RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN AZERBAIJAN - A MYTH OR A REALITY?

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Abstract - Azerbaijan, located in the Southern Caucasus on the divide between Europe and Asia, shares quintessential borders with Russia in the north, Iran in the south, Georgia, Turkey and Armenia. Consisting of 9 million inhabitants, it is the home for various religious and ethnic minorities. The article demonstrates the extent Azerbaijani nation embrace diversity of religious and ethnic minorities. Multiculturalism and tolerance is one of the hot topics that reflects the foreign and internal policies of the country. Article discusses legislation and educational issues and it refers various literature reviews. At the same ethnographic research was conducted within 3 months of the various religious centers and religious institutions, along with the surveys among the population and religious leaders, where observation was carried out as one of qualitative research methods. Surveys were conducted among the most widespread religions in the country. The vast array of population in Azerbaijan are Muslims or tolerating Muslims as we would call them. Two imminent reasons prevail, one of which is that through centuries, historically, the state has been home to numerous traditions, cultures and religions. Thus, Azerbaijani people have a deep understanding of the concept of toleration. The second rationale behind this is about the Arab's conquest of the region in the 7th century. At the same time, as a newly independent state (26 years) it is significant for a country to gain recognition and respect on the international stage and to be part of political alliances and economic partnerships. Azerbaijan became a member of several international organizations in order to broaden and deepen the cooperation in the global and regional arena. Thus, Azerbaijan is following the strategies to be accepted as a tolerant country.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged", Jalaluddin Rumi, prominent Persian poet of all time, once told. As new religions are originated, they take some ideas from the old ones and share the similarity with them, and it, in its turn, leads to interaction among those religions. Despite that faith of the people is changing, as time goes by, they still remain the similar way of worship, and praying. According the world statistics, Christianity (31%), Islam(23%), Hinduism(15%), Buddism(7%), and Judaism(0,2%) are most prevailed religions. On the other hand, sixteen percent of world population remains non-religious. The 7 percent includes Folk Religionists and other religions. (Wordometers, 2017). First and foremost reason why Azerbaijan is selected as a topic of concern is its geographical position. As it is located on the divide between Europe and Asia, on the historic Silk Way, the region has been under occupation of various countries from both continents. Starting from ancient Rome up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country encountered myriad cultures, traditions, ethnic groups, and it has been a place of worship for a variety of faiths. Before Islam prevailed in Azerbaijan, the majority of inhabitants, Albans, believed in Zoroastrianism. It was also pre-Islamic religion in Persia. We still celebrate Novruz, a traditional holiday, which was not popular during Soviet Times, later gained its popularity again. When Azerbaijan was part of Soviet Union, it was prohibited to celebrate traditional holidays; however, after gaining its independence as the Soviet Union collapsed, it proceeded to celebrate Novruz nationwide. Despite that Novruz has Zoroastrian roots, that holidays call for unity of all people having different religions. The neighbors, having Muslim, Christian or Judaist faith, come together and bring out the traditions of Novruz. They do not question each other's religious preference, instead, that helps people to respect each other and their religion. There is also one temple of Zoroastrianism in the Surakhani district of Baku, "Ateshgah", construction of which goes back to several centuries ago. Despite of the fact that many other religions became predominant after that, it is still preserved and visited by Muslims and other religious minorities. Mentioning of ethnic tolerance, it would be noteworthy that the major ethnic group, 92 percent of the population are Azerbaijanis, the other 8 percent includes approximately 70 minority groups, including Lezgis, Russians, Armenians, Talyshis with 2, 1 and 1 percent respectively. The Avars, Ashkenazi Jews and Georgians are also ethnic minority groups who account for 2 percent of the population. (WorldAtlas, 2017) Russian language is the alternative language to Azerbaijani which schools are taught in. Besides, those ethnic minority groups might get their education in their own language, with their own traditions being taught. We will discuss one of those schools which belong to Ashkenazi Jews later in this paper. Ethnic and religious tolerance is not a new strategy of independent Azerbaijan, even back to 1918 when the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was established, the National Assembly (Milli Majlis) that is the legislative branch of the government, was made up 120 representative, 80 of which were Muslims, 21 Armenians, 10 Russians, 1 German and 1 Jew and that was proportionate to

nationalities living in Azerbaijan. (Milli Majlis, 2010) Azerbaijan is the first country in Muslim East that granted women the right to vote. (Murguzov, 2016) That displays how Azerbaijan, besides, it own population, respects minorities and guarantees equality of rights and liberties irrespective of nationality, religion, race or gender. It, at the same time, ensures free use and development of other languages spoken by the people. The supreme law in the Republic of Azerbaijan is Azerbaijani Constitution, and according to the Article 18 of the Constitution, religion in the Azerbaijan Republic is separated from the state and all religions are equal before the law. The relationship between religion and democratic values is crucial, since one of the purposes provided in the Constitution is to remain faithful to universal human values, to live in peace and freedom with all the nations of the world and co-operate with them. Azerbaijan is the member of several world organizations, such as the United Nations, Council of Europe, OSCE, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, CIS. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has become part of the Nonaligned Movement under the United Nations, and as that it is the example of global secularism. Azerbaijan has been a host country for various international events for several times, such as Eurovision, European Olympic Games, Formula 1, and Islamic Solidarity Games. According to the CIA World Factbook, in Azerbaijan the 93,4 percent of the population consists of Muslims (Shia and Sunni), the rest are Zoroastrians, Caucasian Albanian Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, Molokans, (European) Jews and "Mountain Jews" and others. (CIA, 2017) The reason for the majority of the population being Muslims is the Arab conquest of the region in the seventh century. Back then, Azerbaijan became the arena of destructive Iranian – Byzantine – Khazarian wars.The end of the destructive war for both sides coincided with the shape of new conquerors–Arabs in the historical arena. The ground for these conquests created socioeconomic and religious–ideological revolution, which were implemented by the Arab society. (Oval, 2016) Later, in 19th century Gulustan and Turmanchay treaties were signed and divided Azerbaijan between Russia and Iran. (Shukurov, 2011) As a large amount of Azerbaijani lands were given to Iran, the countries created visa-free relations between each other. That caused Muslim Irans to have an influence on Azerbaijanis in terms of religion, as well. At present, there are approximately 1,300 mosques in Azerbaijan, of which 220 have been built since 1991, some 40 churches, five synagogues, and other temples, and more than 500 other places of worship for those of other faiths." (Gafarov 2010) That shows every individual has freedom to practice his own religion, assemble and worship, until it promotes violence, terrorism and extremism. Every individual, at the same time, has his freedom to choose a religion. That freedom of religions starts from the education system. There is no class promoting the religion, as the education system is secular. However, with the choice of their own, people can go to special schools where they can learn more about that religion. The state's strategy of freedom of religion prevents a variety of negative cases, and that, at the same time, guarantees people to act based on secular moral and legal principles.

II. METHODOLOGY

Survey

In order to collect precise information qualitative research was used along with a survey, interview with people from different religions. By means of surveys, the objective was to get responses of people from different age groups and religions to get their opinions on extent of religious tolerance for other religions and towards them. Considering that there are lots of foreigners in Azerbaijan, and getting knowledge on how well they are treated and tolerated, survey questions were asked in two different languages, namely Azerbaijani and English. We asked groups of ages because we thought that this information is necessary for us to define whether different generations approach the issue differently. We later asked their religion and wanted to know whether this is the same religion that they were raised practicing in order to measure the freedom of choice on religion. Additionally, we asked 3 separate questions; their personal opinion whether they are tolerant toward other religions, whether Azerbaijanis are tolerant to other religious faith and whether people from different religions respect the respondents. We, finally asked the measures/projects/ recommendations to protect freedom of religions and to prevent religious discrimination.

Interview

The interviews were taken from peoples from different classes and contingents, such as ordinary citizens, students, representatives of The State Committee for Religious Associations, and professionals from the church (Melody Efendiyev), synagogue (Shneor Segal) and mosque (Haji Soltan). Semi structural and group interviews were preferred. Considering attitudinal fallacy, interviews are not always the best option to estimate accurate results. Therefore, personal observations are among research methods.

Data analysis

Objective in both collections of data and analysis part is to receive more ideas from interviews, surveys, observations, which were conducted during 3 months in different religious centers and religious institutions; and literature review in order to find out whether the tolerance, unity, discrimination of religions and ethnic minorities actually exist and if yes to what extent. A data source in the article involves triangulation method of qualitative research.

In order to analyze the research and check the validity, various sources are utilized. As of professionals concerned, we had been Ashkenazi Jew Synagogue in Baku and had quiet frank 60 minutes interview with Shneor Segal, who is Rabbi of the synagogue. Funds on synagogue comes from different donors, locally and overseas, also from the government of Azerbaijan. For example, New Jewish Synagogue Opens in Baku in 2003. Gennadiy Zelmanovich, Chairman of the Baku Religious Community of European Jews, said regarding to the opening of new synagogue: "This is a major event Azerbaijan. Jews who live here have always felt very free, which shows that it's quite possible for Muslims, Jews and Christians to live together in peace. Here in Azerbaijan, we are building up God's house. That's a great cause for celebration." Over hundred of people visit a synagogue during Friday and Saturday, and a lot more when there is an event or a holiday, around seven hundred people, but it is open to everyone irrespective of religion. He later proceeds mentioning how Jews are tolerant, since Jews believe not everyone has to be Jewish, but Jews. He emphasizes that “There is no other muslim country in the world that tolerates Judaism as such, everyone is trying to help, to solve the problem if any, and that is very unique. “ Coming to the measures to promote Judaism, he mentioned several events and projects, such as women`s club, humanitarian aid, and most importantly Jew school, where kids get both local education and Jewish education together. They receive a diploma from the local Ministry of Education, where Hebrew and Main Jewish Culture classes are included in that government document. The man named Ravin told that “Muslims are our friends. Despite that we live in Azerbaijan, we have deep friendly relations with them. We respect each other's religion.” The observations made in two churches for several times, one of which is Russian Orthodox Church, the other one is Evangelical-Lutheran Church. Short conversation with priest Alexander in Russian Church demonstrated that people come different times of the day to pray, but the majority prefers to come early in the morning. He mentioned that among prayer there are Muslims as well. Additionally, in German Church, interviews were taken from ordinary people visited the Church and they told that they are pleased with the way they are welcomed by local community here. The woman, named Tatiana told that she has never been in a Synagogue or Mosque, because she is afraid she can be influenced from other religions. Another man, named Mammad, claimed that he is Muslim, but he often visits other religious centers, since they all are the home of God. The priest approached us and invited us to come anytime we want, since it is the home of God. They emphasized how tolerant the Azerbaijanis are towards them, however, did not give an interview for certain reasons. According to the professionals in Islam, particularly Haji Soltan, in Azerbaijan there are several religious schools concerning Islam, and that he is teaching in one of those schools, where he has a fair number of students. He emphasized that besides Islam, students get information about other religions as well. Students are taught to be tolerant to other religions and people from those religions. Since the area, where Mr. Soltan is the religious leader, is considered to be a touristic zone, the visitors frequently visit the mosque that is newly constructed and get information about Islam and its history. The second type of data we have collected includes survey, where our purpose was to know how ordinary citizens approach the issue. We have collected survey results from 200 people from both sexes, from all ages, including foreigner living in Azerbaijan. The results are quite satisfactory. 52 percent of respondents are 16-30 years, 31 percent of them are 31-55 years, and the rest are above 55 years old. Young generation are more likely to tolerate others, especially the ones with non-religious. One of the lack in our survey was that we reached people only from certain religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and the large proportion confirmed that the religion that they believe in is the same religion that they were raised practicing. In 10 score scale, individuals, overall, evaluated their level of tolerance with 9 points, while they assessed tolerance level of Azerbaijanis towards other religions with 8 points. Respondents, at the same time, were asked to give recommendations on preventing religious discrimination and promoting the freedom of religion. Most of them offered that professionals from different religions should assemble and give lectures and seminars about their religion and educate people. Besides, preparing social video clips, using different forms of the arts to promote inter-religious dialogue are among the recommendations.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, taking into consideration what people have indicated in the interviews, surveys, and the literature review, we can conclude that Azerbaijan portraits exemplary tolerance towards other religions and ethnic minorities. On this basis, we can bring up the particular article concerning freedom of religions and ethnic minorities of the Constitution into attention. Moreover, government of Azerbaijan funds in religious and ethnic communities. For example, the government takes care of the catholic communities registered by the government as a result of the efforts of Polish priest Yerzhi Pilyus. The cultural heritage of the country's Jewish community which has ancient traditions has also attached a great deal of attention by the government of Azerbaijan. Through centuries, as number of empires appeared in the land of Azerbaijan and left, ethnic groups remained here. Diverse range of ethnic groups commenced to assimilate and get used to one another. They, then

irrespective of their nationality and religion could get along and live together without a fight. Therefore, the ethnic groups mentioned in the paper, also plays a vital role in the balancing tolerant approach. Based on the above facts, it can be noted that Azerbaijan maintains a policy of balanced religious tolerance.

APPENDIX

Survey questions

HYPERLINK
"https://ru.surveymonkey.com/r/7MKCMP3"
https://ru.surveymonkey.com/r/7MKCMP3

Interview questions

1. Who is funding in synagogue?
2. Approximately how many people visit the synagogue during the week?
3. To what extent the people whose religion is Judaism tolerate the other religions?
4. What projects/event have been realized in promoting Judaism in Azerbaijan?

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