



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Abulfaz Elchibey

Former President of Azerbaijan (1992-1993) - Chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Part

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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"Elections, Democratization and Human Rights in Azerbaijan"

Dear Members of the Commission

Ladies and Gentleman

It is for the first time that I am in the United States of America, a country looked upon by many as a bastion of freedom and democracy. The United States is a superpower that took upon itself the responsibility to defend and support democracy and freedom in the world and to help resolve conflicts among and even within states. The present administration has reiterated that objective as well.

It is not an easy task. Besides laws, conventions, and political endeavors, there are, and there should always be in politics, ethical values, such as justice and honesty. Values that had been shaped throughout history and which are our common heritage. I believe that in their main political actions the United States are governed by these underlining values and will not abandon its global role of defending freedom and democracy worldwide. In general, the United States policy has been effective and that is why democrats in Azerbaijan and in the world consider the United States to be their best ally.

Unfortunately the U.S. policy toward any country, and here I want to speak about my country, Azerbaijan, is not shaped by one factor and dimension only.

U.S.-Azerbaijan relations, even when based on the right premises, are also influenced, sometimes strongly, by corporate interests, by group interests, by individual people, who deviate from the ethical principles of the U.S. foreign policy. Sometimes it is the case even of appointed U.S. representatives. Whether an individual is himself a democrat matters in politics a lot. If one looks, for example, at the rotating chairmanship of the OSCE, one will see that the OSCE attitude toward democracy in Azerbaijan changes from year to year depending on whom, and what country is at the helm.

Sometimes there is no congruity between U.S. political principles and the interests of the oil companies. This creates an unhealthy situation in which democratic politicians are pressured from two conflicting sides. Such was the situation when the oil companies were pushing for a pipeline through Iran, while the U.S. government and we, the democrats in Azerbaijan, were supporting the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline route. The oil companies were taking revenues into consideration. We took under consideration our national interests,

regional cooperation, and long term strategic policies.

I did not come here to criticize U.S. policy. Each country should run its own foreign policy according to the will of its own people. What I want to stress is that in issues such as security, independence, territorial integrity, freedom, and democracy in Azerbaijan, there should not be any ambiguity in the U.S. policy. The people of Azerbaijan are carefully listening to what the United States says and we ask you to clearly articulate your positions.

When we return to Azerbaijan, our constituency will ask us: Does the United States support the democrats in Azerbaijan? What should we tell them?

The U.S. took a tough position against dictators such as Milosevic and Lukashenko. What is the U.S. position toward Heydar Aliyev? If all the election in Azerbaijan since 1993 have been declared by independent international observers to be undemocratic and unfree, but 15 out of 120 Members of Parliament are from the opposition because such is the whim of Mr. Aliyev - does it mean that Azerbaijan is a democracy? We do not think so.

Each time we wanted to boycott the elections because of the unfair election laws, the U.S. was telling us: "go and participate, it is a good learning experience, monitor the violations." We did go, we monitored the violations, we did it several times. The violations were monstrous. Sometimes we were consoled that in Uzbekistan it is even worse. We do not want to be compared to Uzbekistan. We would like to be compared to Estonia, for example. Why not to the Czech Republic?

It is true that having a few deputies in the parliament has some advantages because they can say some words of truth. But they cannot have influence in politics, nor can they pass any legislation. On the other hand, by agreeing to go to elections and sending our people to the parliament, we give the present government legitimacy it does not deserve.

This time, at the eve of the November 2000 parliamentary elections we will do everything in our power to change the law on the Central Electoral Committee, the Law on the Elections and we will make sure that our candidates are registered and that the votes are honestly counted at the polling places.

And we would like to know whether you are supporting free and democratic elections in Azerbaijan. Are you supporting the democrats?

When the democrats in Azerbaijan see the vacillation of the U.S. or of West's policy toward democracy in Azerbaijan, and let me assure you here that the majority of people in Azerbaijan are democrats, they feel hopeless, abandoned and suspect the Western democracies of cynicism.

If people in Azerbaijan will become disillusioned, they may turn toward the two neighbors who are doing everything in their power to attract and pressure them: Russia or Iran, and believe me that it will be good neither for democracy in Azerbaijan nor for the United States.

There are issues universally considered not to be internal matters of any given countries. Such issues are, among others, human rights, terrorism, narco-traffic, and also democracy.

I strongly believe that democracy in Azerbaijan will have stronger ramifications, than just bringing freedom and prosperity to our citizens. Look at the map. We are the largest state in the Caucasus. We are a mostly a Muslim population, both Shiite and Sunni, but a secular state, with both Asian and European traditions. We lived through democratic governments. For short periods, it is true: from 1918-1920 and during 1992-93. We had a democratic mass movement of the Popular Front of 1988 which survives until today in the form of several democratic parties. We have democratic traditions, democratic intellectuals, our youth thinks in a modern

democratic way and Azeris are well educated people. Our people know so much about democracy, that it reminds me of the anecdote about a Soviet dissident who was distributing blank leaflets. "Are you crazy?" he was asked. "Why don't you write something on these leaflets?" "Why should I write anything? Everybody knows everything, anyhow."

We are known and respected for our religious and ethnic tolerance. We lived with Armenians side by side for centuries, and the recent war was in no way a religious war. It was a territorial war instigated and provoked first by the Soviet Union and later by Russia. I am proud that it was during our government of the Popular Front that we passed the first most tolerant law on national minorities in the former Soviet Union.

We can be a bulwark, an example, a center from which democracy can radiate to Central Asia. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and even Kyrgystan are on a dangerous way not only toward full dictatorships, but lately they have been reinforcing their links with Moscow and with the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Already in 1992-93, Azerbaijan, as a Turkic language-speaking nation, and the only democracy among Muslim nations of the former Soviet Union, as a more economically developed nation started to be a magnet for democrats in Central Asia. Unfortunately our government was overthrown by a coup, and many of the Central Asia democrats are today either in prison or have emigrated abroad. Of course Turkey, a free market and democratic state is also very important state as an example, but since it did not go through the communist and Soviet experience it is more distant from the Central Asia republics than is Azerbaijan.

If you look at the map again, you will see how close is Azerbaijan to Chechnya. You will see that Azerbaijan has a long common border with the Russian Federation in Dagestan. If the war in Chechnya, which is not an internal matter of Russia, but a genocide of a nation, is not stopped immediately, there is a danger that other conflicts and wars may erupt in the North Caucasus. And the Caucasus is indivisible. The North and the South are closely connected by culture, tradition and multiple links built throughout the centuries. Let me repeat: Azerbaijan is the largest state in the Caucasus. A democratic Azerbaijan, with its people supporting its government, which is not the case today, may be a strong deterrent for Russia if it is planning new expansions in the Caucasus. And it is the only state in which there are no Russian troops. This is also one of the achievements of our government of which we are very proud.

In my short remarks I mentioned only some key issues. I am more than willing to answer all questions and discuss all issues including such important issues as the return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan and the unjust imposition of Section 907; the issue of refugees in Azerbaijan; our willingness to join the NATO structures as the only guarantee of our security, and others.

Let me finish by saying that we are very grateful for the support given thus far by the U.S. Congress, by the U.S. government, by U.S. non-governmental organizations and by individuals to the democrats in Azerbaijan. That support has been very important and useful for us. Because of that support some political parties were registered, some newspapers were not closed, some people were released from jail.

I also believe that the effectiveness of this support could be increase manifold if you apply even more pressure on the present government of Azerbaijan to adopt democratic election laws. We, for our part, will do everything in our power to do so and I hope we will unite our forces to see soon a democratic Azerbaijan which will be beneficial to the people of Azerbaijan, to the Caucasus, to Central Asia and also to the United States.

Thank you very much for your attention.