



Clan Politics in Azerbaijan: A Critical Overview *

Azerbaycan'da "Klan Siyaseti": Eleştirel bir Bakış

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the subject of the so-called "clans" in Azerbaijani politics. Although informal networks can be necessary or inevitable alongside modern political institutions, it may become problematic when regional or kinship affiliations precede official rights and duties. The failure of democratization in Azerbaijan, together with other former Soviet Republics of Central Asia and Caucasus is partially explained by the "clan politics." Providing a historical overview of clan politics in Azerbaijan, with a focus on independence after 1991, I insist that the term clans should be used carefully. Based on literature review and a fieldwork, I suggest that regional and kinship affiliations are not a key element in understanding Azerbaijani politics, although their presence should not be overlooked.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, clan politics, informal networks, post-Soviet, democratization

ÖZET

Bu makale Azerbaycan siyasetindeki sözde "klanlar" konusuna odaklanmaktadır. Modern siyasi kurumların yanında gayriresmi ağlar gerekli veya kaçınılmaz olabilese de, bölgesel veya akrabalık bağları resmi hak ve görevlerden önce geldiğinde sorunlu hale gelebilir. Azerbaycan'da ve Orta Asya ve Kafkasya'daki diğer eski Sovyet Cumhuriyetlerinde demokratikleşmenin başarısızlığı kısmen "klan siyaseti" ile açıklanmaktadır. Azerbaycan'daki klan siyasetinin, 1991'den sonraki bağımsızlığa odaklanarak tarihsel bir genel bakışını sunarak, klan teriminin dikkatli kullanılması konusunda ısrar ediyorum. Literatür taramasına ve bir saha çalışmasına dayanarak, bölgesel ve akrabalık bağlarının Azerbaycan siyasetini anlamada önemli bir unsur olmadığını, ancak bunların varlığının göz ardı edilmemesi gerektiğini öne sürüyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, klan siyaseti, enformel ağlar, post-Sovyet, demokratikleşme

INTRODUCTION

Informal networks play a significant role in the political landscapes of former Soviet states, especially in Turkic republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In this context, "clan politics" often refers to networks based on regional or kinship ties, with implicit negative connotations rooted in Western-centric perspectives of political modernization. During the Brezhnev era, the Soviet regime reproduced pre-modern social relations, shaping political behavior. This article explores "clan politics" in Azerbaijan, examining its impact on democratic norms and political dynamics through literature and interviews. The findings offer insights not only for Azerbaijan but also for other nations influenced by informal, kinship-based networks.

In Azerbaijan, regional and kinship affiliations are significant for elite recruitment, though field research suggests regionalism is less influential than commonly assumed. Regionalism, as understood today, emerged during the 1960s and 1970s when Azerbaijanis became the majority in the country's political bodies. This shift coincided with a redefinition of center-periphery relations within the Soviet Union, granting local leaders increased autonomy as long as central demands were met (Bennich-Björkman & Grybkauskas, 2021; Hajda & Beissinger, 2019). This period is pivotal for two reasons: Gorbachev's reforms later dismantled entrenched networks of power, and many Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan, gained independence with their old elites intact. Regional networks served dual purposes: providing stability in politically insecure environments and facilitating smoother governance. However, in post-independence Azerbaijan, regionalism as a political force has waned, replaced by elite alignments based on shared political and economic interests.

Local accounts challenge the exaggerated importance of clan networks. Emir Pehlivan, an interviewee, argues that regional affiliations do not necessarily translate to advantages for regions of origin. Elite networks operate on personal relationships rather than center-periphery dynamics. For ordinary citizens, survival and economic well-being outweigh regional loyalties.

Regionalism's roots in Soviet political life date back to the 1960s, evolving under Heydar Aliyev's leadership. Aliyev used anti-corruption campaigns and regional affiliations to reshape the political elite, bolstering

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Nakhchevani influence while the Bakuvian elite (*Bakintsi* in local usage) retained power. Despite Aliyev's removal from the Politburo, Nakhchevanis maintained their influence, facilitating his return as president. The concept of regionalism further evolved after events like "20 January," as new networks emerged amid shifts in power dynamics.

Cultural orientation also plays a role in Azerbaijani politics. For instance, Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis largely supported Ilham Aliyev's presidency in response to perceived dominance by Nakhchevani and Yeraz elites. However, under Ilham Aliyev, rural-affiliated groups gained prominence, while the influence of the Yeraz elite declined, giving way to the Baku-based Pashayev family. In Azerbaijan's political system, trust and loyalty, often tied to regional identities, underpin elite relationships (Cornell 2011: 167). While political rivalries cannot be solely attributed to regionalism, understanding elite group dynamics is crucial for analyzing Azerbaijan's political structure.

Clans under Russian Imperial Rule

The roots of clan politics in Azerbaijan trace back to the "Era of Khanates," from 1747 to the early 19th century, when the Safavid dynasty weakened, and various khanates—Baku, Quba, Shaki, Shamakhi, Karabagh, Nakhchevan, and Erevan—emerged independently. These khanates, fragmented by ethnicity, religion, sect, and nomadic versus sedentary lifestyles, frequently engaged in violent conflict, reinforcing regional solidarity and hindering the development of a unified Azerbaijani national identity (Cornell 2011: 167). After the Russian Empire's victories over Iran in the early 19th century, Azerbaijan's khanates became part of Russia. In the 1840s, administrative changes reorganized these territories into Russian provinces, or "*gubernii*as," disregarding historical and demographic realities (Altstadt 1992: 12). Under Russian rule, Azerbaijan's Muslim population, especially the Azerbaijani Turks, faced discrimination, particularly in comparison to Christian communities in the Caucasus. The Islamic clergy, which had considerable authority, was brought under state control, while Armenian and Georgian Christians retained more freedom.

The rise of Baku as a global oil hub during the late 19th century, known as the "First Oil Boom," had significant social and political consequences (Aliyev & Mamedzada 2009). In response to the dominance of Armenians in civil service, many Azerbaijanis were recruited between 1896 and 1904, often from wealthy, land-owning families. These recruits typically gained their positions through education in Russia (Cornell 2011: 9).

Despite limited political and economic modernization under Russian rule, regional and kinship affiliations remained strong, particularly during the industrialization of Baku. Migration from rural areas to the capital for work further reinforced these affiliations, as the absence of social integration mechanisms like civil society organizations and education made kinship ties crucial for survival.

Clans during Soviet Rule

Informal networks based on regional and kinship affiliations trace back to the pre-modern era, but they became integrated into modern political institutions during the Soviet period, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The Soviet era had a mixed impact on clan networks. Up until the mid-20th century, Baku was a cosmopolitan city with a heterogeneous population and hybrid culture. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, the city underwent a demographic shift, favoring Azerbaijani Turks. Migration from rural regions, driven by educational and employment opportunities, laid the foundation for a broader cultural, economic, and political transformation. This demographic and cultural reclamation enabled Azerbaijani Turks to bring their practices and social networks to Baku, completing the city's transformation.

Diaspora communities from western Azerbaijan—Nakhchevani, Yeraz, and Graz—were particularly successful in establishing networks of economic and political power (Cornell 2011: 168). Their success, extending into the post-independence era, can be attributed to the strong group cohesion they developed while living in ethnically alien and often hostile environments. In 1969, Brezhnev appointed Heydar Aliyev as the First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (AzCP), marking a turning point for the Nakhchevani clan in national politics. Brezhnev's "stability of cadres" policy (Gorlizki 2010; Rigby 1978) allowed local strongmen like Aliyev to govern with relative autonomy in exchange for loyalty and economic performance. Aliyev leveraged this autonomy to appoint many Nakhchevanis to influential positions in government and academia.

This strategy reflected not just primordial loyalties but also a need for trust and loyalty in an uncertain political environment. The base Aliyev built during this era was pivotal for his popularity in Azerbaijan, enabling his political comeback in 1993 after falling out of favor in Moscow. Beyond Nakhchevani support, Aliyev also secured the Yeraz elite's backing, further consolidating his power in the 1990s.

Clans since Independence

When examining the role of clans in Azerbaijani politics, it is essential to recognize that regional affiliation, as in other contexts, is not the sole determinant of political alignment. The political sphere in Azerbaijan began to expand during Gorbachev's reforms, leading to the proliferation of political movements and organizations outside the official boundaries. Across the USSR, various groups emerged with agendas ranging from environmental protection to open opposition to the communist regime. In Azerbaijan, many of these groups coalesced under the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), an umbrella organization that played a pivotal role in ending communist rule and governed the country for nearly two years post-independence.

Notably, both the leadership and membership of the APF included significant representation from the Nakhchivan and Yeraz regions. This demonstrates that the political behavior of individuals from these regions was not uniform, as members of the same clans held differing political alignments, with some opposing the government while others occupied key administrative positions. This supports the assertion that political preferences cannot be reduced to regional affiliations alone. Some of my interviewees emphasized efforts to minimize the role of regionalism within the APF, striving to position it as a political platform for all Azerbaijani citizens and to move away from the entrenched practices of nepotism and patronalism. However, they also acknowledged that regionalism could not be entirely eradicated. Nevertheless, accounts from local informants strongly challenge the portrayal of Azerbaijani politics as a pre-modern, tribal construct.

While APF leader Ebulfez Elchibey hailed from Nakhchivan, his political identity did not align with the Nakhchivani clan. Other prominent political figures, such as Isa Qambar and Ali Kerimli, originated from Mountainous Karabakh, and Musa Qambar's explicit opposition to regionalism extended to the Nakhchivani clan (Cornell, 2011: 170). Similarly, Etibar Memedov, the former leader of the Azerbaijani National Independence Party and a Yerazi, attracted significant support from his regional base (Cornell, 2011: 169). From the late 1980s until approximately the mid-2010s, five major informal networks associated with specific geographic and administrative regions were widely recognized as influential in Azerbaijani politics. These included the Nakhchivan, Yeraz, Graz, Karabakh, Baku-Shirvan, and Ganja clans. With the exception of the Baku-Shirvan and Ganja clans, these networks primarily represented Azerbaijani diaspora and enclave communities from the western regions of the country (Cornell, 2011: 168). Additionally, the Talysh, from the southeastern regions, and the Lezgin clans held important roles, particularly within the religious and military hierarchies, although they failed to evolve into politically dominant groups due to their status as ethnic minorities.

The prominence of western clans in Azerbaijani politics and economics has been linked to the conflict with Armenia (Alkan, 2010: 207). Among the Nakhchivani clan's notable members were Ramiz Mehdiyev, Rasul Quliyev, Namik Abbasov, and Ali Nagiyev, with Mehdiyev acting as a key power broker within the clan. The Yeraz clan included figures such as Ali Insanov and Murtuz Alasgarov, though members of other clans also held significant positions in government. For example, Ramil Usubov, originally from Karabakh, maintained a close connection to Heydar Aliyev, reportedly dating back to the 1980s (Cornell, 2011: 169). However, regional affiliations should not be overestimated as determinants of political security. For instance, Insanov was detained and sentenced to 11 years in prison following allegations of his involvement in the 2005 protests.

In other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, clan politics similarly play a role, with presidents often portrayed as balancing the interests of competing groups. Failures to maintain this balance have led to violent conflicts, as in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 (Radnitz, 2006; Collins, 2011; Voronin & Bakina, 2019). Conversely, Heydar Aliyev successfully navigated such challenges in Azerbaijan by leveraging clan rivalries to consolidate power. By promoting and punishing clans strategically, Aliyev prevented any single faction from dominating and eliminated external threats to his rule by the late 1990s. Between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, inter-clan rivalries, particularly between the Nakhchivani and Yeraz clans, were a defining feature of Azerbaijani politics. These tensions became evident during the 1998 presidential elections when the Yeraz clan is believed to have covertly supported Etibar Memedov in his bid against Heydar Aliyev. Intra-clan rivalries also emerged, with figures such as Rasul Guliyev maintaining a political base among Nakhchivani elites despite being in exile. The Bakuvian elite, represented by Ayaz Mutalibov, lost prominence in the post-Soviet era but maintained some support among urban constituencies who resented rural clan dominance.

It is crucial to approach social and political analyses of regional affiliations in Azerbaijan with an awareness of their fluidity. As anthropological studies emphasize, such identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed depending on the context. As Cornell (2011: 170) notes, while regionalism is entrenched, it should not be viewed as an all-encompassing explanation for Azerbaijani politics. Interviews with local informants repeatedly underscored that an interest-based perspective offers greater explanatory power than a narrow focus on

clan politics. In the years following independence, clan structures and their mechanisms have undergone significant transformations. While loyalty and trust were critical for state survival in the 1990s, these qualities have since become tools for maintaining stability within an authoritarian framework.

Ilham Aliyev's succession to the presidency brought expectations of reforms, including the reduction of clan influence. Initially, inter-clan rivalries posed challenges to his authority, with the 2003 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections marking turning points in Azerbaijani power politics. By reducing the Yeraz clan's influence and relying more on the Nakhchivani clan, Aliyev consolidated his position. His tenure also marked a shift toward family networks as a dominant factor in elite recruitment, with alliances increasingly forged through familial connections. Mehriban Aliyeva's appointment as Vice President in 2017 exemplifies this trend, though it was criticized as indicative of sultanistic practices (Erickson, 2017; Foley, 2017).

In summary, while regional affiliations and kinship networks remain relevant in Azerbaijani politics, their influence has evolved. Clan structures are increasingly shaped by financial and political calculations, demonstrating the adaptability of these networks within the broader context of authoritarian governance.

CONCLUSION

Regional affiliation, rather than representing a primordial form of group identity, serves as a marker of cultural orientation and plays a significant role in Azerbaijani politics. In Azerbaijan, both at the societal and elite levels, the influence of regionalism and clan networks has been steadily diminishing. This trend is driven by ongoing, albeit challenging, processes of nation-building and state-building, which are contributing to the homogenization of communities. Additionally, the forces of market mechanisms and globalization—despite their inherent challenges—are fostering similar outcomes by reshaping individual and group identities. These shifts have also transformed the sources and nature of social capital, reducing the significance of ethnic, clan, or regional affiliations in shaping political and economic behavior.

These dynamics represent promising avenues for further social research. While clan politics remains resilient and continues to play a significant role in Azerbaijan's political sphere, scholars must recognize its evolving nature. For instance, the "Old Guard," comprising the Nakhchivani and Yeraz networks, retains considerable influence. However, the gradual aging and passing of their older members have initiated a generational shift. Consequently, a new political elite, shaped by a markedly different experience of political socialization, is poised to assume leadership roles.

The construction of patronage networks and the use of informal relations are not phenomena exclusive to authoritarian political systems. Informal networks are integral to political life, as they often complement formal mechanisms and the institutional organization of power (Goodfellow, 2020; Helmke & Levitsky, 2012; Minbaeva et al., 2023). The issue arises, however, when informal mechanisms supplant formal ones and are exploited to secure unjust advantages for specific groups. Thus, the degree and purpose of informality are critical variables in assessing its political impact.

In post-Soviet states, political systems exhibit varying degrees and manifestations of informality. While explanations for the persistence of informal relations rooted in kinship and regional affiliations often trace their origins to pre-Soviet social and political structures, it is essential to distinguish the unique influence of Soviet and post-Soviet experiences in transforming informality into a modern phenomenon.

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