

AZERBAIJAN'S MODEL OF MULTICULTURALISM

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Abstract

While racism, nationalism and xenophobia are expanding around the globe, Azerbaijan has developed its own model of multiculturalism, interfaith tolerance, ethnic diversity and intercultural dialogue. The model presented to the world by Azerbaijan is a multinational model that respects the national and spiritual values of people. Today the world of politics is studying this model and multiculturalism is seen as an alternative to xenophobia, islamophobia and racism. Even today, whilst some call for peace and harmony, others call for hatred. If one side's goal is to drag the world into chaos, the other's is to achieve global harmony. The experience of Azerbaijan in this regard is unique.

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Humanitarian Forum, ethnic and religious groups, International Tolerance Day, Year of Multiculturalism, Intercultural Dialogue*

In a globalized world not a single society can stay out of the influence of multiculturalism, as the indoor cultures are rapidly declining.

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Mr. Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly noted that multiculturalism is the national wealth of the country. According to Article 25 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, rights and duties of everyone should be respected, regardless of origin, race, and religion or spoken language. [7, 310]

The legal framework of multiculturalism is reflected in several provisions of the Constitution. It is reflected in the Article 18 of the "Religion and State" section and Article 25 of the "Law of Equality" section. The Article 18 states that religion is separate from the state and that all religious beliefs are equal before law, and the Article 25 ensures that everyone's rights and freedoms are respected regardless of his/her race, nationality, religion, language, gender, origin, property, position, beliefs, and affiliation with political parties, trade unions and other public associations.

Article 44 of the Constitution also states that every single citizen has the right to protect his/her national identity and that no one can be forced to change their nationality. Article 11 of the Law on Culture states that the cultural identities of all ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan are respected and legally protected. The article on "Freedom of Conscience" also addresses the respect and freedom of everyone's religious beliefs. [4, 3]

Simultaneously with the provisions of the supreme law, the Republic of Azerbaijan also responds to international calls. The Republic of Azerbaijan complies with all the provisions of the 1996 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Prevention and Punishment of Apartheid Crime and, finally, the Prevention and Punishment of the Genocide. Finally, the Council of Europe's Charter of Regional or Minority Languages is being implemented by Azerbaijani government as well. [4, 3]

Azerbaijan has been at the crossroads of cultures throughout history and has played a leading role in comprehension of various civilizations. Azerbaijan, distinguished for its tolerance from the ancient times, has been home to the Zoroastrianism, the first cradle of Christianity in the Caucasus, and Islam. Our country remarkably carries the ethnographic diversity of Achaemenid-Sassani, Roman-Byzantine, Scythian and Turkic-Oghuz cultures.

Undoubtedly, the roots of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan are very old. It is known that in the ancient Caucasian Albania, people from different nations, religions and cultures lived and contributed from time to time. Mifodiy, the Secretary of the Russian Orthodox Church of Baku and Azerbaijan, Eugene Brenneysen, member of the European Jewish Religious Community, Rasim Khalilov, leader of the Protestant community of the Word of Life, Robert Mobili, President of the Albanian-Christian community, in their speeches, talk about the state-religion relations in Azerbaijan, the guarantees of freedoms, tolerance towards religious and national minorities. [5] It seems quite clear today that even though various ethnic groups claim to be Azerbaijani, each of them has preserved its own distinct elements of culture. [1]

In the globalized world, multicultural and tolerant values are universal, and the Republic of Azerbaijan proudly protects and promotes these values. [13] Multiculturalism aims at preserving, developing and presenting the cultural diversity of people of different nations and religions around the world, as well as integrating minorities into the national culture of dominant ethnic groups. This path is a stage of integration without assimilation, where democracy and humanism are guiding ideologies. Only in this case mutual enrichment, friendship and cooperation is possible. Multiculturalism is a guide to create a dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

In integrated world, which we live in, there are different models of multiculturalism - such as Swedish, Australian, and Canadian. But many countries from different parts of the world, from different cultures and civilizations are promoting the Azerbaijani model. A clear example of this is the adoption of resolution which approves the Azerbaijan model of tolerance by the Senates and Houses of Representatives of Utah and Oregon in 2014. [4, 3]

Studies show that in our times there are two poles of multiculturalism policy. Formation of the first pole is linked with the name of Prime Minister David Cameron. Cameron said that multiculturalism in Europe has collapsed due to the refusal of different cultures to integrate with each other. The other pole is considered optimistic. The Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism is the optimistic one. [12]

Although the term multiculturalism has been recently introduced in Azerbaijan, its historic importance has been preserved and laid the ground for the coexistence of many different ethnic groups. Throughout the centuries, different nations and ethnicities have lived in the tolerant environment, sharing same values. The protection of their rights and freedoms, as well as their native languages has been enshrined in law as the main principle of the state, and as a result, members of each ethnic and/or religious group are widely represented in every sphere of society. [15]

The main cornerstone of multiculturalism is the transmission of the spiritual treasure of the nation to generations. At the IV Global Baku Forum, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said that people of different ethnic backgrounds and religions have lived in peacefully and securely in Azerbaijan. He also stated that multiculturalism and religious tolerance are preeminent state policies. [16, 4]

2016 was declared the 'Year of Multiculturalism' by the Decree of President Ilham Aliyev of January 11th of the same year. The construction and restoration of mosques, churches and synagogues throughout Azerbaijan is seen as a clear example of multicultural atmosphere in the country. The exceptional services of the great leader Heydar Aliyev in strengthening of multicultural values in our country should be noted. Thanks to the late president, traditions of multiculturalism have been widely used in our country and have been integrated as 'a model' in domestic policies of several countries.

Before the national leader Heydar Aliyev came to power, the country was in turmoil. Right after the collapse of Soviet Union, the ideologies of chauvinism and separatism became widespread in the country and the region. Nonetheless, as a result of the far-sighted policy of Heydar Aliyev, a unique atmosphere of solidarity between different ethnic groups was established. Heydar Aliyev united every single citizen under the ideology of 'Azerbaijanianism' and simultaneously has taken the centuries-old tradition of multiculturalism to a new level, demonstrating its superiority over other political models. [11, 37-43]

He once said: "The Republic of Azerbaijan is a multinational state. In addition to Muslims, there are also citizens belonging to other religions that live in Azerbaijan. As an independent, democratic country, Azerbaijan provides freedom to all people and nationalities living on its territory, regardless of religion, language, race, or political affiliation." [17, 4] Even at the inauguration ceremony on October 10, 1993, the Great Leader stated that Azerbaijan is a multinational state. All citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan shall have equal rights regardless of their national or religious affiliation. [2] In general, the more a nation is able to unite, the more wealth it will have. It should also be taken into account that the celebration of the International Day of Tolerance in 1999 was initiated by Heydar Aliyev.

There are 644 religious organizations registered in Azerbaijan - including Christianity, Judaism, Baha'i and Krishna oriented organizations. There are currently more than 2,000 mosques, 13 churches and 7 synagogues operating around the country. [9] All these religious organizations operate and cooperate in a harmonious and tolerant manner. From this point of view, the ideology of 'Azerbaijanianism', put forward by the great leader, is remarkable by its unique strategy.

The fundament of the ideology of 'Azerbaijanianism' is the unity of different people, cultures, traditions and confessions. This ideology is based primarily on state power and national discipline and national self-determination. The ideology of 'Azerbaijanianism' seeks understanding within various social classes and propagates constant and non-radical reform of the state, which arises from its potential. 'Azerbaijanianism' is a historic value that has been shaped for centuries. The centuries-old tradition of the harmony of the confessions currently living in Azerbaijan is the product of the great history of brotherhood and interrelationship of all nations and ethnicities living in our homeland, their common destiny and their shared struggle for the integrity of independent Azerbaijan.

Thus, the ideology of 'Azerbaijanianism' is political, as well as ethical. It belongs to the citizens of Azerbaijan and to the adherents of the idea of independent statehood of Azerbaijan, and, of course, serves as a unifying function. The ideology today plays a special role in regulation of relations between ethnic and cultural differences. As the great leader said, Azerbaijan's source of strength is the joint power of all people living there.

It is clear that multiculturalism has three basic elements:

- Providing cultural pluralism in the state
- Socialization of small cultural groups
- Revival and development of different cultures

All this demonstrates that multiculturalism is a democracy of cultural values within globalization process, and tolerance is its main characteristic. [10] In 2014, the State Advisory Service for Inter-ethnic, Multiculturalism and Religious Affairs was established in the country at the instruction of President Ilham Aliyev. In May of the same year, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a decree on the establishment of the Baku International Multiculturalism Center in the name of wider recognition of Azerbaijan as an example of tolerance in the world.

First and foremost activities of the center are - providing tolerance and protecting cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. Baku International Center for Multiculturalism explores inter-ethnic, inter-religious and intercultural relations. Without any doubt, the services of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation in promoting the traditions of tolerance and multicultural values of our country cannot be ignored. [14]

The dominant role in this direction belongs to the First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva. Mrs. Aliyeva states: "The Azerbaijani society, where traditional friendship and brotherhood relations and tolerance are prevailing among people, is our historic achievement and this factor has become a leading value of our socio-political life." [4, 3] Vice President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Leyla Aliyeva, has played a major role in promoting the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism from the platforms of UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Youth Forum of Islamic Conference.

On November 8, 2012, by the initiative of the Vice-President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Leyla Aliyeva, the British Parliament hosted a conference on the topic of "Perspectives of European multiculturalism: the Azerbaijani model of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance". This event played an irreplaceable role in promoting the Azerbaijani multiculturalism model in the Western world. [5] Furthermore, in 2012 Paris hosted an exhibition of Reza Degati - "Azerbaijan - A Land of Tolerance" - that reflects religious tolerance in our country. [5]

Today, dozens of activities regarding multiculturalism are taking place throughout our country, and this tendency has continued every year. One of these activities is the second World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue held in 2013 under the motto "Living together in peace in a multicultural world" initiated by President Ilham Aliyev. The event was attended by UNESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the Council of Europe, and the North-South Center of the Council of Europe, ISESCO, the UN World Tourism Organization and many more organizations. Another great example is the 8th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Baku in 2013. (19, 5)

In addition, there are a number of activities carried out by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation: construction of the Khabad-Or-Avner Educational Center for Jewish Children living in Baku, the restoration of VII-XII-century churches in France, the restoration of the Holy Roman catacombs, and the erection of a monument for Knyaz Vladimir in Astrakhan. [4, 3] Undoubtedly, multiculturalism and tolerance have historically been a way of life for Azerbaijanis and have become a daily way of life for every citizen, government institutions and organisations of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In addition to all aforementioned, Azerbaijan often hosts international events dedicated to the cooperation of nations and religions. An example of this is the conference called "Globalization, Religion, and Traditional Values", held in Baku in 2010 and attended by hundreds of representatives of different religions from all over the world. It should be noted that the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue has been held in Baku every two years since 2011, by the initiative of President Ilham Aliyev. All of aforementioned activities are carried out by international organizations, such as UNESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the Council of Europe, North-South Center of the Council of Europe, ISESCO, and the UN World Tourism Organization. [4, 3]

During one of these events, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said: "We are talking about a dialogue between civilizations. But at the same time, some statements, such as 'multiculturalism has failed' and 'multiculturalism has no future' make us sad. These are very dangerous statements. I should note that multiculturalism has no alternative in the modern world, because the majority of the world's countries are multinational. If multiculturalism (dialogue of civilizations, including religious co-operation) fails, then what is the alternative? Alternatives are discrimination, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism." [15]

Today Baku has become not only a diplomatic and political center of the region, but also a center of multiculturalism and tolerance. Our country often hosts the International Humanitarian Forum, the Conference of Ministers of Culture of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, the Crans Montana Forum, the Davos Forum, and the 3rd Global Baku Forum.

In the "Year of Multiculturalism", a series of memorable events were implemented in Azerbaijan. A number of government agencies took an active part here. These include the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, Ministry of Youth and Sport, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Heydar Aliyev Foundation, ANAS, Caucasian Muslims Office, Knowledge Fund under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. They have greatly contributed to the Year of Multiculturalism.

If we look at the strategic principles of the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism, it is apparent that today ethnic and religious dialogue are the fundament of multiculturalism and are governed by proper integration processes. The core of multiculturalism is the coexistence of peace, humanism and tolerance. The primary point here is the mutual dialogue between people

of different religions and speakers of different languages. Various ethnic groups and representatives of different faiths and beliefs live in peace and mutual coexistence in our country. [6]

Intercultural dialogue is generally defined in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue within a framework of the 118th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Council of Europe. In the White Book, intercultural dialogue is understood as a process of open and sincere exchange between individuals and groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic origins and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. Intercultural dialogue requires the freedom and the ability to express itself, as well as the desire and ability to listen to the opinions of others. It promotes the political, social, cultural and economic integration and convergence of multi-cultural societies. (8)

Today, the Republic of Azerbaijan is recognized worldwide as an example of the coexistence of peoples and nations. Multiculturalism taught national minorities and ethnic identities to love Azerbaijan as much as their homeland. In Intense international conditions of political world, this can only serve as good example and hope for the whole world. However, the situation is tense in one neighboring country - xenophobia, racial and ethnic-religious discrimination is an integral part of their society. The expulsion and deportation of the Azerbaijanis from the territory of Armenia in 1988 clearly support this argument. The war that still goes on has further precipitated the negative image of neighboring Armenia, who tries to maintain mono-ethnicity in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region by all means. Doubtlessly, xenophobic policies of our neighbor are a considerable threat to the development of multiculturalism in the region.

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**Date of receipt of the article in the Editorial Office
(07.10.2019)**