

A LIMITED LEGACY

By Konul Khalilova, Azerbaijan

In 1991, Dilara Aliyeva, Azerbaijan's most prominent female politician who had been elected to the parliament a year before, was killed in a tragic car accident, the causes of which remain mysterious. She was 61. Today, women's organizations and even a street in Baku are named in honor of this Georgia-born philologist who founded the democratic Azerbaijan Popular Party (APP). But her legacy of getting women into politics remains limited. While Azeri women are represented in science and arts, few have managed to break into politics. There are only 12 women in the 123-member parliament, five among 50 in the cabinet - - one of them is Minister of Justice -- and one woman who head a political party.

The reasons for the absence of women in politics include the country's non-democratic atmosphere, social and economic problems, and conservative attitude that women just don't belong in there in this country with an Islamic and patriarchal tradition, characterized by feuds and factionalism and engaged in a long war.

The stories of the two most influential Azeri female political figures -- Leyla Yunusova, chairperson of Institute of Peace and Democracy, and Lala Shovkat Hajiyeva, chairperson of the Liberal Democrat Party -- show the struggles of women here.

Since its independence following the Soviet Union's collapse, two issues have characterized Azerbaijan: the effort to achieve a stable democracy and the war with neighboring Armenia. Generally, Azerbaijan has been losing this ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a part of Azerbaijan claimed by Armenia. These defeats have discredited governments and created much turmoil in domestic politics.

Yunusova, 44, has been in the middle of this turmoil. She was born in Baku and studied military history in the Royal College of Great Britain -- which would stand her in good stead during her nation's military crisis. She also has a doctorate in the history of sciences. In 1990, Yunusova became a founder of the Azerbaijan Social Democratic Party (ASDP) and was elected to its central committee.

But only a year later, Yunusova left the party as a result of a difference of opinion with Zardusht Alizadeh, one of the party leaders, after he put forward his candidacy for presidential elections in September 1990. Yunusova accused Alizadeh of being too authoritarian. She created the Independent Democrat Party. After the democratic forces came to power in May 1992, Yunusova was appointed head of the press service in the Ministry of Defense and for the first time, provided precise and constant information about the war. But when former Communist leader Heydar Aliyev returned to become president of Azerbaijan in 1993, Yunusova resigned from the government in protest.

In 1996, Yunusova's Independent Democratic Party joined with the Vahdat Party, of which she became co-chairwoman. But two years later she resigned because the co-chairmanship of the party had been summarily abolished. Yunusova then decided to get out of politics. She created and became director of the party's Geopolitical Research Centre, where she focuses on social issues. She is also chairman of the Institute of Peace and Democracy where she defends the rights of illegally arrested prisoners and citizens. She has appealed internationally for the protection of the rights of several former government ministers who were arrested for political motives, and was responsible for the recent freeing of two of them.

In November 1999, there were rumors that Aliyev was going to make concessions to the Armenian claims. The hard line Yunusova became famous by offering every Azeri woman a black headscarf to wear as a symbol of rejection against Aliyev's policy. After the action, Aliyev ended up not refusing to sign a compromised agreement with Armenia at the Organization For Security and Cooperation in Europe's Istanbul summit in last year.

Given Aliyev's long service as a Soviet intelligence official and role as head of Azerbaijan when it was a province of the USSR, many Azeris believe he is too accepting of the Russian influence threatening Azerbaijan's continued independence. Yunusova has spoken out critically of past Soviet domination, especially in a widely publicized speech on Azerbaijan's tenth anniversary in January 2000. But in interviews, she has said she doesn't expect to return to politics.

Lala Shovket Hajiyeva, 48, has had an equally tumultuous political history. In 1969-70, when Aliyev ran Soviet Azerbaijan, her family incurred his enmity and was forced to migrate to Moscow. There, Hajiyeva earned a doctorate of medical sciences and began her political activity. Ironically, Aliyev himself fell out of favor and had to move to Moscow, too. He and her family became friendly again.

When Aliyev returned to rule independent Azerbaijan in 1993, Hajiyeva did also and became secretary of state. Asked later, how she could befriend the man who persecuted her family, she replied, "There are no eternal friends nor eternal enemies in life."

Hajiyeva became both a strong critic of the opposition and an independent voice in the government. She later resigned from her position, citing corruption and excessively high food prices and created the opposition Liberal Party (LP). For the next five years, she refused to give interviews explaining that she preferred to conduct party activities in private.

As the presidential elections of 1998 approached, the LP became a member of the Movement for Electoral Reforms and Democratic Elections (MERDE), which decided to boycott the balloting claiming the elections would not be fair. But early in 1999, LP left MERDE unexpectedly, as a rejection of its dirty political games. After that claim, Hajiyeva was attacked from the opposition too. Zakir Mammadov, vice-chairman of the Liberal Party (now a chairman of Liberal Democrat Party) accused her of being authoritarian, and refusing to hold a party congress or consult with other leaders.

Today Hajiyeva, chairman of the Liberal Party, is persona-non-grata for both the authority and opposition. She still doesn't meet with journalists claiming they misrepresent her. Instead, she meets with ordinary citizens and tries to solve their social problems.

Neither Hajiyeva nor Yunusova have been interested in women's issues or using their position to improve the status of Azeri women. Asked once about the problem of getting more women into politics, Hajiyeva said, "I don't accept the male-female division in politics. I support politicians of high moral standards."

But whether women will get the chance to be such politicians remains in doubt.

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