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Ethnic identity among the Iranian Azeris

Iran is a multi-ethnic country with Persians accounting for only half of its 71 million people. From the remaining Non-Persians, almost half are Azeris (Samii 2000: 128), mostly living in northwest Iran, but also as migrants in many other areas of the country. Azeris are primarily distinguished by their language Azeri – a branch of Turkic languages very much influenced by Persian and Arabic vocabularies.

An area of considerable size, Azerbaijan territory began, from the early 19th century, a continuous process of getting split. Whereas a large part of its lands (what is now the territory of Republic of Azerbaijan) were annexed by the Russians in the 1810s/1820s, its remaining area was further split, during Pahlavi (1925-1979) and Islamist regimes, into the provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan and Ardebil. These four provinces have a total area of 122,660 km², which is roughly 1.5 times bigger than that of the Republic of Azerbaijan (86,600 km²).

This territorial fragmentation went hand in hand with the emergence of an historical phenomenon, which was to impact the center-periphery relations in Iran for the time to come: the rise of modern nation-state in the early 20th century. This new political order had three major consequences for the Azeri people.

Firstly, Azerbaijan, for centuries the epicenter of political and economic power in Iran, assumed a peripheral status, as the centralized modern state concentrated the political power in Tehran. As a matter of fact, the shift of power to Tehran had begun much earlier as the Qajars (1794-1925) chose this city in 1796 as their capital. Nevertheless, Tabriz remained, as co-capital of the Qajars (Chehabi 1997), an important focal point of the political power as well

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as of economy and culture. The modern nation-state drastically changed this constellation to the advantage of Tehran.

Secondly, the growing gap between Tehran and Azerbaijan regarding their pace of development led to a large-scale

migration of Azeris to Tehran, so that soon there lived in this city more Azeris than in Tabriz, the biggest city of Azerbaijan (Atabaki 2005: 37). This mass migration further contributed to the stagnation and peripherization of this region.

Thirdly, the modern nation-state was based upon a homogeneous notion of Iranian nation and a denial of cultural rights for ethnic groups. This ideology, best expressed in Reza Shah's slogan of "one country, one nation" (Atabaki 2005: 32), was soon translated into a repressive policy towards the cultural claims of the ethnic groups. The core issue of this policy was to establish Persian as the only eligible language in the state administration, the educational system, and the media all over the country.

The Persian-centered nationalist policies of the central government evoked among the Azeris an ethnic identity of varying degree, which has ever since been present in all the major political upheavals in Azerbaijan. However, Azeri nationalism has had at least two other causes. On the one hand, the anti-Azeri discrimination has not been limited to the political sphere. Persian or Tehrani chauvinism, expressed in the mockery of Azeri language as well as jokes about the "Turks", has also been of certain relevance. On the other hand, Azerbaijan, as the gate of modernism in 19th century Iran, was also receptive of socialist ideas, including the doctrine of protecting the "peoples' cultures". Thus, many leading Azeri intellectuals, including Mohammad A. Rasoolzadeh

(1884-1954), advocated a federal political system (Adamiyat 1984: 175), which would allow a fostering of local cultures. Thanks to this *Zeitgeist*, Azerbaijan, and more specifically its Russian part, witnessed in the early 20th century a renaissance of Azeri literature (Javadi 2003). This allowed many intellectuals to better communicate their modernist ideas to the Azeri masses. The satirical poems of the great (Russian) Azeri poet Aliakbar Taherzadeh Saber (1862-1911) are indeed the best example of how the intellectuals used the local language to bring their political ideas to the “ordinary” people. Nevertheless, all revolutionary movements in Azerbaijan, from Mashruteh (1905-11) to the Khiabani movement (1920), were mainly committed to the installation of democracy in Iran, with Azeri nationalism being rather a latent tendency.

At the outset of World War II, however, the situation had changed considerably. While Reza Shah’s Persian-centered police state had intensified the grievances of Azeri nationalists, the cultural autonomy of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic made the case stronger for promoting the local language. Therefore, the forced retreat of the king in 1941 as well as the deployment of the Soviet army in the northern provinces of Iran were used by Moscow-oriented Azeri socialists, led by Jafar Pishevari, to proclaim in 1945 a socialist republic in the Iranian Azerbaijan with Azeri as its official language. In 1946, soon after the withdrawal of the Soviet army, the young republic was dismantled by the Iranian army. The restoration of the Persian-centered autocracy under Mohammad Reza Shah meant a renewed repression of Azeri nationalism.

In the period 1946-1978, Azeri nationalism was almost absent from the public life of the Azeris. Even though some poets continued to write in Azeri – including Sahand, Saher and especially Shahriar, whose nostalgic poem “Heydar-Baba-ya salam” is generally regarded as the most important work in the Iranian Azeri Literature in the twentieth century (Djavadi 1993: 129) – Azeri nationalism as a political movement was almost non-existent. For a short while, the Azeri novelist and essayist Samad Behrangi (1939-68) triggered in the 1960s a hot debate in the Azeri public as he criticized the exclusive usage of Persian in Azeri-speaking schools. However, this debate did not really lead to a revival of Azeri nationalism.

As the mass movement against the autocratic policies of the Pahlavi regime broke out in 1978, the Azeris took part in the nation-wide uprising assuming thereby a key role. In the same year, Azeri nationalists used the political opening to start with their cultural activities including the publication of Azeri journals. In 1980, the newly awakened Azeri nationalism experienced a turning point. As the Islamists ignored the protest of the Tabrizi grand Ayatollah Seyyed Kazem Shariatmadari against the adoption of “*velayat-e faqih*” (“guardianship of the theologian”) in the new constitution, there followed mass demonstrations in some cities of Azerbaijan creating a severe political crisis in the region. Even though this movement was devoid of explicit Azeri nationalism, the symbolism of a Persian Ayatollah (Khomeini) ignoring an Azeri one could only invoke old ethnic grievances. Many Azeris believed to see some parallelism between the revolutions of 1905-11 and 1979: In both revolutions Tabrizis played a key role only to be bypassed by their Persian colleagues soon after the victory of the revolution. The Islamist regime cracked down the upheaval with an iron fist, putting an end to any political dissent including the Azeri nationalism for some time to come.

During the “silent” years, cultural revivalism in Azerbaijan continued a non-political life in a low-key manner. On the one hand, the Azeri socialists found in the ethnic Azeri cause a substitute for their socialist aspirations after their organizations were smashed by the new regime (Riaux 2008). On the other hand, “intellectual entrepreneurs” dedicated themselves to an inconspicuous program of cultural revivalism (*ibid.*).

It was only in 1996 that, thanks to the liberal atmosphere of the parliamentary elections, voices of Azeri nationalism were once again heard in the public. Azeri activists were also encouraged by the emergence of the Republic of Azerbaijan as an independent state in 1991. Paradoxically enough, it was an Islamist called Mahmudali Chehregani, a candidate from Tabriz, who during his campaign called for cultural rights for the Azeris. As Chehregani’s popularity grew and his tone became radicalized, he was jailed and his followers were persecuted.

Chehregani had based his arguments mainly on the article no. 15 of the new Constitution, which permitted “the use of regional and tribal languages in

the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools”, while determining Persian as the official language and script of Iran. Ever since, this article has been the core argument of the majority of Azeri nationalists.

Ten years later, a minor event once again inflamed the Azeri nationalism. On May 19th, 2006 a cartoon in the state-run newspaper Iran led to unrest in Azerbaijan (Tohidi 2009). The caricature had made mockery of Azeri language. On May 26th mass demonstrations broke out in several cities of Azerbaijan, which could only be silenced by ruthless repression.

After a century of struggle, Azeri nationalists have achieved some progress in fulfilling their ethnic aspirations. TV and radio programs in Azeri as well as publication of dictionaries, linguistic works and anthologies of poems have created some space for a limited Azeri Öffentlichkeit; and every now and then the Iranian parliament witnesses some representative speaking out for the cultural demands of the Azeris. The ban on Azeri language in the administration as

well as in the educational system of Azerbaijan seems, however, to be still strongly advocated by the classe politique in Tehran.

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent,

trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled

without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him