

# **History and evolution of Islamic institutions in Azerbaijan (XIX-XXI centuries)**

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## **Abstract**

Azerbaijan went through different political systems and historical developments in XIX-XXI centuries, which had serious impact on the role and evolution of the government and religious institutions. During this period, Azerbaijan had been under the rule of the Russian Empire, established Democratic Republic (ADR) that lasted only 23 months, was a part of the Soviet Union for 71 years and, eventually, proclaimed its independence in 1991. The research paper is studying the formation and evolution of Islamic institutions in Azerbaijan over the last three centuries, as well as conducting the comparative analysis of their roles and functions under different rules. The author has also identified the contemporary challenges faced by major spiritual body in Azerbaijan, especially in terms of status and scope of activities, and explored possible responses to them.

**Key words: religious institutions, evolution, formation, Sheikh-ul-Islam, Mufti, Caucasus Muslim Board**

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## **Introduction**

The origin of the main spiritual body of Muslims in Azerbaijan – the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) – goes back to XIX century. As part of the religious tolerance policy, on 5 April 1872, Tsar Alexander II approved the “Provision on establishment of two administrations – Shiite and Sunni – of the South Caucasus clergy.” They were first established in Tbilisi, Georgia, as it was the capital of the Caucasus Governor-General of Russia. The headquarters moved to Baku following the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918 and remained in the capital of Azerbaijan during the Soviet times as well. In more than 140 years of existence under different names, this institution experienced changes in its role and functions, including division of power among Shiites and Sunnis, funding, appointment of leaders and relations with state. The CMB still tries to maintain the regional centre function, but political development and geopolitical changes in the region require revision of its status and mandate.

## **Russia’s religious tolerance policy and its implementation in Azerbaijan**

Beginning of XIX century marked division of Azerbaijan’s lands between Russian and Persian empires, following two peace agreements signed in 1813 (the Treaty of Gulistan) and 1828 (the Treaty of Turkmenchay). Under these

treaties, the territory of modern Azerbaijan Republic fell under control of Russia. However, part of Azerbaijan's territory was occupied by the Russian army even before the 1813 Gulistan Treaty.

These developments coincided with the implementation of religious tolerance policy in Tsarist Russia, which had been launched by Catherine the Great in 1767. In her *Nakaz* [Order] to the Legislative Commission, Catherine made historical declaration on the question of minority religions, in which she underlined importance of tolerance towards “other religions” and stated that “...not to allow them to profess different Modes of religion, would greatly endanger the Peace and Security of Citizens...”<sup>1</sup>

Implementation of religious tolerance policy was mainly linked to the constant wars between Russia and its Muslim neighbours – Ottoman and Persian Empires. Tsarist Russia needed support and loyalty of Muslim population during these wars. On the other hand, this policy aimed at ensuring the efficient control over Muslims and influencing them and their activities through the Islamic institutions, which had to be led by loyal to the government persons.

The first reflection of the religious tolerance policy in Azerbaijan was the legislative act on organization of spiritual life of Muslims in Caucasus signed by Tsar Alexander I on 30 June 1805. The main purpose of the document named as “*Rules for Mohammedan clergy of Yelizavetpol district*” was to strengthen the imperial positions in the newly-occupied Ganja khanate. Its centre Ganja was renamed into Yelizavetpol in honour of Tsar Alexander's wife Elizabeth. The document was initiated and drafted by the General P.D. Tsitsianov, who was a Chief Commander in Georgia. According to the legislative act, residents of Yelizavetpol district could freely worship under the leadership of eight mullahs appointed by the Russian administration. Mullahs in turn were subordinated to the Akhund – primary religious servant. All of them were taken on the staff with annual salaries (mullah – 100 rubbles, akhund – 500.) In their Friday messages, mullahs had to promote the “loyalty to His Majesty Emperor.”<sup>2</sup> General Tsitsianov also proposed tough punishment for treason cases, which would include an exile of religious figures and their families to Siberia and confiscation of their properties. However, Alexander I deleted the proposed punishment from the final document.

One of the important developments was the establishment of Sheikh-ul-Islam position in Tbilisi, which was the capital of the Caucasus Governor-General, in

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. Reddaway, “Documents of Catherine the Great,” Cambridge, 1931, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> Д.Ю. Арапов: «Система государственного регулирования Ислама в Российской Империи (последняя треть XVIII – начала XXвв.)», МГУ им. М.В. Ломоносова, Москва, 2005

1823.<sup>3</sup> The holder of this post had to deal with Shiite community in the South Caucasus. Nine years later, in 1832, similar position – Mufti – was established for Sunni communities of the region. The first Sheikh-ul-Islam was Akhund Mahammadali Huseynzade, while the first Mufti was Tajuddin Mustafin. However, we cannot interpret these developments as establishment of religious institution, because both Sheikh-ul-Islam and Mufti were operating individually. In an effort to start the institutionalization of religious affairs in the South Caucasus, on 29 November 1832, Russian Tsar Nicholas I sent a letter to the Senate that suggested drafting the provision on *Administration of Religious Affairs of Muslims in South Caucasus*. However, the Senate didn't approve them.<sup>4</sup> The process was also delayed because of the Caucasus War (1817-1864) and the Crimean War (1853-1856).

The first official institution dealing with spiritual life of Muslims in South Caucasus was established in 1872. On 5 April 1872, Tsar Alexander II approved the “Provision on establishment of two administrations – Shiite and Sunni – of the South Caucasus clergy.” The same year, the Russian government decided to allocate 37,880 rubbles from the state budget for the maintenance of these bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Provision signed by Alexander II established a *three-level* administration system of spiritual life in the South Caucasus. The *first level* included mullahs and cadies. Mullahs were in charge of running the religious ceremonies, administration of mosques and religious schools, as well as mosque register and the list of Muslim population. They were reporting to the cadies about the mosques, schools, new-borns, marriages and so on. *Cadies* in turn had to monitor the work of the mosque clergy, deal with family (marriage and divorce) and inheritance issues. The *second level* included the collegial bodies – provincial majlises (assemblies), which consisted of three members and operated in the Baku, Yelizavetpol, Tbilisi and Irevan provinces. They were dealing with issues related to religious behaviour of Muslims, administration of religious schools, management of mosques' properties and complaints on decisions of cadies. The highest instances [*third level*] for Shiites and Sunnis were Sheikh-ul-Islam and Mufti, respectively. Each of them received 1600 rubbles annual salary from the state budget, which was equal to the salary of colonel in the Russian army's infantry in 1872. Both Sheikh-ul-Islam and Mufti were appointed by “the Highest Command” of Tsar under the recommendation

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<sup>3</sup> А. Абасов: “Ислам в современном Азербайджане: образы и реалии,” Публикации Музея и общественного центра имени Андрея Сахарова, Выпуск 4, Азербайджан и Россия: общества и государства, Москва, 2001

<sup>4</sup> Presidential Library, Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan: “Religion,” p. 4, [http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf\\_en/atr\\_din.pdf](http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Д.Ю. Арапов: «Система государственного регулирования Ислама в Российской Империи (последняя треть XVIII – начала XXвв.)», МГУ им. М.В. Ломоносова, Москва, 2005

of the Governor-General. This practice continued for nine years and in 1881 the Ministry of Internal Affairs acquired the appointment authority.

Key functions of the spiritual administrations included the following:

- Consideration of complaints related to the decisions of provincial assemblies;
- Supervision of cadies, who had to submit information about the mosques, schools and other institutions;
- Drafting the annual reports and educational programmes for Muslim schools;
- Testing knowledge of religious figures;
- Consideration and discussion of all issues submitted by the Highest Russian Administration.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with the Provision on administration of spiritual affairs of Muslims in South Caucasus, the management of wagfes<sup>7</sup> was run under the common rules for Shiites and Sunnis. All personal and real properties donated to the mosques, religious schools, cemeteries and other spiritual institutions by legal means had been in the competence of the local clergy and power structures above them. They could be spent for running costs of clergy, upkeep of personnel and charity activities. The supreme control over wagfes was conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Governor-General in Caucasus.

The staff members of the South Caucasus Muslim clergy also enjoyed a number of privileges:

- They and their children were released from the public obligations;
- Children of supreme Muslim religious figures, who served for 20 years, possessed the same rights as individual nobleman;
- Mullahs and cadies were entitled to receive travel expenditures and per diems during the visits;
- Muslim religious figures could also receive state pensions.

Thus, quite sustainable system, which organized the spiritual life of Muslims in South Caucasus, survived until 1917.

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<sup>6</sup> Д.Ю. Арапов: “Ислам в Российской империи (Законодательные акты, описания, статистика)” Москва, 2001. С. 50–53.

<sup>7</sup> A waqf is an inalienable religious endowment in Islamic law, typically donating a building or plot of land or even cash for Muslim religious or charitable purposes

### **The state of Islamic institutions following the collapse of Russian Empire**

Political developments in the Russian Empire in 1917 had serious impact on political and geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. Two revolutions in 1917 put an end to the Tsarist rule in Russia and established the Soviet Government, which was actively promoting atheism. The Bolsheviks, as atheist materialists, considered religion as the “opium of the people” of Marx’s famous formulation. It was no coincidence that one of the first decrees adopted by Bolsheviks had been the seizure of all churches’ properties and bank accounts. However, Muslims received different treatment from the newly-established authorities. The appeal issued by the Council of People’s Commissars to Muslims on 3 December 1917 stated that “...*your beliefs and practices, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate.*” *Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, are under the mighty protection of the revolution...*”<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, Sacred Islamic monuments, books and objects, which were confiscated during the Tsarist Russia, were returned to the mosques: the Sacred Koran of Osman was ceremoniously handed over to a Muslim Congress in Petrograd in December of 1917.<sup>9</sup> Friday, the day of Muslim religious celebration, was declared the legal day off in the Muslim-populated areas.<sup>10</sup>

The strategic goal of Bolsheviks was to find a common language with Muslims and make them allies in their internal struggle against Mensheviks. Another strategic target was the distribution of “the world revolution” in the East. The appeal of 3 December 1917 was part of this policy. However, all these efforts were turned down by during the Josef Stalin’s rule in late 1920s. We will come back to this stage later on.

Meanwhile, quite important political developments were in progress in the South Caucasus region. In 1918, three independent states were established in this region: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Azerbaijani National Council announced the establishment of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) on 28 May 1918, which was the first democracy in the Muslim world. The ADR was a secular state, in which religion was separate from state. Restoring its historical name, Ganja was announced the temporary capital of the Republic, as Baku was still under the control of Bolsheviks.

In October of 1918, the ADR established a new state agency dealing with religious affairs – the Ministry of Social Protection and Beliefs. Musa bey

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Allworth: “Muslim Communities Re-emerge: Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics, and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia,” Duke University Press, 1994 - History

<sup>9</sup> А.Авторханов: «Империя Кремля», Вильнюс, 1988, стр. 99

<sup>10</sup> A Park: “Bolshevism in Turkestan, 1917-1927,” New York, 1957, p. 214.

Rafiyev was the first head of this Ministry. The Chairman of the National Council Mahammad Amin Rasulzadeh also instructed to establish the common religious board of the Caucasus Muslims in Baku on the basis of religious administrations operating in Tbilisi. On 11 December 1918, the Tsar-appointed Sheikh-ul-Islam Muhammad Pishnamazzadeh resigned and Minister Rafiyev appointed Agha Alizadeh as a new [eights] Sheikh-ul-Islam and the Head of the Joint Religious Board of Caucasus Muslims. Alizadeh was quite progressive person, who supported the work of the parliament and was against the sectarian discrimination. However, his position and the work of the newly-established institution were terminated after the invasion of Bolsheviks on 27 April 1920. Azerbaijan lost its independence following the establishment of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic on 28 April 1920.

As it was mentioned above, religious life in Azerbaijan and other areas of the Soviet Union experienced difficult times during the rule of Josef Stalin. The most intensive “secularization” process occurred in 1925-1941. The Soviet government turned most of the mosques, especially in the villages, into schools or clubs. There were cases of demolitions as well. For instance, White Mosque in Tyumen was turned into the pencil factory, while the Red Mosque into the alcoholic beverage plant.<sup>11</sup> The number of mosques and spiritual places were destroyed in Azerbaijan as well. The famous Bibi-Eybat mosque in Baku, the historical architecture of XIII century, was fully destroyed by Bolsheviks in 1936. The Union of militant atheists was established in 1925 and played the assault detachment role of cave atheists with the slogan “Struggle against religion – struggle for socialism.”

However, some liberalization of religious policy was observed in the mid-1940s, which can be explained with two reasons:

- The war [WWII] contributed to the consolidation of religious communities, including Muslim circles, which couldn't be ignored by the government;
- Reference to the religious feelings in the years of war could promote “the consolidation of Soviet people;”<sup>12</sup>

This change also had positive impact on religious affairs in Azerbaijan. In particular, the Religious Board for the South Caucasus Muslims resumed its work in 1943. Akhund Agha Alizade was elected the head of this institution at the first session of the South Caucasus Muslims, which was held in Baku on 25-28 May 1944. There had been two important developments during the resumption of the work of the Religious Board:

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<sup>11</sup> Т.С. Саидабаев: «Ислам и Общество, Москва, Наука, 1975 – стр. 151

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.170

- Agha Alizade became the first elected Sheikh-ul-Islam [leaders of religious communities in South Caucasus elected him], as previous holders of Sheikh-ul-Islam title were appointed by the relevant government agencies;
- Resumed religious body put an end to the dualism in administration. Sheikh-ul-Islam became the only leader of the organization, while Mufti started serving as the first deputy of the department chair and dealt with the Sunni communities-related affairs.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy that Agha Alizade and the following heads of Religious Board for the South Caucasus Muslims served as Sheikh-ul-Islam until their death.

In the meantime, the Soviet government established a special state agency – the Council on Religious Rites Affairs, which had its own authorized representatives in the regions. The Council had to ensure communication between the USSR government and heads of religious associations on the issues like organizations of religious rites and ceremonies, which required permission of the government. In 1964, this body was transformed into the Council on Religious Affairs under the USSR Ministers Council, which was responsible to facilitate “patriotic and peaceful activities” of religious associations. However, later the Council and their authorized representatives turned into the tool of the government control over the religious life of people.

Unlike to the Tsarist Russia, the Soviet government was not funding the work of religious organizations. Akhunds and imams were receiving their salaries based on donations and income from religious services. Most income could be received during the Kurban bayram (Eid al-Adha), Ramazan bayram (Eid al-Fitr) and Ashura commemorations. These incomes also allowed them to cover the utilities.

Although officially religion was separate from the state, the Soviet government was interfering into the religious affairs, including the organization of rites and other public ceremonies, by maintaining the authority to permit or reject the religion-related events.

Haji Allahshukur Pashazade was the last head of the Religious Board of Muslims in South Caucasus, who was elected in 1980. The religious body survived until the collapse of the Soviet Union and emerged in a new role in the independent Azerbaijan.

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<sup>13</sup> Presidential Library, Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan: “Religion,” p. 5, [http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf\\_en/atr\\_din.pdf](http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf)

## **Muslim Board in independent Azerbaijan: main challenges and possible responses**

On 18 October 1991, Azerbaijan restored its independence. The Supreme Council (Parliament) of Azerbaijan adopted the Constitutional Act “On the State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan.” Four years later, on 12 November 1995, Azerbaijani people voted for a new Constitution, which declared Azerbaijan a secular state. In particular, the Article 18 of the Constitution states that “Religion in the Republic of Azerbaijan is separated from state.”

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Religious Board for South Caucasus Muslims transformed into the Caucasus Muslims Board (CMB), which was linked to the intention to cover the activities of Muslim religious communities in the North Caucasus as well. In fact, the CMB was mainly responsible for organization of spiritual life of Muslims in Azerbaijan, as well as appointment of akhunds and imams of the mosques. Following the practice established during the Soviet times, Sheik-ul-Islam remained primary position in the CBM, while Mufti served as the first deputy.

Beginning from July of 2011, the CMB and other religious communities in Azerbaijan started receiving funding from the state budget. According to the presidential decree signed on 1 July 2011, the government also stated financing the work of the CMB’s representative offices in foreign countries.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Government is providing free gas supply to the places of worshipping, including 1956 mosques, 13 churches and 7 synagogues. The government also sponsored construction of the number of mosques, churches and synagogues.

Decision of the Azerbaijani authorities to establish the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) led to re-visiting the share of religion-related duties in the country. The Committee was established on 21 June 2001. Its major duties included the registration of religious communities, ensuring the implementation of freedom of religion-related legislative acts, facilitation of co-operation between the religious organizations of Azerbaijan and international religious organizations and forums, developing the academic curriculum for religious education in the country and providing the expert opinion for improving its quality, as well as participation in signing the inter-governmental agreements for organization of pilgrimage to the holy places abroad.<sup>15</sup> However, the Committee has neither supervisory function nor appointment power over the CMB and other religious communities.

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<sup>14</sup> Official website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan <http://president.az/articles/2674>

<sup>15</sup> Official website of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan <http://www.scwra.gov.az/pages/126/>

The CMB in turn has the authority to issue fatwa<sup>16</sup> on urgent religious matters, which is a responsibility of its Gazi [Confessor] Council consisting of akhunds, imams and religious scholars. The CMB claims that its Council's fatwas are in force in the entire Caucasus region, which remains as one of the debated issues among the local scholars and political experts. New wave of debates was caused by the recent statement of the head of CMB's fatwa department, who affirmed that CMB is the only eligible organization to issue fatwas in the Caucasus region.<sup>17</sup> This causes a reasonable question: "How the fatwa issued by one religious community in Azerbaijan, which has an NGO status, can be effective on the territory of other sovereign states?" Apparently, the CMB representative refers to the mandate given to this organization during the Soviet Union, which made the CBM a regional centre. However, today, there are four independent states in the Caucasus region, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russian Federation and each state [except Armenia] has its own religious administration for Muslim population with similar duties. In particular, Georgia has established its own religious body few years ago,<sup>18</sup> which is in charge of organization the spiritual life of Muslims leaving in Georgia. Most of the religious communities in the North Caucasus (Russian Federation), in fact, do not recognize superiority of the CMB, as they are subordinated to the centralized body in their own country. These circumstances also produce the second question concerning the name of the main spiritual body in Azerbaijan. There are suggestions that the word 'Caucasus' should drop from the name of this organization. The local experts suggest changing the name into the Azerbaijan Muslims Board and limit its scope of activities solely to Azerbaijan.

Another issue of concern is the official status of the CMB in Azerbaijan. This organization is registered by the SCWRA as an ordinary religious community, like other 587 communities in Azerbaijan,<sup>19</sup> and has an NGO status. However, it is not clear why the CMB has superiority over other Muslim communities in the country and possesses an authority to appoint akhunds and imams in the mosques of Azerbaijan. One of the options to address this issue would be the adoption of legislative act on specialized organizations, like the Caucasus Muslim Board, which would bring more clarity on their institutional status.

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<sup>16</sup> A fatwa is the term for the legal opinion or learned interpretation by qualified persons on issues pertaining to the Islamic law and events

<sup>17</sup> Lent.az web portal: "CMB issues warning," 21 January 2014, <http://news.lent.az/news/152867>

<sup>18</sup> IslamToday portal: "Georgia established new Muslim affairs department independent of Azerbaijan," 13 may 2011 <http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-229-4063.htm>

<sup>19</sup> According to the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations, as of February 2014, the number of registered religious communities constitutes 588, including 567 Muslim and 21 non-Muslim communities

Sources of CMB's financing and transparency of expenditures also remain among the problematic areas in the activity of this organization. The CMB never makes public the total amount of money it receives from donations, which are mainly made by organizations and individuals in the mosques and sacred places, and doesn't report on how the organization is spending them. This behaviour causes questions on transparency of the CMB, which can be addressed by open and fair policy in this field.

Thus, the Caucasus Muslim Board needs to revise its mandate and consider the structural reforms in order to make the work of this organization more practical and efficient, and obtain the trust of believers in Azerbaijan. The latter appears to be the most important target in the light of widespread radicalization trends in Islam.

## **Conclusion**

Major Muslim spiritual body in Azerbaijan – the Caucasus Muslim Board – has experienced a number of changes in status and roles since its establishment in 1872. For instance, the Head of the Board, i.e. Sheikh-ul-Islam, transformed from the appointed position into the elected one; although Sheikh-ul-Islam and Mufti possessed equal power in XIX century, the Soviet government put an end to dualism and gave to Sheikh-ul-Islam a superior role, while Mufti started holding the first deputy position; during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the government was using the religious body as a main tool to control believers, which is not the case since Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence. Nevertheless, as it was noted above, geopolitical changes in the region and emergence of new challenges open room for new changes aimed at ensuring the efficient and tangible work of the Muslim Board in Azerbaijan.

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