

RELIGIOUS PROCESSES IN SOUTH AZERBAIJAN IN THE 1940S: BASED ON THE MATERIALS OF THE “AZERBAIJAN” NEWSPAPER (1947-1949)

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ABSTRACT

The article presents views on religious processes, struggle against religious problems, religious illiteracy, and ignorance based on the 1947-1949 issues of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, the organ of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) led by S.J. Pishevari. The newspaper was published in Tabriz between 1945-1946. After the defeat of the ADP government by the Pahlavi Shah’s army, the newspaper was published in Baku between 1947 and 1949 in Azerbaijani language with Arabic script. In the article, the works of some writers, such as S.J. Pishevari, the newspaper’s founder, ADF members - J. Mujiri, A. Shamida, G. Kandli, the Soviet press of the time, and other literature were also used. Based on the materials of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, the article deals with 19th-20th century Azerbaijani thinkers M.F. Akhundzadeh, M.A. Sabir, “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, Mashruteh revolutionaries like M. Khiyabani, poets like M.A. Mojuz Shabustari, leading figures of ADP like M. Biriya and their religious perspectives, challenges against ignorance and superstitions. The article reflects the critical attitude of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper towards the Pahlavi rule, the non-democratic methods used by the government to keep the people in obedience, superstition, fanaticism, and reactionary religious views. Furthermore, the article argues how progressive intellectuals of the time invited the people to a democratic and secular regime. In particular, the interaction between the views of ADF writers on patriotism, nationalism, religious and moral values, and their outlook on human rights and freedom is presented. Moreover, these writers’ approaches to Christian missionaries and Islamic sects were analyzed comparatively, and the place and role of religious enlightenment in the formation of national consciousness and the national-religious movement was determined, by highlighting the ideas that are in step with the present. The article is notable for its contribution to the research and promotion of the struggle of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper and intellectuals of South Azerbaijan against religious superstition and ignorance.

Keywords: “Azerbaijan” newspaper, religious processes, superstition, religious illiteracy, ignorance.

INTRODUCTION

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper as an organ of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party mainly addressed issues such as criticism of the Pahlavi Shah regime and the struggle for national enlightenment and democratic rights. The religious processes of the time, the fight against religious ignorance, fanaticism and superstition, conservative clergy, and the criticism of the religious policy of the Pahlavis of Iran were also widely covered in the newspaper. For this purpose, the works of thinkers such as M.F. Akhundzadeh, M.A. Sabir, J. Mammadguluzade, examples from “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, and other press organizations, are given significant consideration in the paper. Particularly, articles by S.J. Pishevari, J. Mujiri, G. Kandli, A. Shamida, and other writers criticizing the religious policy of the Pahlavis, religious enlightenment, and fight against superstition, were published in the newspaper. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper featured the life stories of South Azerbaijani poets, such as M.A. Mojuz and B. Abbaszadeh (Hammal), and their poems exposing the flaws of the time under the influence of “Molla Nasreddin”.

1. An overview of religious enlightenment and the struggle against superstition in the “Azerbaijan” newspaper

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper extensively presented the 19th-century intellectual M.F. Akhundzadeh’s struggle for national enlightenment and against religious fanaticism and superstitions. The newspaper recorded that M.F. Akhundzade, the son of the Azerbaijani people and the first materialist philosopher in

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the Muslim East, in his famous philosophical work “Kemaluddovle Mektublari” (“Letters to Kemaluddovleh”), revealed the true nature of hypocritical and traitorous clergy, mullahs, and sheikhs. He wrote, O preachers and scientists, O charlatans, why do you frighten the poor people with the hellfire and do not allow them to contact other peoples and use the achievements of science and art? The newspaper stressed that, as in the time of M.F. Akhundzadeh, criticizing and exposing those hiding under the veil of a pious sheikh was necessary (“Dünya mədəniyyət xadimlərinin yığıncağında”, 1948, p. 4).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper promoted “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, emphasizing its crucial role in national enlightenment and Azerbaijani literature and contributions to women’s freedom at the beginning of the 20th century (Təbatəbai, 1946, p. 4). The newspaper highly appreciated the contributions of J. Mammadguluzade and M.A. Sabir to the publication and their hard work in maintaining the linguistic purity of their mother tongue, featuring “There is no one who does not know them in the East” (Müciri, 1948, p. 4; Azərbaycan, 2022, p. 484).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper reported about J. Mammadguluzade’s “Anamin Kitabi” (“My Mother’s Book”) and narrated the story of an Azerbaijani family whose children studied in Petersburg, Istanbul, and Najaf. According to the storyline of the play, three brothers who got different educations constantly have arguments on different ideologies, and each of them tries to promote his beliefs and the influence of his environment on others. It is clear from the play that the aggressor governments generally try to annihilate the mother tongue and culture of a nation as the major measure to keep them under constant control. Later, this play by J. Mammadguluzadeh was showcased in the Tabriz theater (Nikpur, 2020, p. 14).

Noting the educational feature of M.A. Sabir’s works, the “Azerbaijan” newspaper emphasized the significant impact of his exposing, logical, and bitter criticisms of exploiters—khans, beys, landlords, clerics, merchants, and judges (Qurbani, 1948, p. 3). The newspaper mentioned that Sabir’s poems were eagerly read in the trenches of Sattarkhan devotees, as those poems reflected the mashruteh movement and empowered the devotees (Həbibi, 1948, p. 4). The “Azerbaijan” newspaper advocated M.A. Sabir’s “Hophopname” and presented the availability of “Hophopname” in Tabriz libraries to southern readers (Müsəvvər, 1946, p. 2).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper specifically emphasized the satirical poems written under the influence of Sabir by M.A. Mojuz, Bayramali Abbaszadeh (Hammal) (Bayramali, 1948, p. 3), and M.H. Burkhanı, a prominent representative of the “21 Azer” movement (Qurbani, 1948, p. 3).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper indicated the profound importance of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, its influence on Southern Azerbaijanis, and the emergence of a new trend in Azerbaijani literature following the publication of “Molla Nasreddin”. Many contemporary poets and literary men who were mainly engaged in writing ghazals, qasida, and noha (laments) joined this trend. “Molla Nasreddin” crossed the borders and was brought to Tabriz, Khoy, Ardabil, and other cities despite the obstacles. The magazine attracted the attention of many readers and writers in South Azerbaijan. Mirza Gafar Natig Siyahpushu was among the poets who wrote under the influence of “Molla Nasreddin”, like M.H. Burhani and B. Abbaszadeh (Həbibi, 1948, p. 3).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper involved a wide range of discussions on the revolutionary poet M.A. Mojuz Shabustari. The newspaper stated how his poems revealed imperialist policies conducted by the governments and their henchmen in the Middle East. It made clear that the creation of religious divisions among the Muslim population, the spread of superstition and fanaticism, and the desecration of holy temples and places of one tribe by the hands of another tribe were the deeds of British intelligence. M.A. Mojuz, called “one of the leading figures of Azerbaijani literature” by the newspaper, argued that the sects that divide Muslims are the product of the British (Həbibi 1947, p. 3).

Through poems written in the style of M.A. Sabir, M.A. Mojuz called on the people to be active in the resistance against British imperialism. The newspaper showed that despite the Pahlavi government’s refusal to allow the publication of M. A. Mojuz’s poems, the people were able to get and read them and see reflections of their lives in them (Həbibi, 1948, p. 4).

On the 20th anniversary of the death of M. A. Mojuz Shabustari, Jafar Khandan wrote an article in the Communist newspaper “Communist” entitled “People’s Poet of South Azerbaijan” in which he described the poet’s activities and the oppression and persecution he faced. Born in a poor family, the poet explicitly conveyed the shortcomings of his time, the bereavement of the people, and the fact that freedom and independence could only be achieved through revolution. His satires mercilessly exposed all the reactionary forces, from the “petty” people who engaged in snake charming, fortune-telling, and witchcraft to the political diplomats of American, English, and German imperialists and the Shah’s government, saying:

“Əbəs yerə əl açıb göydən istədik imdad,
Bizi bu qədər bəlayə düçər edən odur!
Əlac yoxdur bizə şeyxdən, nə də şahdan,
Vəkildən üz əlini, çünki mülkədar odur!” (Əliyev, 2020, p. 112).

Another prominent poet of the Mashruteh period was Bayramali Abbaszadeh from Sarab. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper wrote that B. Abbaszadeh dropped out of school due to poverty and worked as a laborer. When the Mashruteh movement against Muhammad Ali Shah started in Tabriz, he took up arms and joined the followers of Sattarkhan. B. Abbaszadeh’s first acquaintance with literature was in the group of devotees. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper wrote that “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, which provided great help to the Mashruteh movement with its revolutionary articles, attracted the attention of B. Abbaszadeh, and Sabir’s revolutionary poems had a great impact on him. Fed up with the oppression of khans and landowners, the poet dedicated his first poems to exposing the enemies of the revolution. After the defeat of Mashruteh, he moved with his family to the South Caucasus and supported them by working as a porter in Baku.

B. Abbaszadeh had his poems published in “Molla Nasreddin” and met M. A. Sabir. B. Abbaszadeh wrote satirical poems under the pseudonyms “Gulzar” and “Hammal” against reactionism, superstition and ignorance (Bayraməli, 1948, p. 3). The poet died in 1926 in Baku.

“Communist” newspaper promoted B. Abbaszadeh’s revolutionary activities and endeavors and gave examples of his works. His hatred for the Pahlavis and his call for the people to struggle were reflected in his poetry:

“Qoyma mehtər başında tac olsun,
Füqəralar həmişə ac olsun,
Parçala təxti, qoy tarac olsun” (Sadıq, 1946, p. 2; Əliyev, 2020, pp. 108-109).

One of the ADF activists who engaged in revolutionary activities in the first half of the 20th century was Mahammadhuseyn Burhani from Marand. He received his primary education in Marand, secondary religious education in Tabriz, and mastered Arabic and Persian languages perfectly. Unsatisfied with religious ideology, M. Burhani turned to philosophical thought. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper highlighted that Sabir’s criticisms of khans, beys, clergymen, judges, landlords, and merchants had a great influence on Burhani (Qurbani, 1948, p. 3). Because M. Burhani saw the bitter fate of the Azerbaijani people and exploitation and oppression reflected in the pages of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine and the works of M.A. Sabir. All this fueled his desire for revolutionary endeavors. Among the poor masses, especially among the peasants, he began to criticize the corrupt morals of the government and landlords and their oppression of the people. Due to his revolutionary propaganda, M. Burhani was imprisoned for a long time during the reign of Reza Shah. M. Burhani did not stop his revolutionary engagements even after he was released following Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941. An active member of the ADF, M. Burhani, was executed by the Shah’s government.

The newspaper “Azerbaijan” called Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani, the founder of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party and the “Azadistan” government, “one of the distinguished Sayyids and great thinkers of Azerbaijan”. It is stated that he taught theology in Tabriz, had extensive knowledge of religious sciences, and served in the Karimkhan mosque (Novruz, 1945, p. 2 and Pişəvəri, p. 155). The newspaper portrayed Sheikh Khiyabani’s struggle for the freedom of the people against the Shah and foreign imperialism

(Novruz, 1945, p. 2) and provided information about the newspaper “Tajaddid” published by him (Novruz, 1945, p. 2). S.J. Pishevari wrote a series of articles dedicated to M. Khiyabani with the signature “Novruz” in the newspaper “Azerbaijan”, characterizing ADF’s “Tajaddid” as M. Khiyabani’s “immortal work” (Novruz, 1945, p. 2).

M. Biriya, one of the leaders of the ADF, was an outstanding poet and enlightened democratic intellectual. Although he was one of the leaders of the ADF, he was repressed and threatened with dismissal by the Soviets for his engagement in religious worship (Balayev, p. 318). After the collapse of the ADF, M. Biriya’s religious-nationalist attitude during his emigration to the USSR, his desire to return to Tabriz, his letters to the Soviet government demanding the abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet and the return to the old alphabet, his characterization of Armenians as enemies of Turks, his demand for the return of all exiled Muslims to their homeland led to M. Biriya’s imprisonment for many years (Balayev, pp. 59-60). Persecuted in Soviet Azerbaijan, he had to become a mullah. Only after the fall of the Pahlavis, he returned to Tabriz in his old age. However, he was accused of being a communist and was tortured to death in 1985 (Çeşmazər, p. 10). On his tombstone are the following lines written in the style of Nesimi:

“Vurma əl türbətimə, türbəti-Adəm də mənəm,
Nə o dünya, nə bu dünya, iki aləm də mənəm.
Arama qəbrimi, axtarma mənim başdaşımı
Rəsmdə Həzrəti Nuh, isimdə Xatəm də mənəm” (Turan, 2019, February 25).

One of the active writers of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, A. Shamida denounced those who exploit religion and sect as a political instrument and those who follow them obviously. In his article “Is it Religious Propaganda or Political Action!”, A. Shamida criticized those who used religion as a mechanism to hinder resistance of the people for freedom. A. Shamida showed that the imperialists and their henchmen utilized the national and religious prejudices of the people to create animosity and hostility and prevent the people from achieving an independent and peaceful existence (Şəmidə, 1949, p. 4). Moreover, they disseminated sectarian propaganda and corrupted the minds of the people with their reactionary ideas and tried to deter the masses from the struggle for independence. A. Shamida emphasized that the foreign imperialist governments and their occupation army or experts, including reactionary religious figures, weaken the people they exploit. He showed that the foreign missionaries operating in Iran are the agents of the imperialists (Şəmidə, 1949, p. 4).

A. Shamida mentioned that Muhammad Reza Shah met the Pope of Rome in the Vatican, received a medal, and participated in the Vatican conference, where decisions were made to promote Christianity in Iran in 1948. He added that the number of Christian missionaries increased in Urmia, Tabriz, Hamadan, Tehran, and various regions of Iran following the visits of the representatives of the Pope to Tehran. The author noted that the number of missionaries in the churches and schools was greater than the number of teachers and doctors in their establishments. The author emphasized their main engagement as poisoning the minds of the people. Those brought up in these schools and churches have become the servants of the American and British imperialists, carrying out propaganda and espionage for their benefit. They challenged the independence of the people and acclaimed the imperialists in their religious books and speeches (Şəmidə, 1949, p. 4). A. Shamida asserted that the Christian missionaries were mainly countered against the USSR in South Azerbaijan and striving to turn Iran into a colony of imperialist powers.

J. Mujiri, one of the prominent writers of the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, condemned the wrong religious policy conducted in the country under the guise of religion in his article “Let Iranian Reactionaries be Disgraced Once Again!”. The author reproached the Pahlavi government and its foreign patrons who employed religion for political motives. He then exposed how the British imperialists guided the pro-Shah reactionaries and corrupted the minds of the Iranian people through their frauds hidden under the veil of pan-Islamism (Müciri, 1949, January 15, p. 3). The author criticized those who oppressed the people by trying to keep the hope of the hereafter and those who claimed that “the result of enduring hunger and poverty will be favorable” (Müciri, 1948, p. 1).

J. Mujiri asserted that infectious diseases were transmitted among pilgrims from Iran visiting Mecca

and Medina. Many pilgrims die of lack of medicine or become beggars there due to poverty, while the governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia impose heavy taxes on Iranian pilgrims and insult them. The article critiques the fact that wealthy Iranian pilgrims, who ignore the hungry and poor in their own country, spend their money in Arabia and other countries (Müciri, 1949, pp. 1, 3).

2. Criticism of Pahlavi religious policy in the “Azerbaijan” newspaper

The Pahlavi dynasty was the major target of criticism in the “Azerbaijan” newspaper. The reactionary clergy played a significant role in the election of Reza Khan Pahlavi, the first ruler of the dynasty, in 1924. Reza Khan’s desire to establish a republican structure in the country, in the example of Ataturk’s Turkey, was not welcomed by reactionary clerics. These clerics evaluated the republican system to be against Islam. Thus, they were able to convince Reza Khan to preserve the Shah regime in the country (Kurtuluş, 2008, p. 67).

Reza Shah was an active defender of secular Western nationalist values and a firm opponent of Sharia. According to the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, before assuming power and in the early days of his reign, Reza Khan would wear black clothes on Ashura days, join the mourners, cover his head in the mud, and wear a chain ("Məzəhəb iddiyasında olub", p. 4), pretending to be a religious and sectarian fanatic. However, after he became a Shah and consolidated his power, Reza Khan forbade the observance of the Ashura ceremony in the courtyard of Imam Reza’s temple and arrested and killed protestors (Yusifi, 1948, p. 4). Although the policy of Reza Shah provoked many uprisings in Iran, they were forcibly suppressed by the Shah. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper highlighted that it has never been seen anywhere in the modern world that the army intervenes in religious affairs, prevents people from demonstrating their religious feelings, and shoots unarmed and defenseless people (“Azərbaycan” qəzeti, 2022, p. 694). In 1928, the wearing of religious clothes by non-clergymen was prohibited. In 1935, women were forbidden to wear headscarves. They were forced to wear hats and caps. Education was secularized, and schools where girls and boys studied together were opened (Иванов, 1977, p. 343). The “Azerbaijan” newspaper claimed that the Shah’s forcible removal of women’s headscarves had nothing to do with women’s freedom. Because women were not granted social and political rights. It formed possible conditions for gendarmes to take bribes under this pretext ("İran qadınları öz azadlıqları", 1949, p. 1).

Those who opposed Reza Shah’s radical secularism were subjected to severe punishments. Reza Shah’s visit to Turkey in 1934 and meeting with Ataturk reinforced his policy of secularism (Kurtuluş, 2008, p. 67). To quell the protests against the Shah regime, Reza Shah began to support the clergy under him. Reza Shah tried to consolidate his authority over the higher religious centers of Tehran against the teachers and clerics of the regional madrasahs, which were inclined towards independence, such as Qum, Najaf, and Mashhad. He announced that “Tehran should be one of the most important centers of religious education”. In an apparent attempt to demonstrate his supposed pro-Islamist position, the Shah established the Islamic University in Tehran and provided it with substantial support. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper mentioned that the Shah and the ruling class, who had acquisitive intentions toward the property and honor of the people, were trying to pretend to be supporters of religion (Şəkibxan, 1948, p. 1). The newspaper further uttered that the Americans and the British, with the help of the Shah’s government, were trying to establish a foundation for promoting the policy of the Shah regime in universities and other schools (Şəkibxan, 1948, p. 4).

Reza Shah’s secular policy further strengthened the Zoroastrian community, which had a weak position in Iran, granting a seat in the parliament. Unlike Jews and Armenians, Zoroastrians were perceived as Iranians by the Muslim people (Cottam, 1979, pp. 86-87).

The situation of the Bahais was difficult during the Qajar period, just as it was during the Pahlavi period. R.V. Cottam writes that the Bahais, who call for universality, peace, and brotherhood, were the religious minority that has faced the worst treatment in Iran. Because, according to Muslims, unlike the people of the Book (pre-Islamic Abrahamic religions - A.F.), Bahais were seen as “heretics”, and their rights were not recognized (Cottam, 1979, pp. 87 -88).

During the era of Shah Pahlavi, the “Law on Civil Service” was enacted, and Bahais were deprived of their pensions. In 1924, with the fatwa of religious leaders, Bahai raids were carried out in some cities of the country. “Bahai Centers” were looted and destroyed. In 1925, by the Shah’s decree, Bahais were banned from working in government offices. Bahai officers were expelled from the army in 1932-1933. The Shah’s government banned the printing of Bahai literature and closed Bahai schools.

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper conveyed that Reza Shah’s tyranny brought Hitler’s fascist ideas and practices to the country, strengthening oppression and bondage. The Reza Shah government, which sought to strengthen its legitimacy on a religious basis, preached phrases like “shah sayaye-khodast” (“the shah is the shadow of God”) to people and the students in schools, forcing them to accept the “base” policies and dictatorship (“Azərbaycan” qəzeti, 2022, pp. 60, 200, 488).

Reza Shah’s alliance with Hitler led to his being overthrown by the Soviets and the British, and his son Muhammad Reza Shah ascended to the throne. During Muhammad Reza Shah’s reign, the situation of the Bahais became even more complicated. The arrest of Bahai leaders was accompanied by an escalation in the killing of Bahais. The government launched a smear campaign, claiming “Bahais are collaborating with communists”. The Shah’s government addressed the public and ordered the “rooting out of the Bahai sect”, initiating mass arrests and killings against the Bahais (Cəfərov, 2022).

Muhammad Reza Shah, unlike his father, refrained from German fascism but maintained a dictatorial regime in the country. During this period, English and American imperialism replaced German fascism. Muhammad Reza Shah’s dictatorial policy was also supported by reactionary clerics who called the Shah “Zillullah”, meaning the Shadow of God (Zakir, 1948, p. 3). Ignorant clergymen continued to exploit the people and used Islam as a means for this policy. That propaganda was even being spread in schools, saying that the Shah was “Zillullah” and that “obeying the Shah is a sacred duty” (Bəhrəmi, 1949, p. 1). S.J. Pishevari criticized the Shah government and officials for using religion for their covetous purposes. He wrote that they looted the property of the Muslim people, but when their property was damaged, they cried out that they were losing their religion. ADF had to rebel precisely because the government was looting and bribing (Əliyev, 2023, p. 229).

Although the Shah used religious slogans to stay in power, he killed patriotic, progressive, and democratic clerics such as Sheikh Muhammad Ali Ali-Ishaq Khoi. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper expressed condolences over the murder of this prominent clergyman. The newspaper reported that the true face of A. Qavam, who employed religion and sects for political purposes, was revealed (“Tərhim və təziyə”, 1946) November 25, p. 1; (Məzhəb iddiasi olub, 1946, p. 1).

The Shah’s government used Mujtahid Abulhasan Siqatulislami, the member of parliament and the Tabriz cleric, to divert the ADF from the struggle for democracy and to find common ground with the Shah (Rəhimli, 2009, p. 74). ADF fought against the Shah regime, as well as against pro-Shah, reactionary, and fanatic clerics. S.J. Pishevari stated in his speeches that they did not agree to representatives like Siqatulislami speaking on behalf of Azerbaijan in the Assembly (Qızıl səhifələr, 1946, p. 57). Although A. Siqatulislami promised to support the ADF (Həsənli, 1998, p. 99), he actually saw the ADF as pro-Soviet and called on the people to take up armed resistance against them. Encouraged by A. Siqatulislami, Azerbaijani clerics like Mirza Hussain Vaiz spoke in the parliament in Tehran, calling the people to resist the Soviet occupation and the ADF. Pro-Shah clerics accused the Azerbaijani democrats of betraying Islamic ideas and of the ADF’s decisions being against religion (Гасанлы, 2006, pp. 142, 148, 215, 354). As a matter of fact, these clerics were large landowners and worried that the unjust wealth they had accumulated over time would be taken from them. Fleeing from South Azerbaijan to seek refuge in Tehran, the reactionary, pro-Shah clerics established an association called “Liberation of Azerbaijan” with the encouragement of the Shah’s government. This society was conducting propaganda against the ADF and its democratic values. Although the Pahlavi government was against religion, it supported and used reactionary clerics like Mir Khas Ardabili and Mirza Hussain Vaiz under the pretext of protecting Islam. These reactionary clerics labeled ADF members as enemies of religion and sect, infidels, and atheists, inciting the Muslim populace to revolt against the ADF (Əlizadə, 2017, pp. 18, 20, 31). One of the reactionary religious

leaders was Seyyed Abulgasim Kashani. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper mentioned that he was a “drug addict hiding behind the mask of a cleric and a mullah” (“21 Azər” in 3-cü ildönümü”, 1948, p. 4) and “a reactionary element” (Həbs olunanlardan, 1949, p. 4). The newspaper showed that he and M.H. Vaiz had propagated Hitler and fascism during the Reza Shah period (Haşimi, 1948, p. 4). The “Azerbaijan” newspaper criticized Nazi supporters and published articles praising the victory of the Soviet Union against German fascism (“Alman faşistlərinin Sovet”, 1948, pp. 1, 4).

S.J. Pishevari wrote that during the Məsruteh period in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the reactionaries pressured everyone they wanted under the pretext of being Babi, even taking away a piece of bread from them. He later emphasized that they applied the same policy against the ADF, slandering the democrats with the name “Babi” (Qızıl səhifələr, 1946, p. 106). During the fall of the ADF in December 1946, thousands of men and women who supported the ADF were killed and raped by Shah-loyalist bandits under the fatwas issued by these reactionary clerics (Əlizadə, 2017, pp. 64-65). The pro-Shah newspaper “Demokrat-e Iran” asserted the Pishevari supporters as “individuals without a god and a homeland”, fascists hiding under the guise of democracy. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper described such religious speeches by the pro-Shah reactionary elements as “an insult to religion and the Islamic world” (Haşimi, 1948, p. 4), accusing the Shah and his supporters of having “no religion, no sect, no fear of God” (“Azərbaycan” qəzeti, 2022, p. 700). During this period, more than five thousand Azerbaijanis who managed to escape persecution and massacres were forced to migrate to Soviet Azerbaijan (Abışov, 2023, p. 98).

The ADF, led by S.J. Pishevari, tried to normalize relations with progressive clerics. S.J. Pishevari sought support for this purpose by meeting with the spiritual leaders of South Azerbaijani Shiites, Mirza Khalil Aga Mujtahid, Haji Mirza Baghir Aga, and Mujtahid Seyyid Muhammed Hussain Tabatabai (Gacanlı, 2006, p. 215). However, Mujtahid Tabatabai refused to support the Soviet ally ADF and moved from Tabriz to Qum. He later became famous as the author of the multi-volume Arabic Quran commentary, “al-Mizan” (Mertoglu, 2010, pp. 306-308).

One of the leading Azerbaijani scholars of the Pahlavi era, Tabriz-born S.M. Tabatabai, was famous for his religious-philosophical works, such as the 20-volume work “al-Mizan fi tafsiril-Qur'an”, “Qur'an der Islam” (“The Quran in Islam”), “Usule-falsafa ve revishirealizm” (“Philosophical Methodology and Revised Realism”), “Bidayetul-hikmah” (“The Beginning of Wisdom”), and “Nihayatul-hikmah” (The End of Wisdom). In his works, many subjects of classical Islamic philosophy have been addressed. Topics such as the comparative study of Eastern and Western philosophies, psychology, sociology, and history have been examined. S.M. Tabatabai was a scholar known for his philosophical research on the interpretation of the Quran, the revival of traditional wisdom, and skillfully combining these two fields. S.M. Tabatabai's inclusion of classical Islamic philosophical thought in his works, his incorporation of Sufism, and his efforts to synthesize philosophy with religious sciences have led to the strengthening of the previously weakened position of Sufism and philosophical thought in the Islamic world. S.M. Tabatabai's reference to Sunni sources and Shia sources in his Quran commentary contributed to the strengthening of inter-sect rapprochement in the Islamic world. Western thinkers like H. Corbin have also placed great importance on the Tabatabai legacy and have supported it (Fərhadov, 2023, pp. 141-143).

M.H. Tabatabai was not the only person to leave Azerbaijan to protest S.J. Pishevari. The “Communist” newspaper expressed that pro-Shah officials who did not want to cooperate with the ADF went to Tehran (“İran Azərbaycanındakı vəziyyətə dair”, 1945, p. 1). R.V. Cottam emphasized that during the Pishevari government, approximately 100,000 people left Azerbaijan to protest the new rules and settled in other provinces of Iran (Cottam, 1979, p. 127). In the memoirs of some witnesses from that period, it should be noted that the arrival of the Soviet army in South Azerbaijan was equated with the occupation of Northern Iran by the Tsarist Russian army during the Constitutional (Mashruteh) Revolution and World War I. At that time, the Muslim population harbored distrust and suspicion towards the Russians. The distrust towards the ADF, which was an ally of the USSR, by some of the people stemmed from this (“Cənubi Azərbaycanda 21 Azər hərəkatı haqqında xatirələr”, 2017).

Ayatullah M. Shariatmadari, Mirza Javad Maliki al-Tabrizi, and Allame Abdulhussain al-Amini can be

cited as prominent Azerbaijani religious figures and thinkers of the period. M. Shariatmadari from Tabriz received advanced religious education in Qum and Najaf and returned to Tabriz as an Ayatullah in 1927 at the age of 19. Like his teacher, Ayatullah-Uzma (Grand Ayatullah) Hussain Burujerdi, he was also against the intervention of religion in politics. After the death of Hussain Burujerdi in 1961, M. Shariatmadari was recognized as the most influential religious figure in the Shia world. He founded the Muslim People's Party during the Islamic Revolution. M. Shariatmadari opposed the establishment of a religious state and demanded the establishment of a democratic state and the rights of South Azerbaijan. For this reason, he was arrested and mysteriously killed (Ələkbərli, 2021, pp. 630-633). Another spiritual thinker of the time, Mirza Javad, received advanced religious education in Tabriz, followed by Qum and Najaf. He is the author of religious and philosophical works such as "Irshadut-talib" ("Guide for the Student") and "Ususul-ghaza vash-shehadat" ("The Foundations of Justice and Martyrdom"). Abdulhussain al-Amini from Tabriz also achieved higher religious education in Tabriz and Najaf and earned the title of Mujtahid. Later, he engaged in teaching religion and Islamic philosophy in Tabriz. He authored a work titled "Fatihatu'l-Kitab", based on the Quran (Ələkbərli, 2021, pp. 586-587).

Although ADF members countered pro-Shah clerics, they expressed support for democratic-minded ones. ADF emphasized their instilling hope and confidence in the people. S.J. Pishevari always remembered and respected the great spiritual scholars such as A. Bihbehani, S.M. Tabatabai, and M.K. Khorasani, who were mujtahids supporting the people against the Shah regime during the Constitutional Revolution (Pişəvəri, 1984, p. 404). S.J. Pishevari also had great hopes for the progressive clerics of his time and mentioned that "our government is a democratic government. Let the clergy and all classes come together and protect our autonomy" (Şəhrivərin on ikisi, p. 71). S.J. Pishevari criticized the teaching of religious sciences in Arabic and Persian by religious scholars, saying that speaking Turkish in madrasas is against Sharia. He invited them to preach sermons at mosques and to teach theological instruction at madrasas in their native languages (Qızıl səhifələr, 1946, pp. 34, 97).

In the ADF program, respect for national and religious values was emphasized, freedom of religion was acknowledged (Balayev, 2010, p. 318), and the importance of celebrating national and religious holidays was highlighted (Qızıl səhifələr, 1946, p. 65). The "Azerbaijan" newspaper called on Azerbaijani Muslims to unite around the ADF, saying "believers are brothers" based on the 10th verse of the Surah Al-Hujurat of the Qur'an. The newspaper analogized the Shah government to "a person who does not pray" ("Azərbaycan" qəzeti, 2022, pp. 188, 632).

Forward-thinking clerics supported the activities of the ADF and closely participated in the building of the nation-state. The "Azerbaijan" newspaper wrote that progressive clergymen encouraged the people to join this organization by giving speeches from the pulpits. For example, the clerics of Ardabil, Maku, Khoy, and other regions sent congratulatory telegrams to the ADF and the Constituent Assembly. Sheikh Musa Keyvani, the representative of Khoy, served as a part of the ADF. Despite the cleric Mirza Muhammad Aga Siqatulislami calling on the ADF not to harm Iran's territorial integrity ("Azərbaycan" qəzeti, 2022, pp. 21, 26, 93, 562, 608, 632), he cooperated with the ADF ("Ruhanilərimizin ehsasatı", 1946, pp. 1, 4).

M.A. Shabustari from the ADF met with some clerics in parliament, such as Mirza Muhammad Aga Siqatulislami, Mirza Rafi Aga Siqatulislami, and Mirza Mahmud Aga Sadr. Appreciating their support for the ADF, he stated that the state would protect their rights. He criticized the Shah's clerics and praised the role of forward-thinking religious scholars. He stressed the Shah government's crushing of the South Azerbaijani people, including progressive theologians, and turning the country into ruins. He argued that reform-oriented clerics should work for Azerbaijan's national unity and save the people from the disaster caused by the Shah ("Ruhanilərimizin ehsasatı", 1946, pp. 1, 4).

The Pahlavi government presented the ADF's policy as hostility towards the Muslim people and called on the pious to combat the ADF. The "Azerbaijan" newspaper stated that as a result of Pahlavi's flawed religious policy, ignorant mourners occupied the pulpits ("Ağayı Pişəvərinin nitqinin müxtəsəri", 1945, September 18, p. 1). However, Azerbaijanis do not believe in the "nonsense of the reactionary, treacherous press" and will not follow them. It compared the victory of the Pishevari government to the verses of the

Surah Al-Nasr in the Quran, which proclaims “the help of Allah and a decisive victory” (Pişəvəri, 1945, September 20, p. 1; Pişəvəri, 2016, pp. 118-120).

In the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, the Shah and his reactionary officials, as well as the Shah-supporting religious figures, were criticized for exploiting religion to manipulate the people. Their true faces, false piety, and actions against the people were revealed. The newspaper stated that the Shah described himself as an “Islam-panah” (“the refuge of Islam”) and that the Shah’s supporters referred to him as “Shahanshahe-Islam-panah” (“the King of the refuge of Islam”) (Yusifi, 1948, p. 1). The newspaper portrayed the Shah, whom the sycophantic officials called “zillullah”, as not the shadow of God but the “British’s shadow in Iran” (Azəroğlu, 1948, p. 3). The newspaper emphasized Shah’s crimes and the bloodshed in Azerbaijan, mentioning their marks left in history and hearts. Those who called Muhammad Reza “Shahanshahe-Islam-panah” were declared the greatest enemies of Islam in the newspaper (Yusifi, 1948, p. 4).

The Pahlavis organized “prayer ceremonies” in mosques in the name of the Shah to consolidate their power (“Rəzmara yaltaqlıq edir”, 1949, p. 3). Fearing that Muslims would rebel against the tyrannical Shah, they created contradictions and conflicts among the people and sects in the country. The “Azerbaijan” newspaper asserted that the Shah’s supporters tried to organize national genocide among the people living in Iran, using the British colonizers’ slogan “Sow discord, rule!”.

The first tool they employed to achieve this plan was the sects. One day, they would create conflict between Sunni and Shia, and the next day, between Muslim and Armenian (Kəndli, 1948, p. 1). The newspaper provided examples of Azerbaijani poet Mirza Ali Mojuz’s poems criticizing the British government and the Shah regime for their nefarious policies:

“Söylər hər kəs küçədə və bazzarda:

“İngilis barmağı var bu karda (işdə-Ə.F.)” (Həbibli, 1947, p. 3).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper stated that the Shah government’s policy was “against the sect”. It criticized their use of religion to deceive the people and maintain power and their theological schools that train royalist clerics. Nevertheless, the newspaper asserted that the people did not believe in the Shah. It wrote that instead of spreading knowledge and literacy, the Shah wanted to strengthen superstitions and myths, keeping the people in ignorance to solidify the foundations of his power (Şəkibxan, 1948, p. 3).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper mentioned the spread of retrogressive ideas by imperialist powers under the guise of sectarian propaganda and the dissuading masses from the struggle for freedom. Imperialists were urging the people to endure the oppression and plunder of imperialism by creating organizations that spread sectarianism and superstition. However, the newspaper believed that the Iranian people would win in their struggle against local rulers, foreign imperialists, and the backward-looking clerics (Şəmidə, 1949, p. 4). The “Azerbaijan” newspaper wrote portrayed that, as in the time of M.F. Akhundzadeh, ignorant liars hiding under the guise of pious sheikhs are running rampant in the Middle East (“Dünya mədəniyyət xadimlərinin yığıncağında”, 1948, p. 4).

The “Azerbaijan” newspaper announced that pro-government newspapers, state radio, and government propagandists deceived poor workers with religious slogans, trying to calm them with “fate, destiny, and predestination” (Məhəmmədzadə, 1949, p. 1). They tried to deter people from the struggle with trivial and meaningless words like “the state cares for the people, patience, and tolerance are beautiful qualities, we should be tolerant, we should be loyal to the Shah”. However, according to the newspaper, if you ask any villager or worker in the country what life is like right now, they will say: I am hungry, I am poor, I have no supply for tomorrow. There was an irreconcilable enmity between the Shah and the poor people (İran zəhmətkeşlərinin tələbatı 1948, p. 1).

In the “Azerbaijan” newspaper, the speech given by Maryam Firuz, a Qajar princess and women’s rights advocate from Tabriz, at the newly organized International Women’s Congress in Budapest was presented to the readers. It was revealed here that the government created obstacles for Maryam Firuz to prevent her from attending this event (Şəmidə, 1948, p. 1). However, she managed to convey the plight of Muslim women to the congress participants by attending the event. She stated that the Shah government sold its people to foreigners. Addressing the congress participants, she called on them to protest the policies of the

Shah government and Western imperialism ("Beynəlxalq Qadınlar Təşkilatının ikinci konqresində", 1948, December 22, p. 1). It became clear that restrictions on women were not limited to the Shah government's harsh measures; reactionary individuals also pressured women by deeming secular education sinful. In the press, they issued articles, speeches, and talks against women's freedom. Reactionary forces tried to ensure women remained ignorant ("8 Mart dünya qadınlarının beynəlxalq bayramı", 1948, p. 1).

Indeed, real women's rights in Iran were granted by the ADF government in 1945-1946, not by the Pahlavis. During the Pahlavi era, women were given the right to vote and be elected only in 1962, and very few female parliamentarians were elected in the first elections. Although some women were appointed as ministers in high positions, most of the significant positions in society belonged to elite families. Thus, there was no significant change in the lives of middle-class people. Although the first female MPs were elected to the parliament after 1968, they could not establish proper communication with the women in society and protect their rights. Therefore, they could not gain a significant position within the women's community. The main reason for this issue was that they entered parliament not by the people's will but with the government's permission (Abdollahifard, 2021, p. 370). Despite some women being members of parliament, ministers, or judges, they were not actually participating in real politics. The Pahlavis raised the legal marriage age for girls from 13 to 18 only after 1962. Women were allowed to file for divorce. The number of women a man can marry has been reduced to one (Rodriguez, 2002). In 1945-1946, the ADF government provided women with equal social and political rights to men. The "Azerbaijan" newspaper reported that the "Azerbaijan Women's Conference" was held several times in Tabriz, where reports on "Women's Citizenship Rights" were introduced and women were educated (Faiq, 1946, p. 4). However, after the defeat of the ADF government by the Shah's army in December 1946, women's rights were abolished. Despite this defeat, the "Azerbaijan" newspaper did not lose hope and believed that true human freedom would be restored. The newspaper highlighted that true women's freedom could not be granted by the "bandit" Shah government, which was a "puppet" of imperialism, but rather by the people's government, which was not far off in time ("17 Dey İran qadınlarının "Azadlıq bayramının" həqiqi mənası", 1948, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

Finally, we can say that the Shah regime's use of reactionary religious ideas and sectarianism to strengthen its power and exploit the people has been continuously criticized by the ADF and the "Azerbaijan" newspaper. While the newspaper promoted Islamic unity, religious enlightenment, and progressive religious ideas, it emphasized the importance of progressive clergymen in serving the people. The religious and political issues of the era, the use of religion as a political tool by the Pahlavis, the violations of women's rights in the country, and the struggles of Azerbaijani human rights defenders like Maryam Firuz were discussed. The article is significant for the examination of the democratic awakening, fight against religious radicalization, superstitions, and ignorance in South Azerbaijan. The article is also beneficial for examining and promoting the history of the struggle of the writers of the "Azerbaijan" newspaper against reactionary and authoritarian authorities who exploit religion for undemocratic purposes and the pro-Shah clerics who support them.

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