

Praise to Dictator

For the past few years Azerbaijan has been celebrating the birthday of its late president, Heydar Aliyev, as a national holiday. This year, among many usual festivities, millions of flowers were brought-in by the mayor of Baku (capital of Azerbaijan) specially for this occasion from Netherlands and Belgium, many speeches were made praising the "great leader and savior of nation", and newly built statues and parks dedicated to his memory were advertised all over Azerbaijan. A new voice joining these celebrations rang very loud and it came, surprisingly, from Washington, DC.

Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev during the meeting with US president George W Bush

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Three U.S. congress members, Rep. Virginia Voxx (R) of North Carolina, Rep. Dan Burton (R) of Indiana, and Rep. Eddie Bernice (D) of Texas made speeches praising Heydar Aliyev and his contributions to the nation of Azerbaijan and to the advancement of U.S. interests in the region. This show of rare bi-partisan unity, albeit in support for a dead foreign dictator, was both improper and puzzling (here is the link to full speeches by these congress members on Heydar Aliyev's birthday: http://azerireport.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=121).

It is undoubtedly true that the country of Azerbaijan is immensely important to U.S. interests in that part of the world. Being sandwiched between Russia and Iran, this post-Soviet and extremely oil-rich country with pre-dominantly Muslim, very secular and US-friendly population has pursued staunchly pro-Western foreign policy since its independence in 1991, and consistently supported the United States and its allies, Turkey and Israel, in the geo-strategic standoff between regional powers. Azerbaijan has signed multi-billion dollar oil contracts with Western companies and is the main participant of oil and gas pipeline designed to secure energy supplies for United States and its allies while by-passing Russia and Iran. It is also true that in spite of its friendly policies toward the United States and its allies, Azerbaijan has not received the support it deserves, particularly considering that it has been subjected to blatant aggression, ethnic cleansing and occupation of part of its territory by neighboring Armenia (the client state of Russia and Iran).

Thus, there would be nothing wrong with members of congress supporting an important U.S. ally and sending well wishes to the people of Azerbaijan. However, expressing this support by praising a late dictator who had a terrible record on human rights seems to be unnecessary, sends wrong message about the American values and US support for freedom, and destroys any remaining trust toward the West by the fragile pro-democracy movement within Azerbaijan. In fact, this unreserved admiration of the oppressive ruler by the members of U.S. congress gives extra moral ammunition to the Azerbaijani authorities in their persecution of opposition members and journalists, and tremendously damages U.S. image in the eyes of freedom-loving people in Azerbaijan and beyond. The mistake of mixing the due and rightful support from the United States government and Congress to the friendly nation of Azerbaijan with paying tributes to its deceased oppressive ruler can become very costly to the U.S. interests and how it is viewed by regular Azerbaijanis. After all, there are many other national holidays in Azerbaijan (including Independence Day and National Statehood Day), on which the members of the U.S. Congress could congratulate Azerbaijani people. But why choose a dictator's birthday?

This giant official propaganda display with a picture of Heydar Aliyev, followed by his son Ilham and grandson Heydar-junior reads "The past, the present and the future of Azerbaijan!"

In order to understand how misplaced this action is, one needs to consider the record of Heydar Aliyev's rule in Azerbaijan. He governed Azerbaijan with iron-fist for a long time, starting from 1970s when Azerbaijan was one of the communist republics of Soviet Union. Later he became one of the twelve members of communist party's Politburo, the top ruling body for the entire Soviet Union, in charge of electing its top leader. After the collapse of the USSR Heydar Aliev re-invented his image as an Azerbaijani nationalist and returned to power in a military coup which overthrew the democratically elected government of Popular Front in 1993. Once back in-power, he established a one-man rule with a cult of personality and suppression of freedoms, very typical of many post-Soviet, Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Azerbaijan under his rule was consistently cited as one of the most corrupt and oppressive regimes by international organizations, human rights groups, U.S. State Department and practically any unbiased observer who happened to pay attention to the events in that country.

After his death, his son Ilham Aliyev was "elected" as president in elections which were marred by apparent wholesale fraud, violent suppression of protest rallies and arrests of the opposition activists, effectively establishing a de-facto monarchy under the guise of "presidency". When he became president, Mr. Aliyev-junior gave his farther the name of "great national leader", made his birthday a national holiday, named the country's international airport, state oil-fund and countless parks and streets after his name, and dedicated many statues and buildings in Azerbaijan and abroad to his memory.

Riot police beats up the last remaining protester after dispersing an opposition rally in Baku's Freedom square

At the same time, Ilham Aliyev continued his father's brutal policies of suppressing dissent, violating press freedoms and persecuting journalists and political opponents. Under the father and son rule of Aliyevs, many journalists and dissidents have been jailed, beaten, tortured and forced to leave the country. One of the most famous opposition journalists, Elmar Huseinov, was murdered several years ago, and his killers are still not identified and nobody was brought to justice for this crime. While Azerbaijan is receiving huge revenues from its oil exports, most of this money gets allocated between the members of the ruling family and closely related oligarchs, while little is trickling down to the general population. All elections since Heydar Aliyev came to power in Azerbaijan were recognized by international observers as neither free nor fair.

With all that in-mind, it really remains a mystery as to what motivated three members of the U.S Congress, the freely elected legislator of the most powerful and democratic country in the world, to rise up and sing praises to the late dictator of a small repressive foreign regime? Do members of the Congress regularly commemorate the dead leaders of all foreign countries? Are these three congressmen also on record for speeches on birthdays of truly well-respected foreign figures, such as Mahatma Gandhi or Charles De-Gaulle, to name a few? What about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson? Or is Heydar Aliyev more worthy of a commemoration in the U.S. Congress than any of these historic figures?

It is expected that sometimes diplomacy includes holding your nose and forcing yourself to deal with leaders whose style of government we might despise. In view of cold realities of the world, the president of the United States might shake hands with a brutal tyrant and State Department might issue congratulations during holidays to a foreign regime which oppresses its own people. Nothing is new in that. However, a U.S. congressman reading odes of admiration to a long-dead foreign dictator during the session of the Congress is something odd and not so refreshing.