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The Politics of Azerbaijan

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Introduction

Azerbaijan stands at the crossroads of East and West, a country shaped by profound historical currents, regional conflicts, and the formidable presence of its energy riches. As a nation, it has carved out a distinctive identity amid the shifting political dynamics of the South Caucasus, weathering the storms of empire, revolution, and independence. Yet, Azerbaijan's story is not only about geography or resources; it is, above all, about the complex realities of its political system and the forces—both internal and external—that have defined and continue to shape it.

Officially a semi-presidential republic, Azerbaijan's political structure is marked by the overwhelming dominance of the executive. The President, a figure endowed with sweeping powers, presides over a system where formal checks and balances exist on paper, yet are often hollowed out in practice. The legislature and judiciary, in theory independent, remain tightly under executive sway. Local governments, too, are subject to oversight from the center, anchoring the system's pronounced centralization. As this book will explore, this arrangement is not merely a quirk of institutional design but the outcome of a complex interplay between historical legacies, social forces, and the priorities of Azerbaijan's ruling elite.

The country's modern history is a story of both tumult and continuity. In the 20th century, Azerbaijan experienced brief independence, Soviet domination, and a turbulent rebirth as a sovereign state in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution. The rise of the Aliyev family has imparted a strong sense of continuity to the political system since the early 1990s, even as the broader region has changed dramatically. Against this backdrop, the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has provided both a rallying cause for national unity and a formidable challenge for peace and development.

At the heart of this political order lies a paradox: while Azerbaijan has adopted the formal trappings of democracy, including elections and multiparty competition, the reality is marked by tight controls on dissent, limited space for opposition, and persistent questions about the quality of democratic governance. Elections are regularly criticized by international observers for falling short of democratic standards, and opposition forces operate within a constrained and often hostile environment. For many citizens, the formal institutions of democracy coexist uneasily with the realities of entrenched power and patronage networks.

These political dynamics do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply entangled with Azerbaijan's economic trajectory and its foreign policy. The country's oil and gas wealth underpins state power, funding ambitious development projects while

reinforcing central control. At the same time, Azerbaijan has skillfully navigated relationships with powerful neighbors and global actors, seeking to capitalize on its strategic position and energy resources. The interplay of economic interests, diplomacy, and security concerns is central to understanding Azerbaijan's political life.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide to Azerbaijan's political system and its broader context. By setting out the historical foundations, dissecting the evolution and functions of its political institutions, and analyzing contemporary developments—from elections and human rights to economic governance and regional affairs—this work seeks to illuminate the forces that define politics in Azerbaijan. Whether for students, researchers, or general readers, this guide aspires to offer an accessible yet rigorous introduction to a country whose politics are as complex as its rich and contested history.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Demographics: Azerbaijan in Context

To truly grasp the political landscape of Azerbaijan, one must first understand the physical and human terrain upon which it is built. This is a country where geography is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in shaping history, culture, and, inevitably, politics. Situated in the South Caucasus, a region that has long been a melting pot and a battleground, Azerbaijan occupies a strategic location at the intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. This position has historically exposed it to a variety of influences, empires, and trade routes, most famously the ancient Silk Road.

The country's physical geography is characterized by a dramatic contrast between towering mountains and expansive lowlands. The Greater Caucasus mountain range dominates the northern border, shared with Russia, with peaks soaring to over 4,400 meters. These formidable mountains act as a natural barrier, influencing climate patterns and historically providing a degree of isolation to communities nestled within their valleys. To the southwest, the Lesser Caucasus mountains form part of the border with Armenia, while the Talysh Mountains lie in the southeast, bordering Iran. These ranges together cover a significant portion of the country, roughly 40%.

Between these mountainous flanks lies the extensive Kura-Aras Lowland, named after the two major rivers that traverse the country. The Kura River, originating in Turkey, flows through Georgia before entering Azerbaijan and eventually meeting the Aras River, which forms part of the border with Iran. These rivers are the lifeblood of the lowlands, providing water for irrigation and supporting agricultural activity. The lowlands themselves include the Shirvan, Mils kaya, and Mugan plains, characterized by dry, sometimes saline, soils.

To the east, Azerbaijan boasts a long coastline along the Caspian Sea, the world's largest inland body of water. While the Caspian Sea provides a vital economic link, particularly for energy exports, it also means Azerbaijan is a landlocked country in terms of access to the world's oceans. The Absheron Peninsula, jutting into the Caspian, is home to the capital city, Baku, and is a region historically rich in oil and natural gas. The presence of these energy resources has profoundly shaped Azerbaijan's economy and its geopolitical importance.

The climate of Azerbaijan is as varied as its topography, encompassing nine out of the world's eleven major climate zones. This diversity ranges from subtropical in the lowlands and coastal areas, with mild winters and hot summers, to a colder, more

continental climate in the mountainous regions where temperatures can drop significantly and snowfall is common. The southeastern Lankaran region, bordering the Caspian Sea and the Talysh Mountains, is an exception to the general aridity of the lowlands, receiving the highest amount of precipitation.

This varied geography has not only influenced the climate and natural resources but also the settlement patterns and economic activities across the country. The fertile lowlands and river valleys have historically supported agriculture, while the mountainous regions have been home to more isolated communities. The Caspian Sea coastline and the Absheron Peninsula have been centers of trade and, more recently, the heart of the country's vital oil and gas industry.

Turning to demographics, Azerbaijan is a nation with a population exceeding 10 million people as of early 2024. The vast majority of the population, around 91-95%, identify as ethnic Azerbaijanis, a Turkic-speaking people with a rich cultural heritage influenced by Iranian, Turkic, and Caucasian elements. The Azerbaijani language is the official language of the country and is closely related to Turkish.

While ethnic Azerbaijanis form the dominant group, the country is also home to a number of smaller ethnic minorities. Among the largest of these are the Lezgins, a Caucasian-speaking group primarily residing in the northeastern part of the country, bordering Russia's Dagestan. Other notable minority groups include Russians, Talysh (an Iranian-speaking people in the southeast), Avars, Tats, and a small number of Georgians and Kurds. Russian remains a significant language, particularly in urban areas, and is spoken as a lingua franca by many, especially the older generation, a legacy of the Soviet era.

The religious landscape of Azerbaijan is predominantly Muslim, with estimates suggesting that between 93% and 99% of the population identify with Islam. The majority of Azerbaijani Muslims are adherents of the Shia branch of Islam, a historical connection that links Azerbaijan culturally to neighboring Iran. A significant minority, however, are Sunni Muslims, with the two communities traditionally coexisting with a degree of fluidity. Despite the overwhelming Muslim majority, Azerbaijan is a constitutionally secular state, a characteristic that distinguishes it within the region. Other religious communities, including various Christian denominations and Jewish communities, also exist but constitute a very small percentage of the population.

The capital city, Baku, is the largest urban center, home to over two million people within its administrative boundaries and significantly more in its metropolitan area. Located on the Absheron Peninsula, Baku is not only the political and economic heart of the country but also a major cultural and educational hub. Other important urban centers include Ganja and Sumgait. While a significant portion of the population lives in urban areas, a substantial rural population remains, particularly in the more agricultural regions.

The demographic makeup of Azerbaijan has been influenced by historical events, including population movements and conflicts. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in particular, led to significant displacement of both Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Understanding these demographic patterns and the distribution of different ethnic and religious groups is crucial for comprehending the social dynamics that intersect with the political system.

In essence, Azerbaijan's geography provides the stage, a diverse and sometimes challenging environment, while its demographics provide the actors, a largely homogenous population with notable minority groups and a predominantly Muslim but secular identity. These fundamental elements form the bedrock upon which the country's political history has unfolded and its current political system operates. The interplay between the physical environment, the distribution of people, and the historical experiences of the population provides a vital context for the political analysis that follows in the subsequent chapters.

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