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EVERYTHING YOU NEVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT AZERBAIJAN

An Account of Political Crisis and Change
In a Former Soviet Republic
(In Three Parts)

Dear Peter,

Herewith, a look at the political crisis in Azerbaijan that peaked in late March but continues to rumble on today.

It was a month of high-stakes political gambling replete with lots of double-dealing and marked cards and not a few painted horses, some of which were lame.

And it ain't over until the June 7th Presidential Sweepstakes: the first freely contested elections of any sort to be held in Azerbaijan.

This is a profound development, and you can anticipate my dealing with it in my next newsletters as the list of candidates grows and the political mud-slinging begins in earnest.

But for the time being, I want to focus on March, '92--a truly remarkable period of time in the short, quasi-independent life of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and one neglected by most observers.

Ironically, there was probably never so much international press coverage of the country as then. But most of the dispatches focused on what the Beirut hack-pack used to call 'collecting bang-bang': stories about death, destruction and the aftermath of disaster.

And in reading much of what has been written, I feel that very little sense has been made out of the flow of events, a missing of (or even disinterest in) the incremental links between the big ticket news items. What is missing is the sort of reporting that falls into the category of 'Everything You Never Wanted To Know About Azerbaijan.'

The issues, personalities and relationships are too complex for the average reader (or editor) to understand or care about.

But I know you are not that reader (or editor) and so I am about to treat (or maybe subject) you to a blow-by-blow of the extraordinary process that started with the Hodjali massacre, moved on to the resignation of President Ayaz Mutalibov and culminated in the historical address by Popular Front chairman Abulfaz Elchibey at the full session of the Azerbaijan Parliament on March 25th.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The style and delivery of the addresses of the two leaders from the same platform tells the story in a succinct and beautiful way:

First came Mutalibov, making one of his rare appearances before the nation he was supposed to be leading, to announce that 'you won't have Ayaz to kick around anymore.' He secured a life-time stipend for his 'service' to the country and immunity from prosecution for his crimes against it in so doing.

Almost a month later, the nation was treated to Elchibey's speech. A modern, secular prophet, humiliated by the continued bad faith of the crumbling communists even at this late stage of the game, he still found it in his heart to make an appeal for the expiation of political sin in the baptismal waters of patriotism. He also--and almost incidentally--predicted his own doom by saying that the next president of the country will be toppled within a year.

The text of the Mutalibov farewell is not of any real interest, but I include the full transcript of Elchibey's delivery at the end of Part Two in the hopes that some graduate student somewhere someday will thank me for having made his or her research life marginally easier.

A footnote will do nicely, please.

Sometimes you feel like you deserve one.

Because for those of us out here in the field (me), who rely on being in the right place at the right time through a mixture of fluke, fate and fortitude, collecting and coalating the raw data of political and social change can be as exhausting as it is exhilarating. The vicissitudes of any given day often leave you feeling like you have been riding a roller-coaster run amok: just when you figure you know what is going to happen next, the train lurches in a completely unanticipated direction, leaving you clinging to your seat, and notes fluttering in the breeze.

The month of March was like that: far too much input without a great deal of reference or context to put it in, save for the one you made up as things roll along.

It was one of those times when, if you heard anyone claiming to be able to understand everything, you knew they knew nothing or were just lying.

And now I am going to try and explain it all to you!

Wish me well with my pretensions.

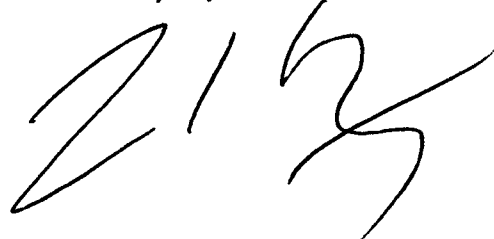
Here, then, a report on the furiously paced political developments both inside and outside of the Azerbaijan parliament.

A running record, as it were.

I don't think anyone else was keeping one.

Thomas Goltz

Baku, April 10 1992





Azerbaijan President Ayaz Niyaziyev Resigns

PART ONE: Mutalibov Resigns:

On March 6th, 1992, in the face of massive criticism over his inability to deal with the growing political crisis in the country, Ayaz Niyazi Oghli Mutalibov resigned his office as the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

He had never been a particularly popular leader and it is difficult to describe him as legitimate in the usual sense of the word. Accordingly, it is hard to feel sorry for him. (1)

1) There was always something pathetic--and maybe even 'wimpy' about Mutalibov. A corrupt CP aparatchik who knew he could only continue to exist in the old, Moscow-run system (he was one of the few USSR republican leaders to publically welcome the August 19th, anti-Gorbachev coup, although he later tried to deny this), he was given to dandy-like hairdos and fine clothes (people on the street would refer to him derisively as 'Ayaz Hanim,' or 'Mrs Ayaz') and was famous for being more concerned about getting a spare tire for one of his presidential Mercedes than what was happening out in Nagorno Karabakh. This image of a marionette figure suggests that he was so out of touch with local reality that he could not possibly have been really cruel or mendacious, and to give credit where credit is not necessarily due, one might note that he could have tried to hang on to power by force, but at the last moment chose not to--and thus avoided a bloodbath.

Mutalibov's career path was pretty standard--and might thus be instructive about how one rose through the ranks of a local Communist Party in what was the USSR. Born in 1938, he was trained at the Azerbaijan petro-chemical institute, and his familiarity with the subject (or maybe just his desire to control the industry) led Mutalibov to attach oil to the presidential apparatus--thus inviting the familiar charges about his accepting massive graft. His early life was a two-pronged career as political and industrial bureaucrat, climbing from the position of second secretary of a local branch of the Azerbaijan CP and director of the Soyduz Factory to his appointments first as deputy and then as president of state planning in the early 1980s, when he also became a member of the central committee of the Azerbaijan CP during the waning days of Haydar Aliiev (Cf; fn 21.) His next leap was his appointment as Prime Minister in 1988 during the short tenure of Abdulrahman Vezirov as General Secretary of the Azerbaijan CP (and thus effective chief of state). Mutalibov assumed the job of General Secretary when Vezirov was obliged to leave the country in the wake of the January, 1990 crack-down on Baku (Cf fn 14.) In the period following the crack-down, Mutalibov made an attempt to bring the increasingly important Halk Cephesi, or National/Popular Front--which had only been formally legalized in the fall of 1989--into the main-stream political arena. One concessions made by the Front during the course of negotiations was the acceptance, on May 17th, 1990, of the principle a presidential system of government. Interestingly, the PF now opposes the idea--probably due to the result of bitter experience with the beast. For on June 26th 1990, the CP dominated parliament passed a new bill that made the General Secretary of the CP into acting president--Mutalibov, claiming support for the idea from across the political spectrum, created the position for himself. (There is an element of deja vu about this sort of double-dealing between Mutalibov and his successors and the Popular Front; sometimes one

But unpopularity is one thing and charges of treason are another. And in the popular mind, Mutalibov was being held personally responsible for the massacre of up to (and maybe over) one thousand Azeri inhabitants in Nagorno Karabakh (2) on

wants to ask why the PF never learns.) Popular elections for the office were delayed for more than a year, and finally held on September 8th, 1991--a week after Mutalibov had parliament declare Azerbaijan to be an independent state. Denouncing the continued state of ~~martial~~ law, the Popular Front boycotted and encouraged other political organizations to do the same.

Initially, Zardush Alizade--one of two brothers who set up the Social Democratic Party group in Azerbaijan--announced that he would contest the elections but withdrew his candidacy under pressure. The results of the polls were hardly surprising: it was a 'landslide' victory for Mutalibov, who collected 93% of an alleged turn-out of 87% of the electorate. The Popular Front maintains that less than 25% of the eligible voters participated. On September 12th, Mutalibov resigned as head of the Communist Party and suggested that the body dissolve itself. It did so the following day, and the Central Committee building thus became the presidential palace.

2) Nagorno Karabakh consists of the six rayons, or districts, that made up the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKA0) within the Azerbaijan province of (Large) Karabakh until late 1991, when the government in Baku formally dissolved the NKA0 and linked the six districts to other, larger districts in (Large) Karabakh. This was in violation of the Helsinki accords that stipulates that signatory countries will recognize all external and internal borders, and only seek to change them through peaceful negotiation. There is now consideration being given to returning the six districts to their previous, special status although this would seem to have become a moot issue: Nagorno Karabakh is no longer in the control of Azerbaijan, and Baku's plans to effect or undo a redistricting are about as meaningful as Palestinians suggesting a 'local autonomy plan' for Tel Aviv in a putative, unitary state of Palestine. Save for reconquest by force of arms, it is simply too late. With the exception of the district seat of Shusha, the writ of Baku seems totally meaningless in the territory and the local Armenians have declared themselves a 'Republic'--presumably as a first step to associating the NKA0 with Armenia (with which it shares no common frontier).

Terms used to describe the NKA0 are important because they can be very misleading. The preferred cliché is 'the mainly Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan,' but this is inaccurate on a number of different counts. Before ethnic tension erupted in 1988, there were approximately 200,000 residents in Nagorno Karabakh, with the Armenians in the majority by about 80%. But due to death, destruction and departures--most recently, the Hodjali massacre--the Azeri civilian population is down from around 30,000 to less than 5,000, making the carefully formed word 'mainly' ridiculous: the reality is that there are no more Azeris in the NKA0. The other part of the formulation is also incorrect because Nagorno Karabakh is not an 'enclave'--yet. An enclave is part of one state surrounded by another sovereign nation. Thus, technically speaking, Nagorno Karabakh can only become an 'enclave' after the Republic of Armenia annexes it, which it has not yet done. Until then one should refer to the problematic piece of real-estate as the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKA0) in Azerbaijan. For short, I prefer to refer the NKA0 as a 'territory.'

February 25/26th by Armenian militants, and then denying the tragedy occurred—even while his government frantically tried to figure out what to say and do next. (3)

After three days of silence or outright lies (4), the government finally decided to broadcast the news of the Hodjali Massacre (5) to the nation and to the world, hoping that public rage at the government could be diverted toward the Armenians, Russians and to meddling outside powers.

The effort to publicize Hodjali might be said to have succeeded on the international level: the Moscow (and Istanbul) press corps, fortified by parachutist journalists from further afield, descended on Azerbaijan in droves. They generally wrote sympathetic stories about the events in Hodjali and the Azeri position on Nagorno Karabakh.

But locally, the attempt to publicize the tragedy was too little and too late: government-controlled television might jam the tube with images of butchered babies and scalped grandmothers, as if reproducing the image death on the screen could somehow reproduce faith in the state information services, but it was three and four days after the fact and the nation knew it. (6) The exploitation of the tragedy reeked of cynical politics,

If one wants to look for parallel situations in the world, the most similar state of affairs to the NKAO is Cyprus where a minority population supported by a fraternal, neighboring state managed to create a local majority in part of the country and then declared itself to be a separate, independent state--the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTC). Usually, the KKTC is referred to by such careful formulations as 'the self-declared republic', 'the renegade state' or, less kindly, 'occupied Northern Cyprus' lest calling it a country in its own right offend the internationally recognized (Greek-speaking) government in Nicosia. There are no doubt merits and demerits for all these qualifying terms, but the point is this: one should apply the same caution to terms used to describe the NKAO as the KKTC.

Lastly, and for the record, 'Nagorno' in Russian means 'mountainous', corresponding to the Azeri Turkish 'Daghlik'. Turkish usage vacillates between 'Dağlık' and 'Yukari,' or 'upper.' 'Karabakh' (Garabakh in Azeri) means 'Black Garden,' although the word 'black' has always been a sort of compliment in the Turkish languages. Armenians refer to the territory as 'Arsakh,' which was once part of ancient Armenia.

3) The 'Chernobl' syndrom, as it were.

4) The government initially claimed that Hodjali had been attacked, but had beaten off the Armenians with only two dead.

5) This is the preferred, if marginally incorrect, spelling of the town's name, with the last vowel turned into a 'shwaw' sound (as in 'uh') to correspond with the all-important vowel harmony found in the Turkic languages, a concept carried very badly in the Cyrillic and (unmodified) Latin scripts. Acceptable alternatives are Khodjali or Khojali. But for reasons I can only ascribe to the tendency of western news agencies to slavishly pick up Russian transliterations of Turkic names and places, the town is usually referred to in the media as 'Khodjaly', 'Khojaly' or even 'Khozdhaly.' In the restored Latin-based script now officially embraced by Azerbaijan, the town's name will read:

'Xocal(i),' (with no dot on the 'i') or possibly Hocal(i), with a slash on the right leg of the letter 'h' to denote frictiveness. 6) To the great relief of certain journalists who were tired of the charge that the western press, manipulated by invisible

and there were too many people who blamed the government itself for allowing Hodjali to fall to the Armenians to simply turn around and let by-gones be by-gones.

Withering personal attacks were made on everyone in government by the opposition press, with the Presidential Spokesman, Rasim Agaiev, becoming a primary target for his participation in the initial cover-up of the tragedy. Even such government-friendly papers such as Halg (7) began running stories about the misappropriation of humanitarian aid along with the regular pro-government blather. The aid/corruption theme would become a leitmotif throughout the month, and heads would roll.

The anti-government press, albeit of limited circulation, was running way ahead of everyone else--much to the chagrin of many of political figures who still thought they could manipulate the news. This was nowhere more apparent than in the fate of Prime Minister Hasan Hasanov, a Communist Party functionary trying to put on the clothes of a reborn nationalist/patriot. In a spot interview with the shrilly anti-government and unabashedly pro-Popular Front bi-weekly newspaper Azadlig (8) on March 3rd, Hasanov made a frontal assault on his nominal boss, pointing out that although he had the title of 'Prime Minister,' none of the security-related ministries--Defense, Interior and KGB--reported to him but remained tied into the all-powerful presidential apparatus. Thus, he was not responsible for the Hodjali massacre and Nagorno Karabakh debacle. He also called for the resignation of the cabinet so that he could then form his own. (9)

There were others, too, whose voices began to be heard.

Armenian interests, was always writing lies about Azerbaijan. All one had to say to the taxi driver/receptionist/green grocer was 'take a look at your own media first if you want to talk about a pack of lies' to terminate this line of conversation. Ay Sahgol, ('Spot on') was the standard, sullen response from those who knew that they had been lied to for years.

7) 'The People'; formerly 'Kommunist'

8 'Independence,' the organ of the Popular Front.

9) The remarkably frank interview might be regarded as the beginning of the end of Hasanov as a player in the Baku sweepstakes. A man with an immense ego and the self-confidence of one who has never had to listen to anyone, he saw his star rise to super-nova status early in the month before turning into a black hole at its end. Pegged as the main presidential contender in the wake of the Motalibov resignation, he was conducting himself accordingly--meeting with visiting dignitaries, lecturing the new American charge d'affaires publically and generally comporting himself like the new kingpin. Then, at the first hint of a financial scandal that should have just bounced off his toughened skin, he dropped like a lead balloon off the political chart in early April, resigning his post and asking--even begging--to be sent as the Azeri ambassador to the United Nations. It is hard to imagine the once formidable Hasan being happy in Gotham, reduced to communicating with surly taxi drivers in pidgin English and confined to hob-knobbing with the UN emissaries from the other CIS states as well as the odd, Turkish or Russian speaking ambassador from such countries as Mongolia and Congo. An alternative theory to the Fear Of Scandal is that Hasanov saw where things were heading and decided to sit out the first race, safely ensconced abroad, until the dust settles back in Baku. Time will tell.

In an open letter published in the usually pro-government Russian-language newspaper Vishka (10) on March 3rd, the non-Azeri organization Sodruzhestvo (11) appealed for sympathy and solidarity with the majority Azeris in their struggle for territorial integrity. The letter accused Armenia of 'aggression' over the past five years and addressed the 'evil rumors' being spread in Azerbaijan about non-Azeri citizens, but stopped short of openly criticizing Mutalibov. (12) In a separate, open letter to Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, the organization demanded an explanation of Russia's position on the Karabakh crisis and why Moscow had recognized Armenia as an independent state and not Azerbaijan. They also demanded to know why so much anti-Azeri disinformation and pro-Armenian propaganda was run on Moscow TV and published in the Moscow-based press. (13)

10) 'Oil Derick,' the pro-government Russian language (almost) daily said to be favored by the 50,000 strong Jewish community in Baku, although I have never been able to detect any 'Jewish' content in it. More recently, a specifically (Russian language) Jewish paper has appeared under the title 'Aziz'.

11) 'Commonwealth' or 'Federation.' By coincidence, it is also the same word as the first part of the new label for the USSR: Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimix Gosudarstv, or "Commonwealth/Federation of Independent States," (CIS). This greatly irritates members of the local "Commonwealth/Federation" organization because in the Azeri context, Sodruzhestvo, stands for the unity of the diverse ethnic groups of Azerbaijan and not the diverse states of the rump USSR. To many outsiders, the identity of the names suggests a common purpose when the exact opposite is the case: The members of the Baku Sodruzhestvo organization maintain that they are (minority) Azeri nationalists who want out of the USSR by whatever name it goes by, including the CIS. That being said, despite the good face put on by many Russians and other non-Azeris, there is grave concern about their future in the country. No sooner than the American embassy put out its shingle in the Old Intourist Hotel, than the consular officer was besieged by hundreds of applications for migration and/or refugee status. Interestingly, these included large numbers of Armenians still resident in Baku. Many are married to Azeris.

12) This was a little odd because although Sodruzhestvo usually pulls its punches on local political issues, it nonetheless stays in the ring. One suspects the censor's scissors here, a process with which I have had direct experience: shortly after Hodjali, a senior editor at Vishka begged me to allow them to reprint a Hodjali story so that the readership could view Hodjali 'as seen through the eyes of the western press'. I gave them a story on the condition that it run in full and that I could check the translation. The editor agreed, but when I was checking the translation I noticed that one small paragraph had been deleted: a quotation of a Hodjali resident criticizing Mutalibov. Despite her pleas, I declined to let the paper run it.

13) The irony of Vishka complaining about biased or tilted reporting aside, the level of bad reporting in the Moscow-based media is truly astounding--especially as the Moscow news services serve as a primary source for foreign reporting. This is an old bugaboo of mine and I am sure that it is as true of reporting out of Georgia, Estonia and Kazakhstan as it is in the specific instance of Nagorno Karabakh and the Azerbaijan/Armenia dispute so I won't belabor the point here at length save for the following observation: the Armenians would appear to have

Throughout all this, the public face of Baku was quiet.

Too quiet, as they say.

Many likened the mood to that leading up to the January 20th, 1990 Einmarsch of the Soviet Army, advertised to the world as a humanitarian action designed to save local Armenians from 'Muslim fundamentalist mobs.' (14)

This time, it was feared, it would be local Russians who would replace the Armenians as targets of mass hysteria which would in turn be used as an excuse for a general clamp down by the 4th Army.

Fueling such speculations were reports of semi-secret meetings between Mutalibov and Nikolay Popov, the commander of the fur divisions of (former) Soviet 4th Army troops stationed in Azerbaijan. The public aspect was Mutalibov's request to take joint-command over the 40,000 troops in the country, lest 'others' use them for their own ends. But in the streets and in the offices of opposition leaders there was a second interpretation: Mutalibov was flirting with the Russians in order to fortify his own position and was getting ready to use force-- 'mercenary' force at that--if the chips were down.

The Popular Front, which had taken the brunt of the crack down in 1990, was doing all in its power to keep people from demonstrating lest agents provocateurs use the moment to create a disturbance.

All we need is a couple of non-Azeris to be beat up or killed, they said, and the 4th Army will be all over us in a jiffy. Stay indoors, the Front advised Russians, stay out of harm's way.

But the Front is not a monolithic organization.

mastered the art of manipulating the media that was so finely developed by the Israelis in the pre-1982 period: David vs Gollaith, noble sacrifice, etc. The Armenian success in doing so cannot be held against them because it is in their national interest. Give credit where credit is due. The Azeris would dearly like to do the same but appear incapable of doing so because of a gaping credibility gap: they have been caught lying too many times before. But it is more than passing strange that the Armenians, even when exposed of passing out disinformation, do not suffer from it. One small example of this will suffice: as soon as the news of Hodjali went ballistic, the Armenian Ministry of Defense announced that more than 200 Armenian soldiers had been killed by counter-attacking Azeris in the town of Askeron. The Moscow press--and through it, the world media--immediately picked up on this most recent reported blood-bath in Nagorno Karabakh. The problem was that the Armenians, though in control of Askeron, had no corpses to show. The story quickly dropped off the news digest of the day, but it had served its purpose: off-setting world revulsion over the Hodjali massacre.

14) The date is etched into the consciousness of all Azeris, and might be said to be the day that modern Azeri nationalism began as a visceral reaction to control from Moscow. Over 200 were killed--many, reportedly, by 'designer' bullets and other illegal weapons--when the Soviet troops arrived to put down mob violence against the 300,000 Armenian residents in Baku. The essential issue was Nagorno Karabakh, although the specific cause of the riots was the presence of thousands of Azeri refugees expelled from Armenia in 1989 who demanded housing, and thought that the apartments of the Baku Armenians were a good trade for their own abandoned abodes. Perhaps a little ingeniously, many Azeris saw a dark plot hatched by the KGB behind the riots that tripped off the crack down.

Rather, it is a loose umbrella of opposition parties, associations and individuals. And not all subscribed to the policy of wait-and-see promoted by the leadership.

One group headed by Anar Resulriza, chairman of the Azerbaijan Writers' Association (and including many university professors and other 'intellectuals', but not a member organization of the Popular Front) decided that although they might stay silent, they had to register their total disgust with and lack of faith in the Mutalibov government. Accordingly, they initiated their own, silent protest vigil in front of the Presidential building--conveniently located right down the street from my house.

They gathered at noon, every day, and just stood in the street while one man waved an Azeri flag and another held up a single, simple sign that read 'Istifa,' or 'Resign.'

There were no quotable speeches because there were no speeches at all. They just stood in the street, talking among themselves.

The first gathering attracted around 200 people; the second day, 300; by the third day, the crowd had only grown to 500--still less than the number of people allegedly killed at Hodjali.

The ritual was always the same.

Come and stand in front of the Presidential building, and register yourself as being against everything it stands for.

It would have been pathetic if they had not been so brave and, like the portionately small crowds who defended Boris Yeltsin's White House in Moscow in August, '91, ultimately so effective.

Elsewhere, too, there was movement afoot.

On March 3rd, the Milli Shura, or National Council, called for an emergency meeting of the full, 350 member Supreme Soviet (15).

The parliament had been in suspension since early December following the last great eruption in the Karabakh crisis--the shooting down, on November 20th 1991, of a helicopter filled with high government officials and Russian and Kazak would-be peace keepers (16). Mutalibov, who had consistently resisted the creation of the Shura because it represented a potential, alternative power-base to his own presidential apparatus, had put a finger in the political wind and apparently decided that the creation of the Shura might take some of the heat off his political hot seat, and the body was brought into being.

But rather than function as an alternative parliament, the Shura--made up of 50 selected parliamentarians equally divided between deputies of the (former) Communist Party and the

15) The Ali Sovyet; the body has yet to be renamed a 'mejlis,' or parliament, although that is the term I will use here.

16) Presumably by Karabakh Armenians, although the investigation into the air accident remains inconclusive. Plenty of conspiracy theories surround the crash, ranging from a devilish plot by the Soviet security forces to further aggravate the inter-ethnic problem to an equally devilish plot by Mutalibov to get rid of certain 'critics', although most of the Azeri dead aboard the craft appeared to be quite close to him and his mourning genuine. The easiest--and most obvious--answer to the question of who pulled the trigger is that it was local Karabakh Armenians. They have been shooting, without discrimination, at all symbols of Azeri authority since 1988 and plugging a helicopter carrying Azeri officials is something they would clearly like to do.

opposition Democratic Block (17)--was limited to the role of being either an ineffectual irritant or a dysfunctional brake on the autocratic presidency. When the Shura attempted to push through critical legislation--ranging from the removal of (former) Soviet troops stationed in Azerbaijan, the formation of a national army and the re-adoption of the Latin-based script for modern Azeri Turkish, Mutalibov might go along with the principle of any given idea but consistently reneged on implementation. And when the Shura challenged Mutalibov on fundamental issues like the president's unexpected and unannounced signing of the new treaties at Alma Ata and Minsk aimed at bringing a reluctant Azerbaijan into the new Commonwealth of Independent States, Mutalibov merely shrugged and claimed executive prerogative.

Although sad and difficult to quantify, there is room for the following cynical argument: the Shura became everything Ayaz Mutalibov needed. Its presence and composition gave Azerbaijan the appearance of enjoying the accoutrements of democratic pluralism, but little or none of the substance.

And more: over its three month existence, the Shura increasingly began to act as an insiders' club for former outsiders, the vehicle for co-opting political opponents who were as devoted to the development of their own careers as they were to the Cause.

Indeed, one might say that the most effective, independent act committed by the Shura was its self-dissolution on March 3rd when it called the full parliament back into emergency session.

Only two of the 50 members voted against the convocation, although this does not necessarily imply a unity of purpose between the opposition and government deputies of the Shura.

The main item on the agenda of the former was to use the wave of popular discontent against Mutalibov as the means to have him legally dismissed and to dissolve the all-powerful presidential apparatus. (18) The pro-government members of the Shura, meanwhile, saw in the readiness of the opposition deputies to reconvene the full parliament the window of opportunity they had long sought: to use their massive parliamentary majority to ram

17) The Democratic Block in the Azerbaijan parliament is often confused with the Popular Front. The two are close, but by no means identical. Of the 40 registered members of the Democratic Block in parliament, 'about' 20 are members of the Popular Front, the others being independent deputies or those belonging to 'independent' parties like the Social Democrats. The fuzziness in the exact number of Popular Front deputies is because the organization is itself so fuzzy about membership. For example, I'tibar Mahmedov, a candidate for the Presidency, was once one of the fieriest speakers at any given Front rally, but he has recently split to form his own, verociously nationalist National Independence Party, which despite its separate status, continues to work closely with the Front leadership and shares the same general ideals. The numbers game is also reflected in the Milli Shura. There, once again, of the 25 Democratic Block deputies 'about' 20 are members of the Popular Front. Both in parliament and in the Shura, though, it was overwhelmingly Popular Front-associated people (Timurlang Karayev, Isa Gamberov and Towfik Gasimov) who were active on committees, making speeches, working late and generally acting like politaholics.

18) There was, to be sure, a great deal of wishful thinking (and even naivete) involved in this position but short of revolution or assassination it was the only means of unseating the man.

through the endorsement of Mutalibov's signing Azerbaijan on as a 'founding member' of the Commonwealth of Independent States with all that this decision entailed: common currency, common defense and, ultimately, common political culture with the rest of the rump Soviet Union.

Almost incidentally, the subject of the special convocation was Nagorno Karabakh.

The Azerbaijan Ali Sovyet, or parliament, is located in an unprepossessing building situated across a large avenue from the Hotel Moscow (19) and a small street separating it from the state television studios and antenna. Diagonally across the intersection is the Shehidlar Xiyabesi, or Martyrs' Park--the final resting place for the growing number of Azeris killed in action in Karabakh or in the way of independence.

The rows of graves in the park accessed by granite walkways are as simple and moving as the ten story building is unattractive.

The parliament is built in the 'Soviet' style: lots of cement.

Cement staircases lead up to two cement buildings connected by more cement. The shorter structure contains the legislative chamber while the higher structure contains the offices of deputies and committees. Tall, plate-glass windows break up the grey walls to some degree, but on the whole it is an ugly, impersonal building that compares badly with the 'modern, commie imperial' style of the brown and white marble presidential palace downtown. (20)

In anticipation of the special session opening on March 5th, the deputies began arriving from all over Azerbaijan. In anticipation of the public displays of disgruntlement with the lawmakers, large numbers of police were also called in.

The reason for this was simple: last time parliament had met, several communist deputies (and one independent walking with them) had been attacked and beaten by members of an irate mob who wanted to know why parliament refused to create the Milli Shura.

The parliamentarians had been obliged to spend the night inside the building.

Now, however, the issue to be debated was much more emotional: the slaughter at Hodjali, and why the law-makers and government had been helpless to prevent it.

Visually, the stand-off was almost ridiculous.

The 'intellectuals' who had been staking out the Presidential building down the hill in quasi-defiance of Popular Front protest policy, had called on students and teachers to reconvene their silent vigil on the steps of the parliament. (21)

19) Recently renamed the AnBa, for 'Ankara-Baku' after it was leased to a Turkish firm

20) From a certain aspect, the style of the two buildings tells the story of power in Azerbaijan: Parliament was never designed to function all year round, and as a result the architecture of the building was never very carefully thought out. It may be made of concrete, but it has a 'temporary' feel about it, reflecting the tasks of those who occupy it. The Presidential building, in contrast, has the heavy feel of permanence about it, as if it were made for (commie) kings.

21) The official 'sponsor' of the rally, strangely enough, was the Baku Region Council of Towns' Association, whose leadership,

The numbers had grown, but not by much: there were perhaps 1,000 people collected at the base of the steps--a tiny crowd in comparison to the masses the Popular Front used to be able to gather--and they were facing off against at least 200 police. (22) The presence of the protestors was technically illegal, but a decision had apparently been taken to tolerate the darts and jabs coughed up from the crowd as the price of peace, and so they were left unmolested.

A couple of thousand irate people in a country of seven million ain't a lot in any case; best to let them howl.

And howl they did.

Istifa! Istifa!, the crowd chanted, adding voice to the familiar protest signs, Istifa!

The noise was lost in the accoustical vacuum of the large, open traffic circle the crowd had claimed as their own, and most of the people were hidden from view from the parliamentarians due to the structure of the raised, review stand over-looking the intersection and the line of policemen blocking the stairs.

The inside of the chamber was a different world.

Gone were the two and three day growths of beard found on chin and cheek outside; here, nearly every male deputy was cleanly shaved and enveloped in the bubble of his own cologne.

Gone, too, were the shabby clothes and permanently unbuffed shoes of the average Azeri man-on-the-street; here, the men sported tailor-made pin-strips three piece suits and Gucci shoes.

The lady deputies, mostly rotund, wore satins and silks and high-heeled pumps and looked like painted dolls whose hair was done twice a day.

Moving among the deputies, I was once more aware that if Azeri Turkish, for political reasons, is the language of the chamber, most of the deputies were quite happy to chat away in Russian among themselves.

I had been here before, but had apparently forgotten.

I had just entered a time warp.

I had entered the land of the crocodiles. (23)

And the reptiles were smiling.

it is said, wants Haydar Aliiev to return from quasi-exile in Nakhchivan. I have written about Haydar extensively elsewhere, and it is clear that the old KGB general and Politburo member has yet to make his final move, but in the early March it was impossible to think of a more distant figure from the events swirling around Baku. Popular Front officials still maintain that they had nothing to do with the organization of the rally, but got sucked into it later ~~■~~ out of a sense of obligation: they feared it would get out of control.

22) Most of these, it has to be said, were crowd-friendly. But the 500, mainly Russian conscripts from the 4th Army who were stationed behind the parliament building were not necessarily of a similar disposition.

23) Members of the Communist elite of the (former) USSR are frequently referred to as 'dinosaurs' in the sense that they are doomed to extinction. But 'Crocodile', I am proud to say, is a Tommyism applied to the aparachiks of Azerbaijan that seems to be catching on. It is a far better description of the survival instincts--and latent threat--of the creatures than 'dinosaur': crocodiles wear valuable skins and lurk in the shallows to snap at goats and small children who stray too near the water's edge. They are not pathetic, they are dangerous.

The special session seemed less an occasion to boldly confront the national disaster at hand than to sun on the legislative log, glad-hand friends and colleagues not seen since the last session and discuss new business deals and recent vacations.

It wasn't just pathetic, it was grotesque: one of two, last Azeri settlements in Nagorno Karabakh had been wiped out existence and upwards of 1,000 people killed; tens of thousands of citizens of the city of Agdam had been sent fleeing down the road by a couple dozen noisy missiles; whatever inflated pride the young, Azeri army had indulged in had been blown out of it by a couple hundred Armenian gunmen. (24)

More to the point, the nation had been lied to, deceived and betrayed in an incredibly open manner--and yet, from all appearances, the crocodiles didn't care.

The exceptions to this indifference were a couple of crocs who had been unlucky enough to be in Agdam when Hodjali was hit.

One was Rahim Husseinov, the deputy Minister of Health, who had the dubious pleasure of reviewing rows of butchered bodies in the local morgue in Agdam and organizing emergency medical aid to hundreds of wounded in the Agdam hospital--all while working under the 'nothing happened' order from the government.

There was also Jalil Tanriverdi, the deputy Minister of Trade, who joined me under the dinner table in the Agdam government guest house when the Armenians in Askeron started to lob Kristal fragmentary rockets on the city, blowing out all the windows in the guest house. One near-miss sent Jalil and I tumbling down the stairs to the basement sauna in a heap after we were foolish enough to believe the barrage was over and had started collecting some things. During the next lull, we joined thousands of other fleeing people on the road out of town. You don't forget that sort of 'bonding' experience soon, nor whom you hold responsible.

The Hodjali massacre and bombing of Agdam had apparently been an eye-opening experience for the pair. They might now be clean shaven and dressed in their rather too expensive suits and they might laugh and glad-hand like the best of them, but their eyes betrayed them as having spiritually left crocodile land, forever.

There were other familiar faces in the hall as well:

There was Timurlang Karayev, the deputy chair of parliament whose tight-rope walk between the opposition and the government was starting to wiggle and wobble. He had been on the front in Agdam, trying to get helicopters in to get women and children out of Hodjali, but the government always said 'tomorrow' and no helicopters came. Then he had tried to secure the exchange of bodies and living hostages, and had produced some. Now, however, he was under investigation by the Popular Front to see what level of 'complicity' with the government he was guilty of, and his political career as the best public face of the opposition seemed to be at an end, or at least in the ice box. (25)

24) The real figure must be known in Yerevan (or maybe just in Stepanakert) but reporters who have traveled the Armenian side of the divide swear that the number of Fedayeen is remarkably low. The estimate given by the information office of the Azerbaijan Ministry of Defense--30,000 to 40,000--is, frankly, insane.

25) Karayev appeared to be on his way to becoming one of the bright lights among the Young Turks of Azerbaijan until he became more involved in protocol than politics. Normally a fine orator with a good sense of the quotable line and the right moment to say it, he has watched his star sink below the horizon due to a series of incredibly stupid political errors. During Mutalibov's

Standing apart from him were his colleagues from the Democratic Block: Isa Gamberov, Arif Hadjiev, Towfik Gamsimov and then the live-wire of the opposition, Iskender Hamidov. (26) All were very tense and wore long looks on their faces.

The main item on the morning agenda had already been passed: disaster had befallen the country, and a fall-guy had to be found. In this case, it was a fall-gal: the much-hated Chairwoman of Parliament, Mrs Elmira Kafarova. Losing the post did not seem to overly upset her, however. During the recess she laughed and smiled with colleagues as if nothing had happened. (27) She had tendered her resignation 'due to poor health' and it had been accepted by the floor--conforming with rumors circulating outside hours before the event and seeming to confirm yet one more conspiracy theory: the government was willing to do anything to buy time to think.

Kafarova had been replaced by the faceless rector of the medical faculty of Baku University, Dr Yakub Mehmedov. (28) The rumors of his putative candidacy for the post of chairman among the crowd outside had been cynically confirmed when multiple government deputies had taken the podium to sing his praises. The eulogizing finally came to an end when opposition

state visit to Turkey in January, 1992, which he attended as the leader of the parliamentary opposition (and was thus politically tasked with representing opposition ideas publically and privately,) Karayev was indistinguishable from anyone else in Mutalibov's retinue and a great disappointment to his hosts. He had also largely dropped from public view in Azerbaijan for months until resurfacing during the Hodjali affair in his native Agdam to count corpses and take the heat. Remarkably, he has now announced his candidacy for the presidency, but the style with which he did this reflects his waning political intelligence: a television 'interview' where he 'spontaneously' responded to questions like 'what do you want to do for the country' by reading from scraps of paper, and often losing place.

26) These four men must account for 75% of the total time in parliament devoted to speeches from the floor--a refreshing and often even entertaining part of attending sessions, but that purveys a false sense that the body is somehow 'democratic'. The opposition might be doing all the talking, but most of the time it is just pissing in the wind on record.

27) From all appearances, Kafarova assumed there was a resign-today return-tomorrow game plan underway. And with good reason. She had been obliged to resign in September 1991 in the wake of massive public protest and indignation over her remarks, accidentally carried live on TV, that the opposition were nothing but "drunks and dope addicts." But after the ruckus over her ill-chosen words had died down, she had managed to walk right back into her old post.

28) In addition to being known as a Mutalibov cronie, Mehmedov also carried the nickname 'Dollar Yakub' due to his reputation for allegedly lowering university entrance and graduation standards for a fee. This might sound like gratuitous reputation-bashing, even in as corrupt a society as Azerbaijan, but the allegation was at least partially confirmed by my landlady, a sweet, upper class, Russified genitologist. Yes, she said wearily one day as she watched her world collapsing around her ears, Yakub Muallim had taken plenty on the sly, but that was yesterday and today the nation needed a leader and so he should be given a chance to reform his ways...

deputies managed to take control of the microphones and say that they smelled another scenerio. The government reacted by calling for the dissolution of the Milli Shura, and the fight was on--and Hodjali forgotten.

Or almost.

In addition to the handful of Popular Front-affiliated deputies from the Democratic Block, there was a surprise guest from the doomed town: Mr Elman Mahmedov, the mayor of the Hodjali, who had managed to survive the death-run through the mountains to Agdam. He was dressed in military togs and was very angry. He had been invited to address parliament, but wasn't satisfied with the word pictures he had painted.

"They won't show the film," he said, "they are afraid of the film."

"What film?" I asked, but knew.

Jengiz Fuatogli, Azerbaijan's star roving newsman who had access that was denied to anyone else, had traveled out to Agdam in the wake of the Hodjali massacre, forced his way aboard a military helicopter at Agdam field and shot initial footage of bodies scattered across a shallow ravine before the helicopter was forced back to Agdam by a second military chopper operating from the Armenian side of the lines. (29)

A second trip two days later was more productive, if grizly: this time the chopper was able to land--and smack dab in the middle of the killing fields. (30)

This was the film that Jengiz had brought to parliament and wanted shown on the four, huge monitors above the dias.

Others wanted it shown as well.

Earlier that morning, opposition deputies had raised a motion that the film be shown to the chamber as a 'curtain raiser' for the general discussion of the tragedy the government had denied

29) For the record, the brave journos were Kostas Sakellariou, a Greek American photographer, the London Times/Economist correspondent Anatoli Levin and almost incidentally, Juliet Roussant, whose emotional contribution to Business Week (Letter from Azerbaijan, March 30th, 1992) is a classic Don't Let The Story Get In The Way Of My Glory sort of 1990s journalism. Still, in treating CEOs throughout the USA to her reflections on what it feels like to get shot at when aboard an armoured bird and the subsequent delights of taking evasive action, she unwittingly wrote about one of the strangest aspects of the Hodjali massacre and one that has not been looked into too closely. The press crew were aboard a Soviet attack helicopter loaned that day to the Azeris; the Azeri forces previously had none. Neither were the Armenians known to have any military helicopters operating in the sector at the time. The point is this: the helicopter dog-fight above the killing grounds seems to have been conducted by two (former) Soviet choppers, flown by (former) Soviet crews but carrying respective groups of Azeris and Armenians. We know what the Azeri team was doing because there was western press aboard. But we do not yet know what the 'Armenian' helicopter was doing in the area. We do not even know if a single Armenian was aboard. Welcome back to the slippery slope of Grand Conspiracy.

30) A close study of the first footage reveals that several of the victims who lay dead in the gully had not yet been mutilated as they were later discovered to be. Someone--from the second helicopter?--had managed to get into the killing fields, carve up bodies, and the get back out again before Jengiz, Kostas and Anatoli returned to the horrible zone.

ever having occurred. The motion had been over-ruled on 'procedural grounds,' with the election of the new chairman and the setting of an agenda taking precedence over all else.

But word of the famous film (like everything else that occurred inside the chamber) had also leaked outside to the street.

Show The Film! Show the Film!, shouted the crowd, audible even through the thick, tinted glass.

Who knows?

Maybe it was Mehmedov's introductory concession to the opposition deputies, in order to establish a proper working relationship.

Maybe he was just buckling under pressure, or trying to humor everyone.

Maybe he just wanted to put off discussion of the rest of the agenda--the status of the presidency, the status of the Milli Shura, the status of the army, the status of refugees--for as long as possible.

It is hard to say.

But when the crocodiles returned to the chamber after the noon lunch break, the opposition once again demanded that The Film be screened for the edification of all in the chamber, and the crocodiles accepted.

The lights dimmed.

The four voting screens lit up.

The first frames of the film started rolling forward.

The next ten minutes changed the history of the country.

The cameraman was in a helicopter and the noise of the engine drowned out all conversation.

The film showed feet and elbows and knees.

Then the camera, pointed out a port-hole, picked up a number of objects on the ground below.

Difficult to tell exactly what it was.

More unintelligible talk.

Then the helicopter landed.

The doors opened.

And then the recorded voice of Jengiz, loud over the whining roar of the engines, let out a terrible, choking sigh.

'Oh God,' said Jengiz, as the lens focused on the objects we had seen from the sky, 'Oh God Oh God Oh God.'

They were corpses, dozens of them, lying stiff on the ground among the pathetic belongings of their dead owners.

There were men and women and children and ancients, some with the backs of their heads blown off, many holding their rigamortized hands above their heads, apparently in some gesture of surrender.

It as pretty awful.

Still crying, Jengiz had enough presence of mind to pan to the horizon, which was covered with lumps and bumps of stuff that were once living beings, all along the way. He added a few more corpse close-ups and shots of hysteric Azeri men loading twisted bodies on the chopper (31) and then the film was over.

Watching a video clip of the parliamentary session watching the film, I noticed that it was difficult distinguishing between Jengiz's groans and those picked up from the chamber floor as the

31) Maybe thankfully, he did not record Anatoli Levin going through the horrible but necessary task of searching the decomposing bodies for identification. This is the man described by Roussant in the Business Week as 'screaming' in fear--as if anything is audible in the belly of a war helicopter under fire.

magnitude of the event began to penetrate the thick protective scales of the crocodile deputies.

They were sobbing, vomiting, chilled by the gruesome, forced video footage of the mutilated, rotting corpses in the killing fields. (32)

Elmira Kafarova might have thought of her resignation as temporary earlier in the day, but there was returning now.

New scape-goats were needed.

Heads had to roll, and big ones.

Istifa! chanted the crowd outside, Istifa!

There was nothing new in the demand of the crowd.

But for the first time, they smelled potential victory.

After a short recess, Ayaz Motalibov, asked to take the floor. Remarkably, he was actually in the building and couldn't very well avoid an appearance on demand.

Ayaz wasn't looking good.

His eyes were puffing and his usual blow-dry hair-do looked ruffled. They said he hadn't slept much over the past few days, but he looked more like a man who had gone on a five day drunk.

He didn't look or act presidential.

Nor, once he got behind the podium, did he sound very executive.

He rambled.

But from his long monologue, several key points emerged:

In the aftermath of the failed, August 19th coup in Moscow, he said, Russia had become the new substitute for the Center. (33)

That same Russia, he said, was pursuing a pro-Armenian policy because Azerbaijan had not ratified either the economic or the political treaties of the CIS.

He predicted that Azerbaijan would lose Karabakh if it did not now sign the up-coming treaty on a unified command for CIS troops and integrate its inchoate national army into that command structure and settle for a National Guard, which would serve at the president's command.

There was a stunned silence.

Motalibov had scarcely mentioned Hodjali, and in light of growing evidence that elements of the Soviet/CIS interior forces had participated in the massacre there, his suggestion that Azerbaijan's national salvation lay in joining itself to the killers was more than amazing, it was insane.

Many in the chamber began wondering whether the President had lost his mind or was so out of touch that he actually didn't know what was going on in the country. (34)

32) The film had such an impact on the parliamentary audience that the powers that be, predictably, decided to co-opt the horror and make it theirs. It is now difficult to avoid watching replays of 'The Greatest Moments Of The Hodjali Massacre', as every government office seems to have a copy and a handy VCR to show visiting foreigners. There is something inherently sick about this obsession with victimization, death and mutilation, but the Azeris are literally wallowing in it now.

33) The catch-all term for the openly and covertly manipulative powers associated with the Kremlin in Moscow during the 70 years of the USSR.

34) Interestingly, this is the argument now (early April, 1992) being trotted out in Motalibov's defense: The (former) President

The first to take the floor after Mutalibov's delivery was Rahim Gaziev, the hero of the defense of Shusha (35), who had arrived in parliament clad in camouflage togs with a pistol strapped to his side.

Earlier in the day, he had emerged from parliament to address the protestors outside and had been met by jubilant cheers.

They, in return, had been met by a cold shower.

Cool out, Gaziev demanded of the mob, now is the time for unity, not dissent. And if we have to keep the president to preserve unity, then that is what we will do.

The crowd was stunned, but duly stopped chanting for Mutalibov's resignation for several hours.

But following the president's post Film delivery, Gaziev went on the attack.

There was nothing in Mutalibov's chikish that even vaguely addressed the conflict at hand, he said. Not one culprit had been named. And as for the future of the army, a universal mobilization was needed--and not the mass de-mob proposed by the president.

Gaziev also brought some more tragic news to the attention of the law-makers: 32 more civilians had just been killed at the village of Jamilli, a Hodjali in miniature, and not one word had been uttered. It was, again, the government that was attempting to hide the news from the people of Azerbaijan and the world.

Other opposition MPs quickly followed Gaziev to the microphones, and one has to be a little surprised with what ease they took the floor. All were recognized as being dyed-in-the-

had been misinformed; the (former) President hadn't known...the Hodjali tragedy was the result of a Grand Plot hatched by the Popular Front, possibly in cahoots with the Russians, in order to unseat him. Amazingly, there are those willing to listen to this twaddle. Had Mutalibov not known about the 50-odd villages erased from the map in the course of half a year? Had not known that those that remained were encircled and that no aid was getting to them? Was he truly oblivious to the 1,000 Azeri citizens killed in Karabakh over the past year, Hodjali excluded? If it is true that virtually every one of his advisors and ministers succeeded in deceiving him for their own nefarious ends, then it seems to me that Mutalibov's inability to choose reliable advisors alone would be sufficient grounds for impeachment. But it is precisely those advisors who are now attempting to circulate the innocent-through-ignorance argument.

35) A professor of mathematics and deputy of the Democratic Block, Gaziev's real career began last fall when he was appointed an opposition member of the National Defense Council, a sort of proto-Defense Ministry that never really functioned. Frustrated with the lack of coordination and the level of corruption in the NDC, he left in disgust and traveled to Shusha, the main (and now last) Azeri town in Nagorno Karabakh located in the heights above Stepanakert, where he began organizing local militiamen on some sort of national army lines. Limited success brought fame and fame brought more men; weapons were bought from departing Soviets, or simply taken. In one such encounter Gaziev was shot in the leg, and now has a hero's limp. Following the fall of Hodjali, Gaziev returned to Baku to take part in the parliamentary debates--and walked into the chamber to be received as a national hero, credited with having saved Shusha from Hodjali's fate. People listened when he spoke and he was made acting Minister of Defense within a week.

wool detractors of Mutalibov and his crocodile cronies, and their statements were all variations on the central theme:

Mutalibov had to go.

Iskender Hamidov (former police inspector): Mutalibov came to power as a result of the January 20th, 1990 blood-bath and was appointed the head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan by Moscow in order to implement its program. He bore personal responsibility for Hodjali, and should resign.

Towfiq Gasimov (professor of Law): By hampering the building of the army Mutalibov had violated the Law on the Armed Forces and also the Law on the Protection of the Borders. Accordingly, he should be impeached according to Article 121/7 of the Constitution for having violated the Constitution.

Isa Gamberov (leading PF deputy in the Democratic Block): Mutalibov's solution to the Karabakh crisis was to join the Azeri armed forces with those of the CIS to patrol the area. The Democratic Block was resolute in its stance: Independence and Independent Armed Forces.

I'tibar Mehmedov (formerly PF, now Independent): The President was a national traitor for even suggesting that Azerbaijan join its inchoate army to the unified force that had so recently slaughtered Azeri citizens.

On behalf of Democratic Block, Mehmedov then voiced a draft resolution calling for Mutalibov's resignation and called on the floor for a vote.

The chair refused the motion, and called for a recess.

The deputies went out into the vestibule to smoke; others to the cafe to pick up a caviar sandwich and a cup of tea.

There, the deputies discovered a disconcerting fact.

The crowd, with the tacit permission of the police, had broken through the barriers, surged up the stairs and surrounded the parliament building.

Most were women, members of the Azerbaijan Women's Rights Association. (36)

The crocodiles, cigarettes dangling from their lips or sandwiches in their hands, found themselves face to face with hundreds of irate women, many holding their children, noses smearing snot on the outside of the huge, plate windows.

Istifa! Istifa! the chanted the ladies banging their fists on the glass.

Then the big plate glass window cracked.

And then it broke.

Shattered glass scattered all over the vestibule floor.

Istifa! Istifa! bellowed the matrons, with no glass muffler to lessen the volume of their chant.

The shocked and amazed deputies found themselves cheek to jowl with the crowd. Many ran back into the chamber, fearing for their lives.

Instantly, the deputies belonging to the Democratic Block moved to separate the crowd from the crocodiles, pleading with the former to withdraw from their new lines and pleading with the latter to return to the chamber and get on with the job at hand.

Remarkably, the small band of deputies succeeded.

Sanity had prevailed, and the crowd returned to their street-side vigil while the badly-shaken deputies returned to the chamber.

36) Led by the redoubtable Hanim Halilova, a tank of a woman who has threatened to lead her ~~pack~~ pack of modern-day Azeri Amazons to reconquer Karabakh.

The debate continued about Mutsalibov's fate, but with new urgency.

The opposition once again voiced their demand for an immediate resignation.

The government, amazingly, continued to stonewall.

As the night ground on, Mutsalibov was once more prevailed upon to make an appearance and voice his attitude toward the calls for his resignation.

His remarks only fueled speculation that the President had become unbalanced: apologizing for past mistakes, Mutsalibov promised to redistribute cabinet posts and include several opposition personalities in key positions. In the next breath he began to threaten the opposition with a crack down.

The call was taken up from a very strange quarter: Araz Alizade, the head of the Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan and a nominal member of the non-Communist, Democratic Block. (37)

In an address notable mainly for its frankness and lack of guile, Alizade called on Mutsalibov to declare a state of emergency, prohibit the activities of political parties and movements (38) and to suspend parliament for six months.

The response from the Democratic Block was as acid as it was predictable: Alizade, the great 'democrat', they mocked, had become the first public advocate of an Azeri monarchy: Mutsalibov.

But Alizade had gone further.

Along with presidential spokesman Rasim Agaiev, he signed an official request in Yakub Mehmedov's name to call in the Soviet army to defend the deputies and parliament from the 'armed groups' who had surrounded and were preparing to attack the building.

The announcement that the troops had started to take up position in back of the building unleashed the full fury of the

37) All to the implausible falls. The SDP was the first parliamentary 'non-communist' party set up in Azerbaijan as a sort of CP-approved opposition that gave parliament a pluralistic face; the founding members were Azer and Zardush Alizade and Leila Yunusova; the latter two were members in good standing of the Popular Front executive steering committee but left the organization on January 6th, 1990. Yunusova, who in some of the (limited) literature on the Popular Front or on reports on Azerbaijan is often cast as 'alternative' (and more rational) leader to Abulfaz Elchibey for reasons that defy logic, subsequently left the brothers to establish the Independent Social Democratic Party/group and is now back in the orbit of the Popular Front, if no longer a member. As for the SDP of the brothers Alizade, it's name and international connections never fooled locals, who knew it for what it was: a commie front. Sadly (or maybe typically), foreigners were never quite so perceptive and no less a personage than Socialist International eminence gris Willi Brandt even laid hands on the Azeri SDP group to bestow some sort of international legitimacy on it.

38) A one entry category in Azerbaijan: The Popular Front. Many outsiders continue to believe that the Front is a political party. It is not; rather, it is a loose association of some five to ten political parties ranging from the Turkic Unity Party to the Owners' Party as well as half a dozen organizations, such as the aforementioned Azeri Women's Rights Association, the White Beards' (IE, 'Elders') Association and the All Union Society of Meschelian Turks.

opposition MPs, who were now joined by a large number of (former) Communist Party MPs.

I'tibar Mehmedov, for one, surrendered his parliamentarian's identity card in disgust.

Rahim Gaziev pulled out his gun and said he would defend the honor of the parliament inside and the women outside, hinting darkly that he would turn Baku into 'a second Tbilisi' (39) if the 4th Army laid one hand on the protestors.

Yakub Mehmedov, denouncing the request signed in his name, agreed that the prospect of allowing Azeri women to be attacked by foreign soldiers was shameful and demanded their withdrawal. He then said he no longer cared to serve under such conditions, and resigned. He had been the chairman of parliament less than 12 hours.

His sudden resignation appears to have shocked other thinking crocodiles to break ranks, and they, too, denounced the order. After a few more moments of high tension, the troops were advised that they were not welcome and should return to their barracks.

Exhausted and having reached another impasse, the session was suspended at 0200 Friday morning, the 6th of March.

The parliament remained surrounded by the protestors, who refused to go home despite the chill of an early March dawn.

Most of the deputies slept in their chairs.

It is not known where Ayaz Mutaibov slept that last night of his autocratic reign.

On Friday, March 6th, the parliamentary session began anew.

Simultaneously, the overnight crowd on the parliament's steps began their own, *al fresco* session again:

Istifa! Istifa!

The session ground on, a circus of redundancy.

The Opposition Lunged.

The Government Dodged.

And then the word went around again:

General Popov's troops had been called in to restore order and to clear the parliamentary area of 'hooligans.'

This time, it was not Rahim Agaiev who threatened to defend the protestors, but armed elements of the Azerbaijan national army-in-formation.

Again, cooler heads prevailed and the foreign troops were once again called back to their barracks, although it remains unclear who gave the command to withdraw.

By this time, the mood outside the parliament had been wiped into a frenzy of anti-Mutaibov sentiment, and the crowd--through the agency of Popular Front functionaries--were issuing demands.

The president had to resign within one hour or they would storm the building.

(39) The reference is to the chaos that engulfed the Georgian capital in late December, 1991, when armed men associated with the 'Opposition' forced President Zviad Gamsakhourida to flee. Although the imagery of the threat works, the comparison could hardly have been worse. The Georgian 'Opposition' were, in effect, the Kremlin's creatures trying to oust the democratically elected chief of state who had promised to lead Georgia out of the USSR--essentially the opposite state of affairs in Azerbaijan, where the undemocratically elected president wanted to join the USSR/CIS and the opposition wanted out.

Possibly to humor the crowd, a trio of parliamentarians came out on the steps for a talk. They were Democratic Block deputies Najaf Najafov and Isa Gameberov, and in their tow came Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade--the leading, state-approved Islamic cleric in Azerbaijan and Transcaucasia.

They listened to the crowd, spoke with their leaders and then returned to the chamber.

They told Mutalibov that the crowd wanted him to resign or they would storm the building.

Mutalibov said he would consider the matter.

It wasn't an option, the trio advised him, it was a necessity: did Mutalibov want to go down in history like a second Vezirov, the leader with the blood of his own people on his hands?

Mutalibov said he needed some time to think about it.

The deadline was extended once to 1400 hours.

The trio of deputies came out to report the conversation to the crowd, who then went wild.

Istifa! Istifa!

An hour went by and there was no official announcement about Mutalibov's plans.

The President, reportedly, was suffering from high blood pressure and could not return to the chamber.

Another hour went by, then two and the crowd, triumphant in its bloodless victory, grew restless again.

The protective coat of the 4th army troops was now a joke; the troops had been called in twice, and twice they had been stared down even before they could take up position. They could not now be ordered in a third time.

The crowd sent in another ultimatum.

Resign, or we will storm the chamber.

Their seriousness about the threat was brought home by another window-smashing spree--rather a repeat performance on the plate-glass replacements of the smashed windows of the night before.

Once again the deputies of the Democratic Block begged the crowd for patience, saying that the modalities of the resignation were being worked out.

Hanim Halilova, meanwhile, with her trusted coterie of militant matrons at her back, launched her own attack on the parliament. Shaming local KGB guards who tried to prevent her from entering, she managed to create a breach with her considerable girth and led a group of women inside the vestibule area; the assault on the inner chamber was her own mission.

'Resign, you worm!' she roared as she broke through the last line of defense and penetrated the inner chamber, to the amazement and consternation of the exhausted deputies, 'You have been playing sick for hours, damn you! Just tender your resignation and go!'

She was dragged from the chamber by several embarrassed guards to the general applause of the protestors outside.

Suddenly, there was movement from behind the scribes' desk, a door flung open and a phalanx of political personalities led by Prime Minister Hasanov emerged from the inner sanctum of parliament with Mutalibov in tow. It was 6:00 pm Friday, and a pale and ghostly Mutalibov asked for silence.

"The People demand that I resign," he said from the podium, lips trembling, "Mistakes have been made. I thus ask that the deputies here accept my resignation." (40)

40) The problem was apparently less high blood pressure than Mutalibov's concern for immunity from prosecution--the essential

It was over--and almost too quickly.

Mutalibov had sulked off into history 'forever.' (41)

The people--maybe 5,000 of them, max--had won. (42)

And as chairman of parliament, Yakub Mehmetov now found himself in the dual role of acting president.

Immediately, the machine started clicking into gear again: Mehmedov invited Hasan Hasanov to form a new cabinet and asked the Popular Front to join in a government of national unity to address the crisis in Karabakh.

There was only one problem.

The Popular Front had stipulated their two conditions to work with Mehmedov and Hasanov: parliament should be dissolved with real, legislative authority turned over to the Milli Shura, and the Presidential apparatus itself cut down to size or dissolved.

The first condition might be met, but there was a real problem with the second:

Both Mehmedov and Hasanov wanted their former boss's job, and with all the perks.

Only one of them would get it.

That is, unless someone like Elchibey came along and took it from them.

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clause in his retirement package. He also collected a 10,000 rouble monthly stipend for life, a country vacation house, a 10 man security detachment and a car for his 'service to the nation,' or some such poetry. The cash value of the stipend (about \$100) might seem small, but it is twice that given Mikhail Gorbachev when he resigned as head of the USSR. It is hardly needed: Mutalibov is known to have salted away lots of the funds that came his way in the course of oil deals--thus the immunity clause. Interestingly, it was the Democratic Block who put forward the draft law on measures to secure Mutalibov's safety; the deputies later said they signed on to the immunity clause because they were exhausted and just wanted to get Mutalibov out of the way: if you try and kill the crocodile, he might fight back. Just let him slither back into the swamp.

41) Scarcely missing a beat, the former president showed up in the presidential palace the next day to introduce Mehmedov to his staff. Obligatory? Maybe. But he was spotted in the presidential building twice the week after--once with the entire cabinet on the day that PM Hasanov got sacked. Shortly after this he deigned to give an interview to the Moscow Nizayisimi newspaper in which he exculpated the Armenians from being the perpetrators of the Hodjali massacre and suggested that it was the work of 'others' who wanted to see him removed from power--IE, either Hasanov, the reformist Russians or, most likely, the Popular Front. He also said that if his immunity from prosecution is lifted, he will have to gather his people and 'fight back' and that he will 'return' if the people demand it. Mutalibov the Moderate, etc. The interview was a big hit in the Armenian press.

42) A first. As explained to me by Popular Front information director Niyazi Ibrahimov, the Mutalibov putsch was the first time that the people of Azerbaijan have ever experienced the concrete results of their collective political action in 70 years. A milestone had been passed, and there is no going back.