasants from China’s rulers.

Misperceived Peasant Attitudes

The misreading of China’s peasantry can in large part be traced to the urban and educated Han Chinese. They harbor extraordinary resentments against the life-wasting policies of Mao, which forced them to live and learn communism among socially conservative, patriarchal, and parochial villagers who neither understood nor cared about Marx, Lenin, or communism. Urban dwellers returned from the countryside convinced that China’s backward peasants were a long way from supporting democracy. As one put it: “Before I went to college, I had spent eight years toiling in rural communes. I realized very well that social conditions here in China are far from ripe for the stage of democratization.”

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2According to V. Zotov, “The working class has the most conservative role to play.” See “Political Crisis in China,” Far Eastern Affairs (Moscow), No. 2, 1990, p. 70.