

Abulfaz Elchibey and Democracy

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By Irena Lasota, June 23, 2002

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But Azerbaijan has had its own period of true democratization, after the elections of June 7, 1992 when Abulfaz Elchibey was elected president of Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan lived through a short period of a first, deep, democratic transformation during his presidency. As much as the First Republic of 1918-1920 became a symbol, an inspiration and a lesson for the Popular Front of Azerbaijan in the late eighties, I believe that one day the period between June 7, 1992 and June 1993 will also become a symbol, an inspiration and a lesson for the future generation of the architects of democracy in Azerbaijan --and that this short period will be called the Second Republic. How the period -- between June 1993 and the future free and fair elections after which the new democratization period will come -- will be called, can be left to the linguists and to the politicians.

Abulfaz Elchibey and Irena Lasota, undated photo

For over twenty years I have been observing, analyzing and comparing first the dissident, underground, anticommunist movements in the communist bloc, and later the independence and pro-democracy movement in the post-soviet empire. I was privileged to closely see such movements as Solidarnost in Poland, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, to know personally such people as Vaclav Havel, Vitautas Landsbergis, Mustafa Kirim oglu, and others who were leaders of some of the most important democratic, liberation movements of the soviet/post soviet era. There is no doubts that Abulfaz Elchibey belongs to the small elite brotherhood of leaders of the democratic transformation of the Soviet empire, his name is not only known, his name is legendary. (I do not mention Lech Walesa in that company because, although he is also legendary, he could have taken democracy lessons from Abulfaz Elchibey.)

In the dramatic years when the Soviet empire was collapsing individuals played a more important role than in times of stagnations. Leaders could lead, they could change reality, they were heard and they could lead thousands, if not millions, into certain directions. Such was the fate of Abulfaz Elchibey who became the leader first of the Popular front of

Azerbaijan, and than of Azerbaijan itself. In the former Soviet Union, of course, among the non-Russian people he is known as a champion of independence from Russia, and from the Russian influence; the Balts remember about the early withdrawal of the Russian troupes, but also the Russian democrats, even if they are not that numerous, know about the democratic nature of his presidency.

What my Chechen friends are telling me also, for example, is that Abulfaz Elchibey was for them not only an example of a President of an independent Republic, but a President of a democratic, pluralistic republic proving that a constitutional, law abiding, secular state can exist in a Muslim society. Let's remember that president Aslan Maschadov, surrounded by the Federal armies in the year 2000 requested his Minister of Foreign Affairs to deposit in his names flowers on the grave of Abulfaz Elchibey.

In Eastern Europe, in countries that are today in NATO or are going to enter soon into NATO, Abulfaz Elchibey is know as the man who attempted to introduce democracy at all cost, and for his attachment to moral values without which true democracy cannot be build. Through rare articles and interviews people were learning in Eastern Europe that in far away Azerbaijan there are people who are fighting for the same cause and sharing the same ideas.

It is very interesting that after the coup of 1993 the image and the myth of Abulfaz Elchibey grew in popularity outside of Azerbaijan, while in Azerbaijan, due to the incessant black propaganda created by his enemies, and because of the settling of the scores in his camp after the defeat, his image suffered greatly and unjustly. Only recently, and unfortunately after his death, people start seriously to analyze the achievements of his presidency in the context of these years, and read and study what this man did, wrote and said. But as his funeral has shown, and his unending popularity among simple people proves – the black propaganda of the regime and of some of the so-called “independent” press did not really contaminate the society.

The period, which started in the ninety eighties, is often called the third wave of democratization in the world. It swept not only the countries of the former Soviet Union, but also some countries of Latin America, such as Brazil and Chile, and parts of Asia, such as South Korea and Taiwan. Not all experiments in democracy survived and we know that most of the states of the former Soviet Union are today far from being democratic. Former first secretaries of communist parties, former apparatchiks, KGB man, and kolkhoz directors are presidents all around us.

Was it just a sum of personal mistakes of Abulfaz Elchibey that he did not remain President longer than he did?

Let's look around us and see how many democrats in the post-Soviet Union came to power, and even more – how many remained. Let's look at Eastern Europe and the return of the post-communists in Hungary or Romania. Even in Poland today both the president and the prime minister are former communists and although many democratic institutions are still in place and functioning – the freedom and independence of the media is in great danger.

Maybe it takes time to create democratic political elites, to get rid of the communist, or post-communist structures which oppose the democratic forces, to take the economy from the hands of the nomenclatura and to build, what was so dear to Abulfaz Elchibey, a middle class, that will defend the democratic values.

Abulfaz Elchibey, elected chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front in 1989 and of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1992, became the symbol of the modern Azerbaijani democracy. Although He was himself a modest and humble man who did not like the cult of personality, who preferred not to speak often on television, who was embarrassed by public displays of admiration, he became such a symbol already during his life, and even much more now.

That is why, although I know that what He did, he did also with others, in this presentation I am using only His name.

Those who collaborated with him will pardon me when I will say, “Elchibey did this and this”. Sometimes he did it with others, sometimes alone.

Many philosophers believe that democracy is the most natural form of social organization, but practice shows that dictatorships can enslave people, not only their bodies, but their minds as well. The communist dictatorship was especially able in such enslavement. And in such systems only few, usually called dissidents, fight against dictatorship through their deep moral conviction. This is the brotherhood of Havel, Dzhemilev, and Elchibey.

The fact that Abulfaz Elchibey was a dissident from the soviet times is very important for understanding his democratic origins. He was from that sort of dissidents who rejected the soviet vision of the organization of society. He simply rejected the Soviet Union and the Russian domination. He did not feel himself a Soviet citizen. I spoke about it yesterday with my friends when we observed the display of happiness all over Baku after Turkey's victory over Senegal in the World Cup. But twenty years ago, while most of Azerbaijan would have cheered for the Soviet Union and not for Turkey, wouldn't Elchibey be in a minority? He was first of all an individual, Abulfaz Aliyev, Abulfaz Elchibey, Bey, he was an Azeri, he was an Azeri Turk, he was also a citizen of the democratic world, but not a soviet citizen, never a homo sovieticus.

He also deeply despised communism. He hated the oppression of his and other nations. He saw communism for what it was: a system of lies, of disrespect for human dignity, of wasting energy, of re-writing history, of murders. He was a free man, he wanted to be free, he wanted to live in a free world which was the opposite of what the communist Soviet Union was offering him and the hundreds of millions who lived on its territory. It seems that he was born that way and that his road to democracy led through struggles for individual freedom, national freedom and understanding that liberal democracy is the best guarantee of such freedoms. Love of freedom is a precondition for a democrat, and Abulfaz Elchibey had it in an enormous amount. Whoever knew him - knows how he rejected bonds and obstacles in whatever way they were coming.

Another condition for being a good democrat, and especially a true democratic leader is to believe in people and to trust people. It is a key issue, especially in situations like Azerbaijan was in the early nineties, in a transition period to democracy, when people trust the charismatic leader. Will he respond in the same way? Will he also trust them? The practice of government shows that there are two opposite types of attitudes of leaders. There are leaders, who mistrust

people, mistrust the society and believe that everything has to be organized from above, forced upon people, controlled. There are also leaders who love and trust people.

Abulfaz Elchibey had an almost unlimited faith in human nature. He believed that people are basically good, that given the right condition they will act rationally, they will be honest, that they will do the right things. Some people called him naive, many people until today cannot forgive him that he appointed that person or trusted another person. When he became President he did not even make that many appointments – he retained 80% of the former governments employees, he decreed several amnesties, he opposed what he called “which hunts” – all for the sake of what he call the “civil peace”. He believed in Azerbaijan, in Azerbaijani people, he believed that in the new independent state all would work for the common good. He did not believe that people whom he trusted may betray him, or even worst – betray the country. Many real democrats, without experience, make such mistakes. But these were not accidental mistakes. These were the results of his general philosophy, more extreme than with many other people, but still a philosophy about the human nature. That the individual is good and his natural habitat is democracy. That a man prefers to be honest, that a person who commits a wrongful deed – feels shame. Maybe he was mistaken, but even a nation needs once in its lifetime somebody who trusts it and loves it unconditionally. All his life Abulfaz Elchibey was also both a student and a teacher. He was interested practically in everything and studied everything. I believe that in the domain of politics he had read everything that was available in languages he knew. Since he had an unshakable conviction that one day the Soviet Union will collapse, he was thinking of different scenarios for the time after such a collapse.

It is very interesting to note here that contrary to many thinkers and politicians who for many years plan the future of political transformation, Abulfaz Elchibey was in no way dogmatic. He still, until the end, had more questions than answers. He was still studying the advantages of presidential over parliamentary systems, although he definitely was for the independence of the three powers: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary; he studied the different methods of administration and electoral systems. He wanted to know about different economic systems, about ways of modernizing agriculture, about the reforms of health and taxation. He was asking me for example to bring him statutes of different democratic coalition from other countries such as Romania, Poland, or Bulgaria to study. It is interesting to note that in all of those countries these coalitions collapsed a long time ago, and in Azerbaijan the Democratic Congress, one of his creations, still functions actively. And this is also a characteristic of a great democratic leader. To have an open mind.

Democracy is a system of the rule of law. Abulfaz Elchibey knew and understood it. During his presidency, as you know, many democratic laws were adopted, many more were prepared. His government’s priorities were clear: to change the system into a law abiding, free market, and corruption-free liberal democracy. Passing the law is of course the first step, enforcing is another. But the example of such countries as Poland, Estonia, and even in some regards Azerbaijan, shows that laws once passed remain often even after the return of the old regime. If we compare the amount of important laws and decrees passed, especially in the first six month of his presidency, with other countries, we will be surprised at the positive achievements.

In 1996, during the first interview I conducted with Abulfaz Elchibey in Kelaki, when I asked him to summarize the achievements of the Popular Front government, he started with the fight against corruption. Today it sounds even more interesting that he mentioned it in the first place when we know how many post-soviet countries and also democracies are collapsing because of corruption. Elchibey mentioned in that context the “blind” (or confidential) exams, introduced for students and planned for civil servants. This was a perfect example of democratization of the society and of the struggle against the old soviet nomenklatura. If one was to introduce a system of honest exams for civil service and for posts in the economy, one would destroy the basis of the system of corruption and of the soviet nomenklatura at the same time. Elchibey’s vision of a democratic society incorporated equal chances for all, a system based on merits, and dignity, that is higher wages for civil servants so they would not take bribes.

In the same interview He spoke with pride also about introducing the decree on the minority, about establishing confidence of citizens of all religions in the state, about the independent press, multitude of political parties, and the beginning of appointing of independent judges. All these are prerequisites of democracy that often function for generations in a society before one can speak of a full-fledged democracy. If you are to look at any post-soviet country you will not find any other example where so much was achieved in so little time. But how many of you wanted to look at it after June 1993?

Abulfaz Elchibey understood that building democracy on the ruins of the Soviet empire was very difficult. He knew the devastations that seventy years of communism had brought to society, human mind, economy, culture and tradition. He knew time was needed to heal the wounds. He was hoping also that the economic reforms started in Azerbaijan would soon create a real middle class, like in Western countries, a class on which liberal democracy usually stands. Although He himself did not care about personal property, he had a deep philosophical respect for small entrepreneurs, for honest businessmen, for what he expected would be a strong Azerbaijani middle class.

The government of Abulfaz Elchibey did not govern, as we know, in a vacuum. There was war, there was an economic collapse of a giant corporation called Soviet Union of which Azerbaijan was only a branch, the society was divided from within and there were forces from outside. And there was no time for anything.

Of course there were mistakes. But I can, from outside, compare them with mistakes of others, and I am always surprised at the eagerness, almost enthusiasm with which all in Azerbaijan speak of the mistakes of 1992-93. If history repeats itself, I am afraid that Mammad Amin Rasulzade spent his last remaining thirty years listening about all of his mistakes that led to the Bolsheviks overtaking the First Republic in 1920. After all we know the embarrassing secret that he was even expelled from his own party at the end. Such is sometimes the fate of great men.

But I strongly believe that the coup of June 1993 happened not because of the mistakes of Abulfaz Elchibey and his

Presidency, but because of the achievements. Because the government was preparing more democratic reforms including privatization and new elections, because Abulfaz Elchibey was working with the Minsk group to settle the Karabah war, because he was planning to go to London to sign the oil deal, because Azerbaijan was becoming a very bad example for the non-Russian people of the former Soviet Union.

In the tumultuous days of June 1993 Abulfaz Elchibey did not see the popular support for his government and his policy. Maybe that was missing to give the decisive orders, and instead he went to Kelaki. He was always proud that he did not draw Azerbaijan into a civil war. For that he is today respected in Georgia.

Until the end, Abulfaz Elchibey, together Isa Gambar, was creating an opposition alliance that turned out to be the strongest and most long-lasting of all such coalitions in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet Union. Until the end Abulfaz Elchibey, in the best traditions of democratic oppositions, stood firmly for the democratic principles, denouncing the authoritarian regime by its name, not allowing for any co-optation by the regime and firmly trying to build a coalition with other democratic partners. He believed that three more years were needed before democrats returned to power, more experienced, stronger.

Today, after September 11, the one year long democratic government of Abulfaz Elchibey and of the coalition of the Popular Front forces has an additional meaning, Azerbaijan, one more time proved to the world that a democratic, law-abiding, pluralistic, moral, secular state is possible in another Muslim society, not only in Turkey.

I started by saying that the word "democrat" is today depreciated. But when Abulfaz Elchibey used this word he knew what he meant and was very serious about it. He was a democrat. He loved democracy with his mind and also with his heart. -0-

(Azeri Report).