

AZERBAIJAN

Non-Muslim religious minorities in Azerbaijan, a secular state

On 12 November, about 100 people participated in the conference "Christians, Jews and Other Religious Minorities in Azerbaijan" organized at the European Parliament by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* with MEP Laszlo Surjan, vice-president of the Parliament, and MEP György Schöpflin. Here is the paper of HRWF:

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.11.2013) - Is Islam compatible with democracy and human rights? Is Islam compatible with secularism? Can Muslim countries accommodate non-Muslim religions? These are recurrent issues that are regularly debated by politicians and human rights experts.

Two years ago, we presented a report about Christian minorities in Bahrain showing the tolerance of the authorities towards non-Muslim groups and the lack of social hostility from the Sunni and Shia population.

In the last week of August 2013, a delegation from Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l carried out a fact-finding mission in Azerbaijan, a secular country massively populated by Muslims (96%).

Azerbaijan is a former Soviet republic which gained independence more than 20 years ago. Its constitution says: "Azerbaijani state is a democratic, legal, secular, unitary republic. Religion in the Azerbaijan republic is separated from the state. All religions are equal before the law."

The secular nature of the state on which separation of state and religion is based is the legal and constitutional pillar of the common house in which all Azerbaijanis can live in peace and with equal rights whatever their religion.

Some characteristics of secularism in Azerbaijan:

- * There is no privileged status of the majority religion, Islam, in the constitution;
- * The judicial system is secular and there is no place for sharia law in family matters;
- * The religious legislation is the same for Muslim and non-Muslim communities;
- * No legislation limits the right to choose or to change one's religion;
- * Religion is not taught in Azerbaijani public schools;
- * Practices of the majority religion are not imposed to other religions: no campaign exists against Azerbaijanis drinking alcohol, and pork products can be found - though not always - in supermarkets
- * Men and women have equal rights: Women are not discriminated against in matters concerning parental or custody rights, inheritance rights and property rights;
- * Muslim men and women can get married with someone professing another religion. There is no compulsion for the non-Muslim spouse to adopt Islam.

Azerbaijan, a case study

Our delegation visited a dozen non-Muslim religious communities and their places of worship in Baku and in the north of the country, talked to ordinary believers, interviewed their spiritual leaders and collected a wide range of testimonies about the mutual perception of their communities, their inclusion in the construction of the Azerbaijani identity since independence from the late Soviet Union, inter-religious relations and relations with the state authorities.

What is the daily reality of religious minorities in the Muslim society of Azerbaijan? Let us begin with two of them for which life is usually very difficult in the Muslim world: the Jews and the Bahá'ís.

The Jews

Jews started living in Azerbaijan more than 2,000 years ago and for about 1400 years as a minority in a Muslim environment. Throughout this period, they have been fully part of society regardless of the regime

under which they lived. Seven communities have been registered by the state since independence over 20 years ago.

Unlike many other countries in the world, there is no discrimination, no social hostility and no organized manifestation of anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. Jews peacefully live among Shi'a and Sunni Muslims who make up around 96% of the population.

The Bahá'ís

In many Muslim countries, institutions and clergy consider Bahá'ís apostates from Islam and persecute them on this ground. In Iran, they are even banned and many of them are in prison. The last report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom lists more than a hundred Bahá'ís in Iran who serve various prison terms from one year up to twenty on a wide range of charges related to their membership or activity with their faith: forming an illegal cult, acting against national security, membership in an illegal group, membership in the deviant sect of Baha'ism, etc.

In Azerbaijan, the Bahá'í community was registered by the state, fully enjoys freedom of religion and is not discriminated against by the authorities. Their presence in this Muslim dominated country has not created any hostility from the Shia or the Sunni communities.

Let us now have a closer look at the way secularism has shaped social behaviours, social culture as well as relations between the majority religion and minority religions. Some concrete examples on the basis of data collected during the fact-finding mission.

Converting from Islam to another religion

By law and in practice, Muslims can convert to another religion whether they are men or women and even proselytize among their former coreligionists without arousing any family or social hostility.

The pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Saviour in Baku, Ismayilova Manzar, is a woman. She is from a Muslim family. She became Christian while she was living in Moscow. It was a personal choice to join a Lutheran community and to study at the Lutheran Seminary of St Petersburg. Her change of religion did not pose any problem in her family.

In Baku, we met with two Bahá'ís, Ramazan Asgarti, Secretary of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly, and Abin Afardiyev, a member of the Office of External Affairs of the Bahá'í community. Both are converts to the Bahá'í faith and are involved in the revival of the community.

The current head of Hare Krishna devotees in Azerbaijan, Ramil Aliyev, is also a convert. He joined the Hare Krishna while he was a student at the Kyiv School of Economics at the time of the Soviet Union. He had never been religious even though his family was culturally Muslim.

Inter-religious relations and solidarity

Religious leaders of Islam, Christianity and Judaism do not compete against each other when preaching to their faithful. All these elements have created a specific culture which cultivates tolerance towards all religions and inter-faith solidarity.

Muslims, Christians and Jews participate in each other's religious festivals.

Jews: A new synagogue was opened in Baku in 2003 thanks to the generosity of donors of various faiths, including Azerbaijani Muslims.

Catholics: When Pope John-Paul II paid an official visit to Baku in 2002 he donated \$20,000 to help pay the \$1 million ransom demanded by the kidnappers of an Orthodox priest in Chechnya as a sign of gratitude for the good relations between Russian Orthodox Eparch Iscein and the local Catholic community.

He also met a group of internally displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh representing the hundreds of thousands of people living in the same situation and made a donation of \$100,000 to cover their urgent needs.

Orthodox: The recent revival of the Russian Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan was made possible by the support of the Presidency, major financial contributions of philanthropists of various faiths and other religious communities.

During the Black January of 1990, the Orthodox Cathedral was hit by missiles fired by Soviet troops. The building was severely damaged, the bell tower and the roof also being hit by shelling. In the same year, the Russian Orthodox Church began restoration work of the building thanks to a donation from a philanthropist: Aydin Gurbanov, an Azerbaijani-born Muslim businessman and vice-president of the All-Russia Azerbaijani Congress. A picture of him permanently surrounded by flowers is exposed in a corner of the Cathedral.

Our meeting with the Orthodox bishop took place in a religious cultural center the construction of which was financed by a Muslim businessman built on a plot of land given by President Ilham Aliyev.

Mutual assistance between denominations is also a prominent feature of the religious landscape and culture in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the World Summits of Religious Leaders in Baku, the regular visits of the ROC Patriarchs in Baku and the long-standing dialogue between the ROC leaders and the other religions in Azerbaijan and in the Caucasus undoubtedly contribute to religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the region.

State support and financing of religions - Secularism is not hostile to religions in Azerbaijan

Last year, the Cabinet of Ministers gave 2 million manats (EUR) to the Caucasus Muslim Board for all its affiliated mosques. The State Committee for Work with Religious Associations was mandated to distribute 400,000 manats (EUR) to non-Muslim associations according to their membership.

Moreover, state help is also provided in the form of donation of plots of lands or rebuilding of places of worship destroyed for city-planning purposes or in other circumstances.

In 2011, city planning projects forced the Mountain Jews community in Baku to move to another location but the state covered the expenses of the reconstruction of their synagogue.

After the visit of the Pope in 2002, the President donated a plot of land for the construction of a Catholic church.

A plot of land for the construction of a religious cultural center for the Orthodox Church was also a gift of the President of Azerbaijan.

The Lutheran church which was confiscated by the Soviet regime in the 1930s remained state property after independence and is now a Philharmonic Center belonging to the Ministry of Culture. The place is rented to the Lutheran congregation according to their needs for the duration of their religious activities for a modest amount and the state maintains this historic building in good condition. This is not very different from the situation in France where the State confiscated all religious buildings after the 1789 Revolution and as the owner of them, it is responsible for their maintenance and renovation. In 2001, President Heydar Aliyev signed a decree allocating 1 million manats (EUR) to the renovation of the Lutheran church.

Islamic extremism

Wahabbism, Salafism and religious radicalism in general are not welcome by the state and society. Men with long beards and covered women are still unusual in Azerbaijan. However, Islamic extremists from the North Caucasus, in particular Dagestan, and from Iran continue their attempts to infiltrate the country and to spread their ideology. Consequently, independent Muslim groups which refuse the authority of state-recognized Islam in Azerbaijan have emerged. Baku considers that this threat is not to be underestimated as it challenges secularism, social order and domestic peace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fundamentalist ideas have had no success in Azerbaijan up to now but vigilance remains a must. Anti-Semitism is non-existent and inter-religious peace prevails both inside the Muslim community and between the main historical religions because mutual respect, solidarity across the denominational borders, dialogue and tolerance are the core values underpinning Azerbaijan's secularism.