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COMMENTARY: Azerbaijan's democracy "is being sold for oil"

By an Azerbaijani Protestant

In this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>, an Azerbaijani Protestant, anonymous to avoid state persecution, pleads for the international community to promote religious freedom for all, as "it seems to us that our democracy is being sold for oil. Foreigners are afraid to call things by their real name. They are afraid to tell our government bluntly that human rights violations must end." He argues that "religious freedom cannot exist without other freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, as well as press and literature freedom. Because of this, religious freedom is a litmus test for freedom and democracy in any society, including Azerbaijan." He concludes by proposing practical steps for effective dialogue with Azerbaijan's leaders, leading to real religious freedom, and how religious minorities can be involved in this process.

In the nearly fifteen years since my country, Azerbaijan, regained its independence, we Christians have faced all kinds of obstacles and problems functioning freely. Although Azerbaijan gained a new constitution that unambiguously recognises the independence of religious communities from the state, freedom of conscience for all and the equality of citizens regardless of their religious adherence, gender or political views, in practice the opposite is the case.

While religious communities in Azerbaijan theoretically largely have the right to function freely (with some exceptions), in practice they do not have freedom. Restrictions and obstacles abound.

When churches and other minority religious communities try to register with the government and gain legal status it can be very difficult – at times even impossible. Obstruction comes from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations – the government agency with the duty of registering religious communities that wish to do so. But not just from the Committee. Local administration officials up and down the country – who also have to approve registration applications – often deliberately and arbitrarily obstruct them.

In principle a community collects the required documents and sends them in, but what happens if the state notary refuses to certify the signatures? The application stalls – and there is little redress. Communities can wait for years as applications languish on this or that official's desk – and believers do not know what they can do to gain the registration they are entitled to.

The same difficulty faces Christian parents if they want to give their children Christian names. That's no problem in most countries of the world, but in some parts of Azerbaijan officials often refuse to register the birth of a child with a Christian name – the child then cannot go to kindergarten or school, get treatment in a hospital or travel to other countries. (See eg. F18News 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=466.)

And when religious communities seek to meet for worship – with or without registration, as is their right under the constitution and in international law – the police or secret police can raid them. Those without registration are told (wrongly) that registration is compulsory before a community can meet for worship.

Worse still, believers are at times detained, intimidated and fined, simply for practising their faith in the way they see fit. Religious literature remains censored, a Soviet-era practice long overdue for abolition.

Even defending religious freedom for all is obstructed. Two years ago local believers of a variety of faiths founded a local affiliate of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). Officials from the United States, Russian and Turkish embassies were present at the official launch at Baku's Irshad Hotel, along with parliamentarians from Kyrgyzstan and other international representatives, among them Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance. Local officials were led by Rafik Aliev, head of the State Committee.

Yet two years on, the IRLA affiliate still cannot register. So many of us are asking this simple question: why not?

Many representatives from international bodies – such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) – come to examine the human rights situation here. So too do officials of foreign governments and parliaments, as well as human rights organisations. But we see no practical changes.

Speaking frankly, it seems to us that our democracy is being sold for oil. Foreigners are afraid to call things by their real name. They are afraid to tell our government bluntly that human rights violations must end.

For its part our government is carefully playing a game to pretend that religious freedom and respect for minority faiths exist. Each time a religious delegation goes abroad or when foreigners interested in religion wish to meet local believers the government brings together a representative of the state-approved Caucasian Muslim Board, the Russian Orthodox Church and the community of Mountain Jews. Doesn't anyone ask where are the Protestant Christians? We are now a sizable community and have been here for more than a century. And what about independent Muslims or representatives of other faiths?

It is right and proper for us Protestants to be included, but no-one hears our voice. Of all the Christians, visitors hear only the voice of the Orthodox. Independent Muslims are not heard – only Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, the head of the Muslim Board, is presented to foreign visitors. The state deceives its visitors – who themselves should also know better. This is a return to the Soviet system. The state wants to control everything.

Instead of just meeting those the government wants them to meet, visitors themselves should seek out and meet Protestants, independent Muslims and others and hear their views. They should then pass on these views back to our government. Given that the government in some way acknowledges that foreigners have a role to play, they could be a bridge between us and the state. We have tried to build this bridge ourselves, but we do not have the power to do so: the state sends the police and secret police against us.

It would be good if visitors ask our country's leaders why religious communities cannot freely register, meet for worship, publish or import religious literature. They should ask why we cannot print or import as many Bibles as we want – the Bible is not banned literature. How much pornography is allowed here, yet we are not allowed to provide Christian literature.

Our previous president, Heidar Aliev, was educated by the KGB secret police and was a KGB man through and through, but since 2003 we have a new president, Ilham Aliev (Heidar's son). He has been educated properly, not by the KGB. He is young, knows several foreign languages, including English, and looks to the future.

Azerbaijan is considered an Eastern country. In the Eastern mentality it is the president who decides everything. Politicians, business leaders and other visitors from the West could tell our president – whether in public or in private – what needs to be changed and improved in the area of religious freedom. Such visitors could also invite representatives of all faiths to such discussions, including Protestants.

Sad though it is to say, I believe the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the US and other Western governments are not telling our leaders the truth. If they spoke about the violations of religious freedom in Azerbaijan to our president in private over a cup of tea, such problems could be resolved.

Western claims of "quiet diplomacy" with unjust regimes can be a cloak for inaction – a useful excuse for the West to avoid telling the truth. But the diplomats usually know what they are doing. Our obligation as members of Azerbaijan's religious minorities is to explain our point of view clearly and allow the diplomats to do their job effectively to make such diplomacy work. At the same time, we need to be wise to make sure we are not being used in any "cup of tea" diplomacy that is not effective.

If independent representatives of all faiths, including Protestants, were ever invited to genuine discussions with visitors and the president, we would say that we want our constitution to be obeyed. We are not calling for laws to be changed but for our rights to be defended. The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations gets funds from our taxes to be the liaison between the state and religious communities, but instead is using taxpayers' money to obstruct religious communities' work. This needs to change. Indeed, the State Committee should be abolished – we do not need such a body.

We Protestants are Azerbaijani citizens, but no-one listens to us. An unwritten law says that as Muslims represent 95 per cent of the population all other faiths, including Protestants, should be ignored. The media, the police and the secret police regard Christianity as an enemy of the people, working for Russia, Armenia or some other "enemy". Fear abounds. Although we are trying to fight for our rights, we cannot do so alone. We need the West. Normally citizens of a country should resolve their problems themselves, but we cannot. Let the state give us the rights we have in the constitution. The constitution is good, but the practice is bad.

Why is the West not doing anything? We do not understand what they are waiting for. We think oil and gas are closing their eyes to democracy here.

Each year Western governments give several million dollars to promote democracy, but where is this democracy? Are these funds being used to promote democracy or the opposite? No-one asks why there is a need for so many police and secret police. Why are there so many? What do we need them for? How are they fed?

Religious freedom is an inseparable part of the other human rights which need to be observed here – and these other rights must also be raised. Freedom of conscience cannot exist without other freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, as well as

press and literature freedom. Because of this, religious freedom is a litmus test for freedom and democracy in any society, including Azerbaijan. Democracy is power. If people have no power, the regime presides over nothing other than a police state.

One problem is that officials here are given no training on what democracy means. The constitution is only a formal document. We find it difficult to explain to officials our constitutional rights – they do not understand them. Officials at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations may be a little bit smarter. They know the rights that believers should have but carry out different instructions – those come from the KGB secret police.

It is also crucial that international pressure is exerted on the government to stop regarding religious activity as criminal activity. In contrast to the government's current attitude, criminal activity as understood by international organisations is just that - not religious activity. Criminal activity is just criminal activity – the religious faith of the criminal does not matter.

Some media here are very quick to react to any religious events, working hand in glove with the State Committee and the KGB in fulfilling their commands. Pro-government television companies like Azerbaijan News Service ANS, Space and Lider often work with officials to slander believers – they are a weapon in the authorities' hands (eg. See F18News 22 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=458). These media outlets violate the rights of religious believers, manipulating interviews and cutting segments together to make the believers look bad. They make believers out to be enemies of the people. As a result, ordinary people are afraid to visit places of worship.

We hear many promises from the international community, but these promises are not followed through. If I send my son out with money to buy bread and he does not get it, I no longer give him money. Western donors should follow this principle. As Azerbaijan has signed international agreements guaranteeing rights to religious freedom, such donors must demand that it fulfils these agreements. Otherwise they should tell our government to stop its violations and if it continues its abuses they should go further, isolating the country's leaders. Officials and pro-government media workers responsible for violating believers' rights should be blacklisted for entry to Western democracies. This should include the police and secret police leadership, as well as the top five or six leaders of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, an agency that depends on the President.

International bodies of which Azerbaijan is a member must be tougher. The Council of Europe and the OSCE should issue warnings over violations of believers' rights then, if the situation does not improve, suspend Azerbaijan's membership. This would give a positive signal for change. Knowing our mentality, it is better for these organisations to start off exerting pressure in a quiet, friendly way. But the pressure must be followed through, with a series of steps which do not exclude harsher measures.

When representatives of such international organisations meet our president to press these demands, it is important that the heads of the KGB secret police, the Interior Ministry and the State Committee are present also – so that they hear the answers our president gives. Such demands are best made first of all in private, the second time in the open, so that everyone can see what the West is demanding.

It would be very helpful for international organisations to be guided by local believers, who should be involved as partners in devising suitable approaches. It is of course difficult for religious minorities to know whether such approaches are sincere efforts to promote religious freedom or merely excuses for inaction. This makes it all the more important for religious minorities to watch the process carefully to ensure that their views are listened to – and to be prepared to keep up the pressure until the approaches bring success.

Religious believers in Azerbaijan are hoping that it is not true that our democracy is being sold for oil. The test of whether or not this is true is the West's concrete actions. (END)

- Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1192.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23&results=50>.

The F18News report on Azerbaijan before this commentary was 17 December 2004 "We want freedom - freedom in society, freedom of faith and freedom to worship" http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=479.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>.

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