

# Keys to understanding Azerbaijan

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## **The country with the most sophisticated and intelligent dictatorship**

When Azerbaijan became independent in 1991, it was one of the few former Soviet republics that had a reasonably healthy economy – based on the production and sale of its biggest natural resource: oil. This has enabled the regime in Baku to follow its own policy without much interference from Russia.

Azerbaijan is currently ruled by President Ilham Aliyev, the son of the previous leader Heidar Aliyev. Heidar Aliyev was already in power during the era of the USSR, so there is a lot of continuity in leadership in Azerbaijan.

The regime does its utmost to polish up its image abroad. President Aliyev claimed, for example, on 26 December 2014 that "all the freedoms, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience, are guaranteed in Azerbaijan. All religious freedoms are fully provided in Azerbaijan". (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, July 2015](#))

Regularly, the country invites delegations from human rights organisations and international political institutes like the EU, UN and others. These people are then provided with a programme to visit a couple of cities and meet with well-selected representatives of the people of Azerbaijan (including representatives of the registered churches). Of course everybody will confirm that Azerbaijan is the Land of Tolerance and that their situation is rosy. Unfortunately it is impossible for delegates to meet with members of the opposition (since these are in prison) or people from churches that do not have registration. The result is that from time to time very favourable reports on Azerbaijan are published.

At the 2015 Central Asia Consultation in Turkey the Azerbaijani delegation gave a very positive presentation about their country which can only be described as propaganda. This was shown by representatives of the Azeri Christian community. Who are they working for?

The regime has also taken up the task of keeping its image intact when critical reports about Azerbaijan are launched. In 2013 The Azerbaijani embassy in Germany approached our Development office to ask how it was possible that their country had ended up on the Open Doors World Watch List, a list indicating the level of Christian persecution in various countries. They repeated these moves after the publication of the WWL 2016 last January. Denials of reality are a routine tactic of the government and its apologists.

To stay in power, the regime in Azerbaijan uses a wide range of tactics. First of all, the country has very restrictive legislation. While the constitution provides for religious freedom, some laws and policies requiring religious organisations to register restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of some religious minorities.

Since 1992 the government has amended the Law on Religious Freedom 14 times. One of the very negative effects of this is that at least six times since 1991 all churches in Azerbaijan have been

obliged to re-register under increasingly harsher conditions. It should come as no surprise that at each round of re-registration fewer and fewer congregations managed to pass.

Second, the security and secret services have a wide mandate and are numerically strong. All opposition, be it political, social, religious, or through the media are under constant surveillance. Arrests and beatings occur on a very regular basis. Churches that have no registration face the constant threat of raids, confiscations, arrests and fines. Pastors and other church leaders are from time to time invited to the police station or the secret police for 'discussions,' just to keep the pressure up.

The authorities have also managed to create an atmosphere of distrust among believers. It is believed that all churches have been infiltrated by spies who report to the authorities. There are anecdotic stories that influential church people received a big gift (e.g. a car) from the state. That is surely a sign of their cooperation with the regime. Other stories report on church leaders being arrested. They are held in a cell for a few days without being interrogated and then released. Everyone will assume that he has talked. As a result, no one knows whom to trust any more.

In many respects Azerbaijan has developed the most sophisticated and intelligent system to stay in power. It has been very successful in this. Currently, there are no major threats challenging the regime – despite its enviable wealth and strategic geographic location.

## **Politics and legislation**

The attitude of the authorities has already been described above. The legislation of Azerbaijan is restrictive. While the constitution provides for religious freedom, some laws and policies requiring religious organizations to register restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of some religious minorities. Under the constitution, persons have the right to choose and change religious affiliation and beliefs (including atheism), to join or establish the religious group of their choice, and engage in religious practice.

A number of legal provisions enable the government to regulate religious groups, including a requirement that religious organizations and individual congregations of a denomination register with the government. Registration allows a religious organization to maintain a bank account, rent property, and generally act as a legal entity.

The State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) holds broad powers over the registration process and can appeal to the courts to suspend a religious group's activities.

According to the law, authorities may deny registration of a religious community if its actions, goals, or essence contradict the constitution and other laws. Religious groups are permitted to appeal registration denials to the courts. A community can be denied registration if it is not recognized as a religious association, if its charter and other establishment documents contradict the law, or if the information provided is false.

The SCWRA reviews and approves all religious literature for legal importation, sale, and distribution. According to the law, punishment for the illegal production, distribution, or importation of religious literature not approved by the SCWRA can include fines ranging from 5,000 to 7,000 manat (AZN)

(\$6,250 to \$8,750) or up to two years' imprisonment for first offenses, and from AZN 7,000 to 9,000 (\$8,750 to \$11,250) or imprisonment between two and five years for subsequent offenses.

The law prohibits religious proselytizing by foreigners but does not prohibit citizens from doing so. Islamic religious rituals and ceremonies can only be conducted by citizens who are educated within the country or whose religious education abroad is approved by the government. Foreigners affiliated with other religious groups can perform rituals and ceremonies if they are registered with the government. (Source: [US State Department International Freedom of Religion report 2015](#)).

The Religion Law – misleadingly called the Law on Freedom of Religion – has been amended 14 times between 1992, when it was first adopted, and July 2011. Every significant change has imposed tighter restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. Many of these amendments – like changes to the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code (see below) – were prepared in secret, with no public consultation, and were rushed through parliament, the unicameral Milli Mejlis, dominated by president Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party.

Article 12 states: "Religious organisations may function only after state registration by a relevant state body and the state registry of religious organisations." There is no legal possibility for more than one person to manifest freedom of religion or belief without state permission. State officials, as before, use such provisions to try to ban the "illegal" exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Under Article 12 religious communities without 50 adult founding members are not eligible to apply for state registration, banning all small religious communities.

The Religion Law reinforces the existing censorship regime, along with Administrative Code Article 300. Religion Law Article 22 states: "Religious organisations, and other natural and legal persons who are not religious organisations, may produce, import, export and freely disseminate religious literature, items and other information materials". However, it allows this only "with the consent of a relevant state body", once again breaking Azerbaijan's international human rights commitments. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, July 2015](#))

This, unfortunately, is not where it ends. Though legislation is restrictive, practice is worse. Forum 18 pointed out that officials behave as if the rule of law, including published laws, places no limitations on their actions. Trials for alleged offences often flagrantly lacked due process, including trials taking place without those accused being aware that the trials are happening. Officials do not allow the international human rights standards to which Azerbaijan is party to limit their actions.

In addition to the restrictions contained in published laws, many belief communities have also found that there are also unwritten restrictions. Without indications of approval from senior government figures, groups of people are unlikely to be allowed to exercise freedom of religion or belief. This in practice prevents communities from legally existing and activities such as opening places of worship, recovering property confiscated in Soviet times, holding public events and publishing religious literature.

Officials take full advantage of the unclear or undefined wording of laws and often ignore other laws and legal procedures. There is impunity for extra-legal official actions. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, July 2015](#))

## Religion

Azerbaijan uses a special government agency, the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), to supervise (and restrict) religion. To function as a religious group, it is necessary to register with the SCWRA. For this 50 signatures of members are needed. Furthermore, the SCWRA must approve of all religious literature and materials before it may be produced, imported or distributed.

Intimidation, infiltration and many restrictions (written down or not) create such an oppressive atmosphere for believers in Azerbaijan that they find it easier to do outreach in Iran or Georgia than in their own country!

The re-registration process has almost ground to a halt, leaving many re-registration applications unanswered. Some religious communities have found that compulsory re-registration has meant de-registration. For example, the Baptist Union had 10 registered congregations in 1992. After compulsory re-registration in 1994 it was six. After compulsory re-registration in 1999 it was two. By 2009 – before the latest round of compulsory re-registration – the Union had been able to register three congregations, in Baku, Sumgait and Gyanja. Now it has no registered congregations, as all seven congregations which lodged applications – which they have repeatedly done – have received rejections. (Source: [Forum 18, Religious freedom survey, July 2015](#))

## Economy

Azerbaijan is one of the richest countries in the former Soviet Union with an unemployment rate of only 5.4% and a relatively small percentage of the population living below the poverty line (6%). Mining and hydrocarbon industries accounted for well over 95 per cent of the Azerbaijani economy. There is an urgent need for diversification, but no significant steps in this direction have been taken yet.

Azerbaijan's high economic growth has been attributable to large and growing oil and gas exports, but some non-export sectors also featured double-digit growth, including construction, banking, and real estate. Oil exports through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, the Baku-Novorossiysk, and the Baku-Supsa pipelines remain the main economic driver, but efforts to boost Azerbaijan's gas production are underway. (Source: [CIA World Factbook](#))

In July 2015 Russia stepped up its pressure on Azerbaijan by extending the area under Russian control in South Ossetia in Georgia southwards. Now more than 1.5 kilometres of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, the main export line is under Russian control. Another fact that had a major impact on Azerbaijan is the recent drop in the price of oil.

## Social situation and culture

BMBs experience much pressure from societal factors like family, friends and local community. This pressure is much stronger in the countryside than in the major cities. Relatives oppress a Christian, trying to make him/her to turn back to Islam. Often it can be with physical abuse. But sometimes it is done also by local police. Believers have been fired from their jobs when it became known that they were Christians.

The conflict with Armenia over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has not been settled yet, but a fragile ceasefire is in place. The enclave is populated mostly by Armenians. Off and on the two countries have been holding talks to find a solution for this longest-running conflict in the former Soviet Union. During 2011 fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the region flared up again. About one million people have been displaced and more than 35,000 were killed. The conflict does have a very negative impact on Christianity in Azerbaijan: it is seen as the religion of the enemy.

Corruption is endemic on all levels of administration and government. Christians have to face the corruption issue on a daily basis – if they want to get anything done they must be prepared to pay bribes. Unregistered groups suffer most: they know that their activities are illegal and that they need to bribe officials to look the other way.

Thanks to the old Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Azerbaijan is literate (99.8%). This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can receive materials in their own language. The closeness of the Azeri language to Turkish means that many materials in Turkish could also benefit Christians in Azerbaijan. Another important factor is the presence of more than 12 million Azerbaijanis in neighbouring Iran. This has provided an opportunity for outreach. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean this sort of ministry must mostly be done unofficially.

## Technology

State control over the media makes it difficult for Christians to spread the gospel in Azerbaijan. In September 2014 the Azeri regime began another campaign for further restricting the media. They have reduced the information space so dramatically that critical media are limited to just one or two outlets. The authorities believe the press should work under the guidance of official propaganda. The government's policies cannot be criticized. (Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)) In July 2016 the independent TV station ANS TV had its license revoked for allegedly expressing support for U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen at the time of the failed coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Ankara has blamed on Gulen. (Source: [Radio Free Europe](#))

Foreign media are also restricted. Azerbaijani authorities sealed off the office of Radio Free Europe which was shut down in December 2014 in connection with a government-led campaign against foreign organizations. (Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)) Foreign Christian radio (medium and short wave) and television stations (satellite) can be accessed from within Azerbaijan.

Internet access is also under surveillance, but to our knowledge there have been no websites blocked by the regime. This means that Azeri Christians do have the opportunity of visiting foreign Christian websites.

There are more cell phones in Azerbaijan than people. This offers opportunities to spread the gospel via SD cards.