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Representation, Reform and Resistance: Broadening Our Understanding of Women in Politics in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Azerbaijan is the leading country in the South Caucasus in terms of women's representation in parliament. However, it has the lowest number of women in government, with just one woman holding a rank equivalent to cabinet minister. Despite efforts to increase women's participation at the municipal and national levels, political parties and decision-making structures remain dominated by men. Women's substantive political engagement occurs mainly through the State Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs and civil society activism.

Introduction: Defining Politics

The presidential system in Azerbaijan was strengthened by referendums held in 2002 and 2009. The current head of state, President Ilham Aliyev, assumed office in 2003, and was re-elected for a third term in 2013. The president has the power to appoint and dismiss the cabinet, including the prime minister, who is head of government. Some legislative power resides in the 125 member National Assembly, or Milli Meclis, which is dominated by the New Azerbaijan Party. However, the distribution of power is closely linked to presidential patronage and membership of political, economic and regional elites.

Women are visible at various levels within this political system, and theoretically, no doors are barred to them. For example, the First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva is the president of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, a UNESCO and ISESCO Goodwill Ambassador, and a member of parliament. In 2013, she was appointed deputy chair of the New Azerbaijan Party, sparking rumours that she could be poised to replace her husband as president. The president's daughters, Leyla and Arzu Aliyeva, are well known figures, and the first lady's sister, Nargiz Pashayeva, is the rector of the Baku branch of Moscow State University.

Although the first family is often cited as an example of women with political power, very few decision-making positions are in fact occupied by women. The upper echelons of politics are dominated by men, with just a handful of women being appointed to leadership roles. This article shows that women's representation increases the further one gets from the centre of power. However, women's advancement is still hindered by male dominance within the political parties. Given the intransigence of the political system, civil society provides an important alternative locus for women's engagement with the state.

Where Are the Women?

Politics in Azerbaijan is a male-dominated field. In October 2013, following his re-election as president for a third term, President Ilham Aliyev appointed a 42-member

cabinet. It included the prime minister, five deputy prime ministers, twenty ministers of state, ten chairpersons of State Committees, and six other offices. Only one of these 42 positions is held by a woman: Hijran Huseynova, who has been the chairperson of the State Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs (SCFWCA) since 2006. This situation compares negatively with Armenia, where women hold two out of eighteen ministerial positions, and Georgia, where three out of nineteen ministries are led by women.¹

A review carried out by the SCFWCA to mark the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 draws attention to the under-representation of women in senior decision-making positions across all government departments. Currently, only three women hold deputy ministerial positions: Sevinj Hasanova (Economic Development), Sevda Mammadaliyeva (Culture and Tourism), and Nigar Aliyeva (Health). Women constitute a majority of workers in certain ministries, such as Health, Education and Social and Labour Protection, and are greatly under-represented in others, including National Security, Foreign Affairs and Justice.

By way of contrast, women appear to be making slow but steady gains in the parliament of Azerbaijan. This progress comes in spite of the absence of institutional mechanisms to improve women's representation. In 1992, the first full year of independence from the Soviet Union, women's share of seats in the Milli Meclis stood at just 6 percent. At Table 1 shows, this number rose to 12 percent in the 1995 parliamentary elections, but dropped to 10 percent in 2000. It rose to 12 percent again in 2005, and up to 16 percent in the most recent elections in 2010, when women won 20 seats out of 125 (one of these is now vacant, as Gular Ahmadova resigned her seat in 2012 after a vote-buying scandal).

¹ According to data found on the websites of both governments in February 2015

Table 1: Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: an Overview

Year	Total number of seats	Women MPs	% of women MPs
1995	124	15	12.1
2000	124	13	10.48
2005	125	15	12
2010	125	20	16

Prominent female MPs include First Lady Mehrivan Aliyeva, and Bahar Muradova, who is deputy chairperson of the Milli Meclis since 2005, deputy executive secretary of the New Azerbaijan Party, and head of the delegation of Azerbaijan to the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. Others include Rabbiyat Aslanova, head of the Human Rights Committee (the only woman to head a parliamentary committee); Govhar Bakhshaliyeva, head of the Delegation of Azerbaijan to the Parliamentary Union of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; and Malahat Ibrahimgizi, chair of the Vote Counting Commission.

While women are a tiny minority within the executive branch of government, they are gaining ground in the legislature and are growing more visible in the field of international cooperation. There is still vast room for improvement: only eight out of 79 inter-parliamentary working groups are headed by women. Additionally, while Azerbaijan remains ahead of Georgia and Armenia with respect to women's representation in parliament, this does not say much about their influence over decision-making power. Rather, it appears that Baku is interested in promoting the image of gender-friendliness. It also does this by hosting high-profile events on women in politics, such as an international conference on women's role in cross-cultural dialogue in 2008, and the Women's Wing of the International Conference on Asian Political Parties in 2013.

Political Parties and Elections

There are over forty political parties registered in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Only one of them, the Liberal Party, is headed by a woman: former Secretary of State, Lala Shovket. Shovket is the only woman to have run for president, contesting the 2003 presidential elections on behalf of the National Unity Movement. She came in third out of eight candidates, with 3.62 percent of the vote (the top two candidates received 76.84 percent and 13.97 percent respectively). However, the election was marked by several irregularities and failed to meet OSCE standards. Shovket has boycotted all other presidential elections and resigned her seat in parliament in protest against corruption.

In response to an OSCE/ODIHR interim report on the 2013 presidential elections, criticising the lack of female nominees, the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan notes that women's decision not to exercise their right to run for office is "inexplicable". This claim ignores a variety of structural factors, such as the extent to which the predominantly male leadership of political parties act as gatekeepers to nominations, or how women typically have less access to the organisational and financial resources required to mount a campaign. These issues are consistently highlighted in expert publications such as the 2007 UNDP report on Gender Attitudes in Azerbaijan.

Turning towards parliament, it becomes more difficult to explain away the under-representation of women. There are 125 members of the Milli Meclis, elected from single seat constituencies under the first past the post voting system. In the most recent parliamentary elections, according to the Central Election Commission, there were 688 names on the final ballot, 94 of whom were women. Women constituted 13.7 percent of candidates, but 16 percent of those elected. This small but significant discrepancy shows that women stand as good a chance as men, if not better, of being elected. However, given that elections in Azerbaijan have been pronounced neither fair nor free, women's representation may have more to do with party selection procedures than the will of the electorate.

A closer look at some of the parties demonstrates the extent to which politics is a male-dominated field. In the New Azerbaijan Party, women constitute over 40 percent of party members, but on the executive board they occupy just three seats out of twenty. In the 2010 elections, the party ran nineteen women as candidates, out of a total of 125. Nor do women fare better with the opposition parties. For example, while the Musavat Party has internal quotas guaranteeing women 25 percent representation in elected party structures, there were just five female candidates in the Musavat-Popular Front opposition bloc in 2010, out of a total of 91. At present, there is no cross-party Women's Caucus.

According to the SCFWCA, the New Azerbaijan Party is currently discussing the possibility of a 40 percent quota for female candidates in the 2015 parliamentary elections. This would certainly change the face, if not the substance, of politics in Azerbaijan. The results of the 2009 municipal elections, in which women's representation shot up from 4 percent to 26.5 percent, show how easy it is to engineer political gains for women. Leading up to the 2014 municipal elections, the New Azerbaijan Party continued to promote women's and youth participation, building on work previously undertaken by women's NGOs and international organisa-

tions. Women's representation in the municipalities subsequently reached 35 per cent.

Women's Civil Society Activism: Reform or Resistance?

Party membership is not the only way that women engage in politics in Azerbaijan. Civil society is often seen as an alternative form of democratic activism, and may be just as effective in terms of promoting women's rights. There are approximately 200 women's civil society organisations in the country, though very few of these are active. Women's NGOs seeking to influence the political process have developed an important relationship with the State Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs, which was set up in 1998 and expanded in 2006. This cooperation facilitated the development of gender equality legislation in 2006, and the law on domestic violence which was passed in 2010.

Since 2011, the SCFWCA has worked with Counterpart International and USAID to implement a programme on enhancing women's leadership. In 2012, a group of women, including several MPs, drew up a list of recommendations for government, advocating the adoption of temporary quotas to increase women's representation in government structures and state agencies. However, these recommendations did not elicit an immediate response from government, raising questions about the effectiveness of the current strategy and the power of the SCFWCA to influence decision-making. In addition, it is unclear to what extent these demands were driven by international donors.

Another area which has seen cooperation between civil society, parliamentarians and the SCFWCA is Women, Peace and Security. In 2002, under the auspices of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Coalition 1325 was formed in order to advocate for the promotion of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in the context of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Coalition has recently become more active in monitoring the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and is advocating for a National Action Plan that would strengthen women's role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

International commitments such as UNSCR 1325 and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have proved to be important mechanisms for tracking the advancement of women in politics. In February 2015, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women reviewed Azerbaijan's implementation of the Convention. Although it commended several positive achievements, it also called attention to legislative developments in 2014

restricting the activities of NGOs, including women's organisations.²

Women's civil society activism also takes the form of resistance to authoritarian trends. This is true of some women's organisations, and of other civil society organisations that are led by women. For example, Leyla Yunus held the position of deputy minister of defence in 1992–93, before founding the Institute of Peace and Democracy and becoming a vocal critic of Ilham Aliyev. She is currently imprisoned on charges of treason, and has been declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. A number of the country's most well-known human rights defenders are women, such as Novella Jafarova, Saadat Bananyarli, Saida Gocamanli and Arzu Abdullayeva.

Women in the media are having a big influence over the next generation of political activists, including Khadija Ismayil, a journalist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty who is currently behind bars. Many women are active in less visible ways through youth movements and women's and/or feminist initiatives. These span the political spectrum, from being pro-government, to oppositionist, to ostensibly neutral. They operate at the local, national and international levels. Women's political activism also encompasses religion, as in the case of the Women's Council of the (banned) Islamic Party of Azerbaijan.³

Women are demonstrably active in civil society and exercise their right to political participation through their encounters with state institutions, such as the SCFWCA. In some cases, women's activism is geared towards dialogue and cooperation, while in others it takes the form of more radical activism. Women organise under diverse frameworks, including women's rights, peace and security, democracy, religious and civil liberties. Understanding how these women interact with the state and where they meet with reform and resistance will add tremendously to our understanding of both women and politics in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan takes pride in its historic legacy as the first Muslim country to extend the vote to women, and is taking steps to increase women's political participation. Nevertheless, women remain under-represented in politics, particularly in the executive branch and areas of decision-making. The case of the 2009 municipal elections shows how easily women can enter politics when adequate resources are made available to them—with

2 <<http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15583&LangID=E>>

3 <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67595>>

or without a formal quota. Given the flawed system of democracy in Azerbaijan, further research is needed to understand why certain women are able to advance in politics, while many more are not.

Women's low level of participation may also be related to general disillusionment with the political system on the part of many women, including a large part of the educated and urban classes. Some of these women

call for regime change, others criticise certain policies, and a third group seeks to cooperate on areas of shared interest, primarily through the institution of the State Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs. A better understanding of how women in civil society relate to political institutions may provide an alternative means of measuring female participation and inclusion of women's perspectives in policy-making.

About the Author

Sinéad Walsh is a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Research Scholar at Trinity College Dublin (2012–2015). Her PhD thesis focuses on gender, women's organisations, civil society peacebuilding and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in Armenia and Azerbaijan. She conducted extensive fieldwork in the region in 2012–2014, and participated in a number of cross-border initiatives.

Further Reading

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- Leila Aliyeva, "Women's Participation in Political Life," in *Political Party Regulation in Azerbaijan*, Centre for National and International Studies, Baku: January 2012
- *20th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action: National Report for the Republic of Azerbaijan*, State Committee of Family, Women and Children's Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku: 2014

Women's Political Participation in Armenia: Institutional and Cultural Factors

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Abstract

Women have been poorly represented in Armenian politics for the last several decades. Currently, there are 14 women out of 131 members in Armenia's National Parliament. The percentage of women ministers and deputy ministers has never risen above 11% during the past 5 years. Women currently hold two cabinet posts, serving in the ministries that deal with culture and the diaspora. There are no women governors. Additionally, for the past decade, there were no female mayors or deputy mayors in any urban community in Armenia. There is a gender quota system in place for political parties, requiring that in campaign lists every fifth person starting from the second position should be a woman. Nevertheless, there is a widely practiced phenomenon of self-withdrawal among women candidates in Armenia, which is one of the barriers for women to be represented in all levels of decision-making. The practice of self-withdrawal is also an obstacle for implementing the quota system since it prevents the quotas from actually functioning. Among various obstacles preventing women's political participation in Armenia are: gender stereotypes, gender roles, women's lack of economic independence and social capital, low self-confidence among women, and the overall political culture.

Introduction

Women have little representation in Armenia's political life. Despite some slow progress, since Armenia received its independence in 1991, women have held few seats in the National Parliament, with the current level at 11%.

In addition, according to the 2014 Gender Gap Index, Armenia was in 123rd place out of 142 countries in the world in terms of the political empowerment of women. Armenia's current position actually marks a decline from 106th place in 2009. Currently,