

tcg-26

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Peter Bird Martin  
ICWA/ Crane-Rogers  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover N.H. 03755

AN INTERVIEW WITH AZERBAIJAN PRESIDENT ABULFEZ ELCHIBEY

It is chance to meet with a revolutionary leader, rare when he is a real democrat, rarer still to have multiple meetings during the stages of his career, and rarest of all to have those meetings packed into the condensed time-span of success--when the subject emerges from almost total obscurity to be elected president of his country, and by democratic means.

The country is Azerbaijan and the man in question is Mr Abulfaz Elchibey--the enigmatic, 54 year old visionary and chairman of the Popular Front, the broad-based opposition coalition that softly seized control of the country on May 15th to keep the democratic process on track.

Contradictions abound in Azerbaijan, and also surround the oil-rich Caucasus nation's first democratically elected leader. A man who leads the life of a Sufi mendicant, representing the dreams of a Shiite Muslim nation, threatening to export secular, democratic revolution to the Islamic Republic of Iran? The leader of a nation engaged in the bitterest ethnic dispute in the former USSR, calling for supply corridors between the enemies territory and that which it has seized?

Welcome to the contradictory country of Azerbaijan, and to its new leader--Abulfaz Elchibey, the charismatic emissary whose vision of an independent Azerbaijan means the demise of the still-born Commonwealth of Independent States.

The first time I saw Elchibey was on Turkish television on January 21st or 22nd, 1990. I was in Ankara, and he was broadcasting from some secret hideout in Baku, as Soviet tanks rolled through the Azerbaijan capital, ~~of Baku~~. I tried to offer a spot news story of those terrible events, but was informed by my newspaper at the time that the whole thing was just another example of fundamentalist Muslims killing Armenians, and that they had enough news coverage from Yerevan on the matter...

The first time we met face to face was in September, 1992, sitting in a school-room that looked like it had been hit by the blitz; Elchibey's head was still swaddled in bandages after government goons had attacked him with clubs in an effort to get him to rescind a call to boycott that month's rigged presidential polls. Nine months later, he had just been elected president in the first truly democratic elections to be held in Azerbaijan.

---

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow studying the Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR with an emphasis on Azerbaijan

---

It was in the wake of those polls held on June 7th, 1992, that this interview was conducted--at a time when Elchibey was still only 'president-apparent,' although early returns suggested he had something in the range of 60% of the vote.

The interview was more than 'exclusive'; it was given to me as a personal favor because Elchibey knew I was leaving the country before the official results were to be announced.

But if it was an honor to be summoned to the presidential building close to midnight, it was a difficult interview to make--and not just because of the late night hour. In many ways, I knew too much from previous contact with Elchibey and was reluctant to ask the same obvious questions. I had conducted two, previous one-on-one conversations with him before, and participated in several small group encounters (usually with my wife Hicran and one or two other journalists). There were also numerous 'gang bangs' press conferences I had attended during the nine months we had known one another, when the chairman of the Popular Front either spoke to a score or more of journalists from a dozen countries, or was mobbed in the foyer or on the steps of parliament.

But this one was different.

Without becoming maudlin about it, I sought the interview because of a foreboding that it might be the last time I get to see Elchibey alive.

Because Abulfaz Elchibey is of the martyr type, and knows it. He also knows he is trying the politically impossible: establishing a nation based on the concept of democratic pluralism, human rights and the rule of law in a former Soviet republic that has far more enemies than friends, and who want to see the effort fail.

Not only is there the undeclared and debilitating war with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh, but there are also plenty of internal rivals only too eager to depose Elchibey and return Azerbaijan to the good old days, when it was a client state of Moscow and when thinking was easy.

Added to these are the reactionary elements within the old USSR/new CIS who do not want to see an independent Azerbaijan, lest its non-participatory attitude serve as an example for other CIS 'states' like those in Central Asia.

And then there is the Islamic Republic of Iran, a state identified by Abulfaz as so anti-Azeri that he has threatened to respond to Tehran's support of Armenia in the Karabakh conflict by exporting his own brand of secular nationalism South.

The fate of others who have crossed the leaders of Iran is well-known.

Indeed.

A day after the interview and on the day that the first official election results were announced, mysterious individuals blew up two ammunition dumps outside of Baku that were ear-marked as the Azerbaijan share of Soviet military hardware to be distributed to different successor states.

And no sooner than had I arrived in an Istanbul hotel from

Baku than CNN was reporting official Armenian 'concern' that the Azeris were preparing to mount a 'massive offensive' in eastern Karabakh that might force Armenia to intervene.

I don't know all the details yet, but usually, if Yerevan is talking about an Azeri offensive it means that the Armenians are preparing the ground-work for their own preemptive strike. Turkish television, meanwhile, was reporting that the city of Agdam on the eastern fringes of Nagorno Karabakh was under a massive artillery and rocket attack--the pretext to cause an Azeri attack to quickly be met by an Armenian defensive assault.

The next day, Saturday, June 13, was the day Elchibey was announced to have won the presidential election; Armenia was reporting that the Azeri offensive of thousands of men, backed by hundreds of tanks, helicopters and even war planes, had begun.

Who knows?

I don't.

Perhaps this time, the Armenians were not crying 'wolf,' and the Azeri army had been remarkably organized into the fighting force it was not just a few days before the 'counter offensive' began, and had miraculously come up with all sorts of heavy equipment it did not have the last time I looked. Azerbaijan defense ministry sources did confirm that they were throwing their all into the fray, but on the note that the movement was designed to silence the Armenian hillside batteries pounding Agdam and to stop Armenia from seizing more Azeri territory.

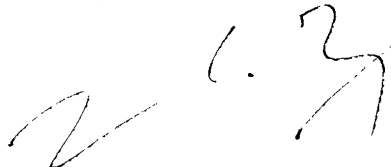
I can't say.

I was (and am) filled with a sense of foreboding about both the partisan and personal future of Elchibey. As a result, I tried to cover lots of subjects--even those we had discussed many times before. In listening to the tape, there were many glaring omissions if my pretensions to making a consummate, historical interview were to be fulfilled. There are many omissions, but the tape is run and I am now far away and I can only hope to make up for them the next time I see Elchibey.

Without further ado, here is the complete text of our conversation of Wednesday, June 10th, set up through his Foreign Affairs advisor (and old school pal) Vafa Goulizade in the Presidential Palace and conducted in Azeri Turkish.

Thomas Goltz

Istanbul, June 13th 1992

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'T. Goltz', with a large, stylized '2' written to the left of the name.



TCG: We have spoken a number of times before about various subjects concerning Azerbaijan's political life, and I would like to pursue those themes again tonight--the Popular Front,<sup>1</sup> the situation in Karabakh, the war with Armenia, the recent presidential elections--but initially I would like to take a look at some different themes. Specifically, who is Abulfaz Elchibey? On the voting ballot you were officially described as Abulfaz Aliiev. Why did you discard the name Aliiev and assume the name Elchibey?

AE: Aliiev is a family name--Ali is the name of the father, and the 'ev' comes from the Russian, meaning 'son.' In some names it is not 'ev' but 'ov'. Ahmedov, Mirzayev--that sort of thing. In certain areas of Azerbaijan we have names with Azeri suffixes like Ahmedli or Iranian style patronymics like Ahmedzade, meaning someone from the extended family of Ahmed. Because of the Russian influence a name like Hajjibeyli becomes Hajjibeyev. But Elchibey is a little different--it means 'emissary.'<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>) Azerbaijan Halq Cehpesi, the broad-based opposition coalition that coalesced around Elchibey in the mid-1980s and was legally incorporated in 1989. Curiously, in most of the literature on Azerbaijan and the Popular Front, most writers focus on such personalities as E'tibar Mamedov or Leila Yunusova and neglect Elchibey or describe him variously as representing the radical nationalist fringe or--in total contradiction to that--the incrementalist reformers who were too willing to compromise. After a year in Azerbaijan and watching Elchibey and his supporters in action, I wonder where most of the 'experts' were or why they focus on such truly fringe people as Mamedov or Yunusova.

<sup>2</sup>) Literally, Mister Emissary

TCG: You chose it?

AE: Not exactly. People used to call me that in the sense that they thought of me as being the emissary, the ambassador of the nation.

TCG: When was the first time you used it?

AE: The first time I used it was after the army entered <sup>3</sup> and we wrote a protest letter to the United Nations General Secretary, Peres de Cuellar and to the democratic community of the world. And I signed the document Abulfaz Elchibey and dropped Aliiev.

TCG: A more personal question--you live with your sister?

AE: No, with my brother.

TCG: Do you have your own family?

AE: Yes, a wife and two children. We live with my brother in his house together. We have two rooms and they have two rooms. It's his house, but we have always lived together. He was older, and when he got married and I stayed single I came to stay with them. We also share the same house in our village for the summer as well as the house here. We have maintained our fraternal relations down to today.

TCG: If you indeed become president, will you move out or move together to the presidential residence?

AE: No, we will maintain the same house--for his children and mine. I don't have a lot of time to spend with my kids right now. My brother takes the kids to the park, the market, to school--it's better like that. That's how it always has been. It is a tradition of Azerbaijan. Four brothers grow up together, marry and have families but continue to live together in the same place, building their different houses in close proximity to each other for solidarity's sake. Life can be difficult in the village--one brother looks after the sheep, another after the expenses, the father or oldest brother becomes the Aksakal (White beard) or leader of the group--there are plenty of families like that today in Azerbaijan. Even large families like that.

TCG: I'd like to ask you about the Nakhjivan connection. Your legal name is Aliiev. Then there is the other Aliiev who is also

---

<sup>3</sup>) January 20th, 1990, when (then) Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the army of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) to roll on Baku to 'restore order' after anti-Armenian riots of previous week.

from Nakhjivan and also living like a Sufi hermit. <sup>4</sup>

AE: No, mine is not the life of a Sufi--it is only necessity. Acquiring a house is very difficult. You have to go here and there and apply and you are told that it will take three or five years...I never had time to go through the process. There are many families like that--four or five kids, or even 15, all applying for houses when houses are few or non-existent. What do you do? Give money. Bribes. But I never have and never will give a bribe. Or take or give money that is not due. Once or twice I have given money to beggars at the door of hospitals because they seemed to be desperate, but that was only once or twice. Also to mosques, sometimes. But I never liked doing it, this giving away of money. Why? What's the point? Actually, I could have acquired a house after I returned from Egypt where I was working as a translator. <sup>5</sup> I had worked abroad and had savings and the recommendations and connections that came from working abroad as a young specialist with a good record. So when I returned from Egypt I went to the Baku Soviet housing office. There was an older woman in front of me, and the responsible man told her there were no houses available. The woman tried to explain that she didn't need the house for herself but for her widowed daughter-in-law and four children. Her son had died and the daughter-in-law and grandchildren were living in a filthy place and were often ill. Tuberculosis. The man said 'woman, I won't give you a house.' The woman pleaded and cried but the man wouldn't give her a place. Then it was my turn he asked me what I wanted and I gave him the special paper I had received from the authorities and I threw it on the table and banged my fist on it--I still remember the man's name. I told him he was a man without honor. 'You are watching people on death's door and you still won't give them decent housing.' I said to him, 'I want no house from you.' So I turned and went away. The second time I had a chance to get my own house was when I emerged from prison. The

---

<sup>4</sup>) Former KGB general, Azerbaijan Communist Party boss and Politburo member Haydar ('Geidar') Aliev, who is now the President of the Assembly of the Nakhjivan Autonomous Republic, the peculiar Azeri territory cut off from the rest of the country by Armenia, with border to the south with Iran and Turkey. Aliev returned to Nakhjivan in 1990 under the banner of being a reborn Azeri-Turkish nationalist and despite--or maybe because of--almost universal belief that he acquired massive wealth during his long years in power, now maintains the simplest of lives. He shares a three room walk-up flat with his sister and brother in-law and their three children, and quite literally lives out of a suitcase because there is no closet for his two suits. "Who does this remind you of?" a Turkish embassy official in Baku once asked me rhetorically.

<sup>5</sup>) Abulfaz was trained as an Arabist and worked as a Russian/Arabic translator at the High Dam in the 1960s.

KGB said that if I applied through them they would get me a house. I told them no, that I didn't want any assistance from them because it would destroy people's faith in me and they would start calling me an agent. I told them I worked at the Academy (of Sciences) so let the Academy give me a house. They said 'you know best.' They worked like that, trying to bind people to them in little ways, put people in their debt. It also made it pretty easy for them to bug the houses they provided.

TCG: I wanted to ask whether you ever were ever a Communist Party member?

AE: Yes. I was a member for three years. They kicked me out of the party ranks when I went into prison in 1975.

TCG: What was the specific charge?

AE: There were two articles--188/2, concerning written and oral defamation of the Soviet Union. After Gorbachev came to power this article was removed from the list of possible crimes in the USSR. Then there was article 67--nationalism. The situation then was that Azerbaijan was losing its culture, language and identity--it was being killed, strangled. Even (communist) party conferences were held in Russian. When do we use Azeri? Azeri had been declared the official language of state but it wasn't used anywhere. Only Russian. It wasn't right, and when I spoke out about it they called it nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

TCG: How many years were you convicted for?

AE: Three years for each crime, but they combined them into a total of three. I only stayed inside for a year and a half after a review of the case by the Supreme Court.

TCG: Was there any special arrangement made for your release?

AE: No, absolutely not.

TCG: I have heard that Haydar Aliev had something to do with your release.<sup>7</sup>

AE: No, it was like this--jailing the nationalists and dissidents

---

<sup>6</sup>) Notably, Elchibey will only speak Azeri at press conferences and even in intimate meetings with diplomats.

<sup>7</sup>) In conspiracy-plagued Azerbaijan, there are even those who suggest that the two Alievs--Abulfaz and Haydar--are part of some deep, dark plot to have Azerbaijan run by compatriots from Nakhjivan. According to the theory, Abulfaz was 'suborned' while in prison, and the two have been in secret cahoots ever since.

of the time were not good for the reputation of the state--or for that of Haydar Aliev. So there was an effort to ease tension among the community, and the sentence was commuted to a year and a half.

TCG: What does it mean to be from Nakhjivan? You are from Nakhjivan, Haydar is from Nakhjivan.

AE: So what? There still isn't a complete melting into one community here--but that isn't just Azerbaijan. Its also in Germany and the United States. Just think of Texans, Californians--all have there own special traits. In Azerbaijan we have Bakuities, Ganjites, Nakhjivanis--it is fair to speak of a certain regionalism. But there is a class of intellectuals, recent graduates who don't have any sense of this at all. The people of the provinces are often a little backward and as such have preserved some special psychological traits and characteristics. But generally, this is weakening due to communications, the media, television and newspapers. A more general, national consciousness is now emerging. People from Nakhjivan and other regions come to educational institutions, they come to factories, work in communications; they intermarry and live in the same neighborhoods and as a result regionalism is lost. It is a natural process. And that process is now underway in Azerbaijan.

TCG: In my notes I have material from your speech in parliament last March when the Popular Front and the Democratic Block came out against holding new presidential elections.<sup>8</sup> You said that the next president of Azerbaijan, elected in such an atmosphere, would be deposed in six months. Well, you didn't boycott the elections, you ran and now you are the president apparent. Your thoughts now?

AE: I remember the moment very well. But there was a lot more to my speech than that. I said to the deputies in parliament that they were clapping when someone was elected and clapping when the same person was deposed after a short period of time, and then

---

<sup>8</sup>) An electric session that came in the wake of the resignation of last Azerbaijan Communist Party boss and first president Ayaz Mutalibov on March 6th over the handling of the Xojali massacre and deteriorating situation in Nagorno Karabakh. After announcing that the government of new parliamentary chairman--and thus acting president--Yagub Mamedov meant to create a government of national reconciliation with the Popular Front, the 'crocodiles', or old communist elite, reneged on a deal made with the Front over the rescheduling of new presidential elections, utterly humiliating Abulfaz. The remarkable thing was that he was allowed to address the assembly, although he is not a member of parliament.



they were applauding again for the next man in line. This type of election, I told them, based on the old system, will only produce the same sort of marionette president we had before because the system of electing was wrong in itself. The future president would be exactly who the Supreme Soviet decided--that's all! If we had not actively contested the elections, parliament would have elected Yagub Mamedov--and then he would be brought down with three months because of inability to rule.<sup>9</sup> A real president must have at least 50% of popular support, and there should be five or six candidates to choose. When there is no real choice, the people rightly assume that the president has been appointed from among the elite. We were concerned that the elections would happen in the same way--you saw that we were twice on the brink of civil war.<sup>10</sup> To avoid this, we proposed that the presidential apparatus cease to function and that all authority be given to the head of parliament, in consort with the prime minister and cabinet of ministers, would establish a balance of power between the executive, cabinet and parliament. We wanted to postpone the elections until the autumn when there would be stability in Karabakh and the situation with Armenia had cooled off. But the parliament did not accept our proposal and we all descended into the chaotic situation that you saw in April and May. The one thing that prevented the rigging of the elections was the presence of outside observers from Turkey and the United States--and this was useful for society.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>) Indeed, this is essentially what happened: Yagub Mamedov replaced Ayaz Mütalibov on March 6th and was the announced candidate (without party) of the old elite, but when it became clear that he could not win, the elite conspired to bring back Mütalibov. His illegal restoration on May 14th, when the old communist dominated parliament voted to rescind its acceptance of his May 6th resignation, lasted for 24 hours and resulted in the Front's counter-coup of May 15th. Mütalibov's first act as restored president was to cancel the elections. The Front's first move was to reschedule them. As a matter of record, Mamedov polled a mere 1% of the vote in the June 7th sweepstakes.

<sup>10</sup>) IE, on March 28th when the parliament decided to hold the presidential elections and then again on May 14th when Mütalibov's restoration canceled them.

<sup>11</sup>) A curious footnote about the fecklessness of the observers. Some 60 observers from the United States, most of whom were associated with the Carter Center in Atlanta or the Young Republican Voting League (?) were scheduled to monitor the voting and counting, but canceled their trip to Baku as soon as Mütalibov canceled the elections on May 14th after his restoration. The would-be observers were not quite as quick in rescheduling their junket once the elections were back on track by the 15th, however:

TCG: What do you mean by the redistribution of power?

AE: It is like this--the parliament should be given more power in order to pass resolutions, which would then be sent to the president for ratification and execution. And the judiciary should be enlarged in order to control the activities of the presidential office and the parliament. If I am indeed the president, I will stimulate the activity of the judiciary, and demand to know to what extent they are actually protecting the rights of the people--even those being violated by parliament, if that is the case. We will also expand the roll of the police to intervene in the violation of basic rights. Previously, an executive body would be appointed in say, the city of Ganje, and then he would demand that this or that person be sent as the chief of police or as the district prosecutor. This was wrong. They were all appointed by the president. If the executive chief of Ganje is appointed by the president, the chief of police should be appointed by the minister of the interior, and not the president. The district judge by the attorney general, etc. And more. Local leaders--like the police or chief in Ganje--should not be able to be deputies in parliament at the same time. <sup>12</sup>

---

only eight individuals showed up, leaving the business of monitoring the polling stations, taking rough exit-polls and watching the initial counting after the day was done to people like yours truly. And it was a very good thing that at least some observers were there: the surprise dark horse candidate, Dr Nizami Suleymanov who took around 35% of the vote after promising the masses that he would instantly put Azerbaijan on a dollar economy and pay everyone \$250 per month salary (as opposed to the average monthly wage of around \$5 at present), fill the shops with sugar, butter and cheap meat and cleanse Karabakh of Armenians within three months with the aid of a mercenary army, charged the Popular Front with massive fraud and ballot stuffing, claiming that he had taken between 80 and 90 percent of the vote. The observers begged to differ. The greatest irregularity was mass-voting of extended families--a sort of ballot stuffing--in the more traditional parts of the country. But a spot survey revealed that such practices were proportionately divided between the candidates.

<sup>12</sup>) A remarkable and unwieldy system inherited from the days of the Communist Party, when becoming a deputy in the rubber-stamp parliament was often a reward for loyalty to the Party--and to the General Secretary of the CP who assumed the newly established office of president by parliamentary decree in 1990. This was, of course, Ayaz Mutaalibov. Typically, most of the 350 deputies were the equivalents of mayors, police chiefs, directors of cooperative farms, factory managers and the like. I am proud to say that the label I gave them--the Crocodiles--is now standard usage among journalists and diplomats in Azerbaijan. After the CP was dissolved in early September, 1991, the slavish loyalty of the 'crocodiles'

This needs to be systematized, and put in the constitution. The different parts of the power structure need to be separated.

TCG: There is a phrase in English: 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely...'

AE: This is absolutely correct--and we have to create a system wherein absolute power does not rest in the presidency. The president must be responsible to the parliament, and not the other way around. That is why we need three, separate bodies, controlling each other.

TCG: Do you mean an American style system?

AE: It is difficult to say that we will get the same exact system but that is the direction in which we must proceed. In terms of the creation of a constitution, I think new laws should have a trial period of six months to see if they are really what we want. Then we will collect new laws into a constitution.<sup>13</sup>

TCG: I'd like to move on to the external situation. Let's start with Iran.

AE: Iran has declared that the Popular Front is an atheist organization. The worst possible thing in Iran right now is to be atheist--in order to get the people to hate the Popular Front. And the Iranian mass media is promoting the idea that I am a 'Zionist.' It is clear that the Iranian media is under someone's control. And we know that Iran is providing Armenia with weapons. The Iranian intelligence service knows this very well. Why don't they prevent this? We want correct relations with Iran; we don't

14

---

in parliament to Mutalibov continued.

<sup>13</sup>) Abulfaz, in earlier interviews, has suggested that new, parliamentary elections should be held at the end of 1992 or in early 1993. That new, democratically-elected body will be responsible for the drafting of a new constitution. One rather bizarre aspect of the 'creeping coup' by the democratic pluralists that culminated with Elchibey's election was their ability to use the existing Soviet-model constitution to put a legal stamp on their revolution.

<sup>14</sup>) Others in the Popular Front leadership, although hardly friendly toward Iran, have tried to temper such rhetoric before it gets out of hand. The new Foreign Minister, Towfig Gasimov, chortled in embarrassment when he heard of Abulfaz's broadside attack on Iran for allegedly supplying arms to Armenia, saying that although he had the greatest respect for Elchibey, there is no hard evidence that the government of Iran was involved in such trade.

want Iran to condescend to us; we want them to deal with us in a correct manner. But we also call for the democratization of southern Azerbaijan--the opening of Azeri schools, national autonomy---at least cultural autonomy. Look, despite the existence of Armenia, Iran is supporting 140,000 Armenians (in Karabakh) who want to establish their own state in our country while at the same time 20 million Azeris are unable to open up their own schools. Can you imagine the repression involved? And yet at the same time Iran pretends to be a mediator in the Karabakh conflict! Let it focus on its own problems at home! That is why we speak to Iran frankly. When you deal with us, do it on an equal basis. Don't expect blood from one wound and water from another.

TCG: Is there any threat to you personally from Iran?

AE: I am not sure of the personal threat, but there are governmental organizations against me. There is propaganda, hatred. And it is not only me. It is the Popular Front that is the target of this hatred campaign. They want to prevent sympathy from the southern Azeris for us. And this is natural because Iran has its own national interests. And Iran wants to expand its influence here. And that is natural. All countries do. America wants to expand its influence in Azerbaijan. So does Turkey. And we want to expand our influence in Turkey, America, France and Russia so that those populations will support us and prevent others from attempting to play with the Popular Front. But Iran is using different methods--and not good ones. For example, Iran says it wants to buy cattle and sheep from Azerbaijan, for dollars. Fine. But tomorrow we won't have any cattle left. They want to play with us, make us dependent, we want to prevent that. The same holds true for other countries, too--the United States, Russia. Mutalibov was for this sort of dependency. He promoted it. And we are against the system represented by Ayaz Mutalibov. If you supported Mutalibov, it means that you are against the Popular Front. Iran--and Russia--are both supporters of Mutalibov. That is why we are against them. This is a man who was attempting to strangle democracy--how can you support him? What is your aim in supporting this bastard? The people are fed up with this. So we take this into account with our dealings with those states that supported Mutalibov. But the United States didn't do this. The U.S. recognized Azerbaijan as a separate state, and assisted Azerbaijan in its application to become a member of the United Nations, but the U.S. didn't recognize the regime at first because it was not elected democratically. This was a great moral boost for us, because it meant that the United States was at least taking the Popular Front into account. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>) This is a very important point. As far back as September 1991, when Mutalibov's parliament had unanimously voted for independence (like every other former Soviet Republic) Elchibey was

Think about this--if we had supported Saddam Hussein, what would be the reaction of the world towards the Popular Front today? The world would ask what sort of allegedly democratic organization could support the bloodshed (in Kuwait). We have principles. We condemned it on the first day. We called Saddam an aggressor and murderer and that we supported Kuwait. Many said that Saddam would win and occupy all the Arabs states and be a hero of the Arabs, but I said let him do what he wants, but that he is the aggressor and a murderer. And during the August coup in Moscow, there were only three who came out against it publicly on the very first day. Yeltsin, Landsberger and the Popular Front. Everyone else in the USSR kept quiet while waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. The next day we not only announced our position to the BBC and the VOA, but we also appealed to all Azeris serving in the army that they should not comply with orders issued by the putchists. We knew perfectly well that there

---

one of the few individuals who dared come out against the idea on principle. How, he asked then, could the same parliament that voted to stay in the USSR in the Spring of 1991 now vote for independence? However sound, it was not a very popular argument because it required far too much explanation--independence meaning the creation of a national army, the establishment of a national bank, a unique national currency, etc. But Elchibey and Popular Front stood by their guns and even criticized Turkey for recognizing Azerbaijan (!). Thus, whether by mistake or design the United States ended up giving tacit support to the Front in its position on independence. Others (Paul Goble; 'Forget the CIS,' Foreign Policy, Spring 1992) have suggested that the U.S. delay in establishing diplomatic ties with all the former republics in one fell swoop somehow encouraged 'Islamic fundamentalists' by alienating, isolating and humiliating certain would-be pro-western leaders--namely, Islam Kerimov of Uzbekistan and Ayaz Mutaalibov of Azerbaijan. In the case of the latter, at least, if Mutaalibov's inability to lure Yankee diplomats to Baku right off the git-go had anything to do with his gradual spin from power, all I can say is Bravo! State Dips! You finally got one right! I also have to say, for the record, that after having set up shop in the Old Intourist Hotel in March (and right after Mutaalibov's tumble from power), the handful of Yankee diplomats have been very active in courting everyone in the country--and became one of two windows to the outside world during times of crisis. (The other, obvious window was the Turkish embassy, whose staff have been put in the deliciously ironic position of playing Big Brother to the Yankees.) Abulfaz in previous interviews has encouraged the idea of 'letting a thousand info channels bloom:' Diplomats, spies--everyone is welcome in Baku; the main point is to let the world get some semblance of a true picture of what is happening in Azerbaijan without the impression being filtered through Moscow first. Truly, this is cowboy diplomacy, or diplomacy on the front, or something, and it almost makes the profession seem attractive for once.

was a danger that the coup would roll down on us and crush the Popular Front but we had to stick to our principles. Our ideas are on the side of freedom, and the coup was a contradiction to our basic principles.

TCG: (unintelligible remark about Kuwait; Elchibey plunges on)

AE: Principles are important. Listen, when I asked a visiting senator why the United States is supporting Armenia in some points (of the Karabakh crisis; tcg) he told me that the Armenian lobby is strong and this is an election year and the law makers don't want to put their re-election in jeopardy. I was not satisfied with this answer: how can you abandon principles about justice, only for a few votes to win an election? If such a strong and powerful country as the United States is afraid of the Armenian lobby, what will happen to us? Imagine! And the same things applies in Moscow as well. There was an objective correspondent from Moscow who came to observe and prepare material about the situation here and in Karabakh. But when he left he said that he is not sure whether his article would be published because of the strength of the Armenian lobby in Moscow. He leaves, fails and writes a letter, saying he has been unable to get his story in print. Is this democracy? Is this freedom of the press?

TCG: If we could move on to the situation in Karabakh and the undeclared war with Armenia...<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>) I have deleted some of my remarks about having experienced the same phenomenon with the media in the United States and Britain that might be written off to ignorance or stupidity--editors refusing to believe that the PF is not a fundamentalist Shiite organization, etc--but will include one reference in this footnote that I think deserves mention for the record: the truly shameful and unethical editorial conduct of Platts Oilgram News. Read by everyone in the oil industry as a basic digest of what is happening in the international oil patch, Platts has a history of twisting news about Azerbaijan in a manner that is nothing short of malicious. One cannot but help believe this is informed by the fact that the editor is an Armenian nationalist. I once wrote a story about a firm involved in making money out of cleaning up the oil-swamps around Baku, but what was printed referred to the level of environmental damage caused by the reckless Azeris and not their efforts to clean it up. A more recent example was a story by my protegee, Laura Le Cornu, about an announcement by the American oil giant Amoco that it was providing four competitive scholarships to Azeri youth to study in the USA. It was such an anodyne story that I, as an editor, would probably not have run it at all. But Platts did, and it was a whopper: Amoco, desperate to shore-up its waning chances of cinching a huge off-shore exploration contract due to the political chaos in Baku, was trying to sweet-talk the Popular

AE: It is very difficult. We had hoped that Turkey and the USA could help us in the matter of resolving the conflict, but Moscow has tried to obstruct this in various ways. But if Moscow can ignore Turkey, it cannot ignore the United States. In the end, Moscow could stop this anytime it wanted but it does not want to.

TCG: There are those who see a comparison between the situation in Cyprus and its de facto division into a Greek-speaking southern zone and a Turkish-speaking northern zone and Karabakh. Do you think such a division might be effected here as a solution? <sup>17</sup>

AE: There is no resemblance. Cyprus is an island nation, with one side inhabited by Greek and the other by Turks. But here, the case is different. There is an attempt to create an 'Armenia' within our territory, and to associate it with the Republic of Armenia which is a separate state. We can't just cut it off and give it.

TCG: But following the establishment of the land corridor, there is almost a fait accompli on the ground.

AE: If we want to talk about fait accomplis, let us assume that Azerbaijan even recognizes Karabakh as an independent state or as part of Armenia. Then after five or ten years, we can go sell everything we've got, devote all our resources to war and create a fine army. Then we go and wipe both Karabakh and Armenia off the map ~~and~~ <sup>we</sup> announce our own fait accompli. Where does it end? We are a member of the United Nations subscribe to its tenets. The question has to be asked: why is Armenia invading the territory of an independent state? There are laws governing the behavior of members of the United Nations. There is the Helsinki final act and other CSCE documents that pertain to the inviolability of territory and the concept that borders should not be changed through force. If it comes to force, Ok--we will wait, and after

---

Front with the scholarships. Now, Amoco may or may not try and win friends and influence people by various means, but four scholarships are neither going to make or break a deal and certainly do not a bribe scandal make. More to the point, the scholarships in question were first announced in January, when Mutalibov was still in the saddle. What is going on here?

<sup>17)</sup> A reverse comparison, to be sure: in Cyprus, it was the Turks who invaded in order to save a minority under threat. Some pundits say that Ankara is secretly delighted by events in Karabakh because it puts their old diplomatic nemesis Greece in the uncomfortable position of either being consistent and condemning fait accomplis in both Cyprus and Karabakh or holding its lip.

five years or so we will give our own answer in kind. <sup>18</sup>

TCG: Realistically, though, is it possible for Armenians and Azeris to live together in Karabakh after all the bloodshed?

AE: This is a very difficult matter. But after a certain period of time we can create the conditions under which Armenians and Azeris will be able to live separately within Nagorno Karabakh. If the area can be put under the control of international organizations for a certain period of time, both sides can slowly adjust to each other. Greeks and Turks were killing each other (in Cyprus) but after the insertion of international peace keepers the bloodshed stopped. Diplomatic negotiations resulted in an agreement. <sup>19</sup> In order to eliminate the hatred and distrust between the two people, time is required. After stability is achieved, the people will be able to see how to progress. The priority now is to stop the bloodshed. The further it goes, the more bloodshed there will be. Right now, the majority of Armenians want reconciliation and peace--so do the majority of Azeris. After that, one hopes that the blood letting will stop and never reoccur.

TCG: What about territorial exchange--that is, ceding Karabakh or parts of it, along with a corridor to Armenia for Zangezur? <sup>20</sup>

AE: Corridors can be opened linking Armenia to Karabakh and Nakhjivan to Azerbaijan so long as no weapons are allowed to pass through them. Let the Armenians set up a customs post, and allow through humanitarian aid, but no weapons. We will do the same thing at Lachin <sup>21</sup> to control traffic to Karabakh--and to

---

<sup>18</sup>) Or in two days. As suggested, I find it almost impossible to believe that the Azeris were even then gearing up for a big push on Saturday, June 13th; rather, I suspect an Armenian attack intended to provoke a necessary response, which would then allow the Armenians the chance to secure more war aims 'defensively.' Only time will tell.

<sup>19</sup>) This is news to me. Although the bloodshed stopped in 1974, it is hardly correct to talk about a 'negotiated' settlement on the island and Cyprus has become a classic case of stalled diplomacy--in other words, a fait accompli for the Turks.

<sup>20</sup>) The strip of territory that separates Nakhjivan from Azerbaijan and gives Armenia access to Iran.

<sup>21</sup>) The town striding the so-called Lachin corridor west of Nagorno Karabakh that was destroyed by Armenian militiamen in mid-May when they punched through their own corridor from Karabakh to Armenia. Cleverly, Armenia initially announced that it was not, had no intention of, opening up a corridor, but was merely assisting



prevent weapons from entering.

TCG: But a territorial exchange?

AE: No, absolutely not. Today the changing of borders is a very complicated and complex psychological issue. It is very difficult to change or exchange territory in the modern world.

TCG: But there are those<sup>WHO</sup> suggest that the fact that Nakhjivan is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan is allowing Nakhjivan to drift away toward Turkey--the Aliev factor, as it were. <sup>22</sup>

AE: The state is the state, and it has a center. Azerbaijan will continue to control Nakhjivan and render all help and assistance. If Turkey wants to help Nakhjivan, it can only do so through the

---

local Kurds in revolt against the oppressive Azeri Turks. Most of these 'Kurds in Revolt' ended up as refugees in Baku--and many of them, by coincidence, in my courtyard. For some inexplicable reason, it became the place where the men and women came to volunteer for the good fight, and I got to know many of the new soldiers, both men and women, standing beneath our laundry line. Reports suggest that the Armenians are now filling up the Lachin area with Yezidi Kurds from Armenia to create a buffer zone in Lachin and to promote the fiction of their having seized Azeri territory for the good of the Kurds along the lines of the arrangement between the Israelis and the South Lebanese forces.

<sup>22)</sup> I had the remarkable experience of traveling with Isa Gamberov, current chairman of parliament and then acting president on his trip to Nakhjivan on Azerbaijan's day of independence--May 28th. It was the first visit of an Azeri state leader (the Presidency was only established in 1990) to Nakhjivan in something like six years, and the occasion was the official opening of the Ümit Köprüsü\* over the Araxes River, linking Nakhjivan to Turkey. But Haydar Aliev does not like competition in his little bailiwick. Not only did he refrain from meeting Gamberov at the airport, but avoided him in town until the two were finally brought together for the pan-Turkic panoply occasioned by the arrival of Turkish Premier Suleyman Demirel and his retinue of hundreds. Aliev, delighting in the limelight once again, never once mentioned the word 'Azerbaijan' in connection with the word 'Nakhjivan' and when he called on the masses to observe a moment's silence for those recently fallen while defending their homeland, he was referring only to those killed in Nakhjivan and not Karabakh. The unbelievably stupid Turks went along with the distinction, referring to 'Dear Azeris, dear Nakhjivanis,' in their speeches and it was left up to poor Isa who, unrecognized as anyone of importance by the Turkish press and often rudely shouldered aside by cameramen who wanted Demirel and Aliev's picture, was obliged to remind everyone present that Nakhjivan was a part of Azerbaijan.

\*baidge

government of Azerbaijan. Aid can only be provided with our permission--and not through Haydar who has no authority to accept such aid without reference to us. It has to be agreed upon in such a manner that Turkish aid to Nakhjivan is provided in accordance with a treaty that recognizes the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. If Turkey recognizes us as the government of Azerbaijan, Turkey must work through us.

TCG: How do you evaluate the situation in Nakhjivan at present?

AE: Haydar didn't recognize Mutalibov because there had not been free elections. But now the situation has changed. Nakhjivan has voted, and for me. That means the central government has been recognized. That means everything that occurs in Nakhjivan from now on must go through the central government. If we, as the state of Azerbaijan, receive something from Iran or Turkey, a portion will be shipped separately to Nakhjivan--but through us.

TCG: Still, Haydar Aliev is a formidable character with much support. How do you see his future role in Azerbaijan?

AE: We will consult with Aliev about this. This is the state and here you are. If you have a program, tell us; if you are an advisor, advise. Do your business and help Nakhjivan. If he is elected to the Supreme Soviet, let him come and do his duty. <sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>) Presumably as Deputy Chairman of Parliament, a position reserved for the President of the Nakhjivan assembly by the constitution. The old communist elite tried to remove the article to keep Aliev away from Baku last September, but it is doubtful he would have come back in any other capacity than Big Boss, a position he still craves. There is no hard evidence at hand, but I have a lurking suspicion that Aliev was behind the phenomenon of Nizami Suleymanov's amazingly good performance in the June 7th elections and subsequent 'spoiler' role. CF fn 11. Following his charges of fraud in the elections, Suleymanov held a press conference where I was the only foreigner. Nothing new there. But I was shocked ~~and was~~ <sup>if I knew</sup> that I realized that I knew Suleymanov from my most recent trip to Nakhjivan; most of his retinue, too, were other people I had seen waiting outside Haydar Aliev's chamber, supplicants and sycophants to a man. It all came together in the middle of the press conference when Suleymanov announced that he would happily lead a rebellion against the 'neo-Bolshevik power snatchers' (Elchibey and the Popular Front) and called on Haydar to return to Baku to assist him in the task. He also invited E'tibar Mamedov (CF fn 1) who, running as the candidate of the 'national bourgeois' (IE: mafia) had withdrawn his name in protest several days before the elections with similar dark, threatening remarks about civil unrest if Elchibey were to be elected. There was more here than mere sour grapes: E'tibar, absent in Turkey during the coup and counter-coup of May 14/15 in Baku, chose to return via

TCG: What about the future of relations with Iranian Azeris?

AE: We are nearing the end of a long and difficult journey--the creation of a truly independent state of Azerbaijan. As for the reunification of Azerbaijan, I hope this will occur but it may be after I am gone. The main thing is to establish and preserve Azerbaijan as an independent state. That is my mission. Azadlik. I may die tomorrow, or I may die today, but the main thing is independence and freedom for Azerbaijan. This is my guiding principle. I cannot stand the enslavement of the nation. If my nation were truly free, I would sit in the library and work on my manuscripts. But the rights of the people had been ground down and stamped on and the nation almost effaced. We had to revive ourselves, and in part we have. But it is difficult.

TCG: Do you see Azerbaijan as an example for other, Muslim, Turkic former Soviet republics to emulate?

AE: When a man goes to Uzbekistan and sees people in the cotton field on one side and the partocrats living a life of luxury and ease on the other, one feels filled with pity and shame and outrage. Those few who have defended the rights of the people there have been obliged to flee. Of three, one went to the USA and the other two came here. Then the partocrats of Uzbekistan sent a team of seven commandos to bring them back. Whoever these people were, they didn't arrive in a country run by Mutalibov but a country run by the Popular Front. We won't give permission (to take back the refugee dissidents). What savages! And the world does not react. Why?

TCG: Do you think the leadership of the Central Asia states is concerned about your election as president?

AE: They are terrified. When Mutalibov was restored to power on the May 14, the supporters of Islam Kerimov in Moscow were delighted--they said its over, a 'real democrat' has come to power. Now they will see what real democracy is. We didn't die and go away. We are very much alive. Now, apparently Islam Kerimov can't sleep at night. If we can have five months of

---

Nakhjivan where he held consultations with Haydar. Too old at 69 to become a official candidate, Aliev had invited people to write in his name on the ballot in order to deny Elchibey the required 50% to win on the first ballot, but my suspicion is that he quietly threw his weight--and that of E'tibar--behind Suleymanov as part of a deal to bring him back in glory and honor. The irony about the maximum age barrier of 65 for presidential candidates that excluded Aliev from running is that it was a constitutional amendment shoved through the rubber-stamp parliament by Mutalibov to close the door on Aliev forever. The Popular Front were only too happy to let the law stand.

peace, free of the war with Armenian, our economy will start to develop and then you will see the democratic movement begin in both South Azerbaijan and Central Asia. It will be impossible to stop this movement. It has already begun in southern Azerbaijan. In Tabriz, Omeriyah and elsewhere there are rallies. They are using the pretext of criticizing the government in Tehran over its position of Karabakh, but the movement has a larger scope than just that. They want democracy. And if and when democrats start coming here for refugee status, just watch the movement start to grow. It makes no difference if Germany or Russia or even the US will come and utterly destroy us, it will make no difference. In two or three or years the people of Azerbaijan will make a revolution and be united. We want to do this through peaceful democratic means, without bloodshed if possible. It will be impossible to stop this nation. You can see it yourself. It is the right of the nation. Sooner or later the nation will achieve this. Once the nation has tasted freedom, it will demand freedom as its right.

TCG: What about the outside Azeris, that is those in exile or those who have moved abroad over the years? Do you intend to take advantage of their expertise?

AE: We will provide for dual citizenship for any and all Azeris in the world. If they want, we will let them come and work and participate in the development of the country--from the USA, from France. We want to open Azerbaijan to foreign investment. We want to open Azerbaijan up to the world.

\*\*\*\*\*

Received in Hanover, June 29, 1992