**Soviet memories (Part - IV)**

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After spending two years in Moscow I moved to Baku, Azerbaijan in 1986, and lived there for a year. From there, I could observe more closely the events taking shape in Central Asia and Transcaucasia. In December 1986, the party first secretary in Kazakhstan Kunaev – who was 85 and had been ruling over his republic since 1964 – had to quit.

Gorbachev removed him and appointed Gennady Kolbin, a Russian, as the new leader of Kazakhstan. Kolbin had never worked in Kazakhstan before; the reaction in the Kazakh capital Alma Ata was almost immediate. Since the press had become free all over the Soviet Union, in Azerbaijan too the Russian language newspapers that I could read carried the news from Kazakhstan and people became anxious and curious. There were reports of demonstrations and violence in the streets. The supporters of Kunaev registered their protests at the change of leadership in Kazakhstan.

We in Azerbaijan did not fully understand if the demonstrations were against the appointment of an ethnic Russian, or whether Kunaev’s political machine organized them. Since Kunaev had ruled for 22 years and was an octogenarian, most people in Azerbaijan thought that the protests were not in favour of Kunaev but against the new leader, Kolbin. The appointment also showed Moscow’s interventionist policy despite Gorbachev’s claims otherwise. The people of Azerbaijan often talked against party leaders who distributed apartments without regard to precedence. Housing was a major issue and the government could not offer homes to everyone.

Connections played an important role in Azerbaijan as in Central Asia or the rest of the Soviet Union. If you don’t like it, think about Pakistan or perhaps any other country in the world where personal connections matter. Probably, the Scandinavian social democracies and welfare states are different, but I am not sure. In 1987, there were more plenums of the Soviet Communist Party in which Gorbachev continued his stinging attacks on the way the party had been operating. He particularly targeted conservatism and inertia in the party and railed against toadyism and personal adulation.

Gorbachev promoted more and more democratization; perhaps he was convinced that ‘democracy was the best revenge’. He proposed an expansion in the role of elected bodies as opposed to party organs which mostly had nominated members. He advocated a much more vigorous electoral process with multi-candidate elections. Within the top tiers of the party these proposals met a cool reception; at lower levels though they received mass support, as people desperately wanted a change in the system. The main avenue that Gorbachev used was the press which influenced people much quicker and the conservatives could not stop it.

Living in Azerbaijan, another name I frequently heard and read about was that of the Turkmen communist leader Niyazov. Gorbachev had appointed him the first secretary of the Turkmen communist party in 1985, after removing an old guard Gapurov who had ruled over the Turkmen socialist republic for 16 years from 1969 to 1985. During his early years in power the new Turkmen leader Niyazov often criticized his predecessor Gapurov for his corruption and authoritarianism; newspapers in Azerbaijan carried many of his corruption scandals. Interestingly, Niyazov himself ruled over Turkmenistan with an iron hand for 21 years till his death in 2006.

In Azerbaijan, there was rationing of butter and meat and other items of consumer interest were also in short supply. The local people believed that Azerbaijan was rich in resources but Moscow plundered them, especially their oil reserves. If you compared Baku of 1987 with Karachi, you found that there was a first-class public transport system with well-functioning underground metro, which Karachi cannot dream of even now. Water and sanitation was a major issue as most hostels for students did not have running hot water. But there were many public baths which people loved even if they had to wait for hours for their turn to take a bath.

There were also problems at the top of the Azeri party too. Azerbaijan’s most prominent communist politician was Heydar Aliyev who had ruled over his republic from 1969 to 1982; then Brezhnev brought him to Moscow as a candidate member of the Politburo. Under Andropov he became a full member and deputy PM of the Soviet Union. When I was in Azerbaijan the first secretary was Kamran Baghirov but people still remembered Heydar Aliyev whose group had vast clout. Since Aliyev was in Moscow as one of the top leaders of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis took pride in him and wished him to be the next Soviet leader.

Aliyev was an old guard and fell out of favour with Gorbachev who removed him in 1987. I remember very well that in Baku people were furious when Gorbachev expelled him from the Politburo and removed him from the post of deputy PM of the Soviet Union. This was a rude shock and the free press of Azerbaijan openly criticized Gorbachev for his highhandedness. People openly started talking against the Soviet Union and I could feel ethnic tensions against Armenian and Russian ‘Christians’ in Azerbaijan. The Muslim identity of local people was strong and they loved a ‘Muslim’ Pakistani student in Baku.

Azerbaijan people are also of Turkic origin and they have a special bond with Pakistan. They spoke fluent Russian and confided in me their dislike for Armenian and Russian Christians. They were also full of praise for Aliyev and did not like Baghirov much. I wondered how they could reconcile with the services Aliyev rendered for Moscow with their own dislike for Russians, and at the same time love Aliyev. Perhaps, people who tend to think in terms of ethnic and religious identities carry these contradictions with them irrespective of where they are.

In mid-1987, elections were held for the soviets (councils) under a new electoral law providing for competitive contests. The old political landscape was changing. By late 1987, I had moved to Ukraine and it was there that I saw the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution which was also the Great October Revolution or simply the Soviet Revolution of 1917. Though the Soviet government led by Gorbachev put up the usual fanfare and staged a pompous show of strength, the feelings among the people were rather cold. In 1988, Gorbachev called the party conference, the first since 1961.

The agenda was more democratization and promoting the process of perestroika (reconstruction) in the Soviet Union. The delegates to this conference were to be elected through secret ballot. Gorbachev’s strategy was to outflank entrenched opposition within the party structure by using secret ballot elections. He wanted more reformist delegates in the conference. Since the party central committee was slow in Gorbachev’s opinion, he wanted partial renewal of the CC by inducting pro-reform forces by replacing the dead wood who still believed in the centrality of the party in the country.

Living in Ukraine, I could observe the events in nearby republics such as Belorussia, Moldova, and the Baltic republics. The newspapers in Ukraine accused the local party leaders of corruption and laziness. It appeared that from Moscow to Central Asia to European part of the Soviet Union, nearly the same pattern was unfolding. Gorbachev’s ideas of democracy and glasnost (diversity of opinion) were visible everywhere. The newspapers were exposing the cults of local leaders in Ukraine too.

In the next and last part of this series, I will present the endgame of the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated.

To be continued

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