

Azerbaijan

**Period of democratic transition: 1989–1991**

**Pro-democracy civic movement: present**

After enjoying a brief period of independence from 1918 to 1920, Azerbaijan entered the Soviet Union in 1922 and became its own Soviet republic in 1936. Azerbaijan experienced repression under Communist rule, as well as growing nationalism in the 1980s.

Azerbaijan's civic movement emerged at a time of growing interethnic conflict over the majority Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Anti-Azeri violence in Nagorno-Karabakh heightened tensions and resulted in the forced migration of tens of thousands of Azeris to the capital. In turn, anti-Armenian hostility led to a large refugee flow of Armenians from the capital. Soviet troops sent in to restore order exacerbated the situation. In this violent context, a generally peaceful civic movement, the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), emerged out of mass protests that mobilized hundreds of thousands of participants who took part in marches, demonstrations, and some worker strikes. The APF pursued a democratic agenda, with calls for independence, a multiparty system, independent trade unions, and diverse media. While the nonviolent APF operated in a setting in which there was considerable violence, radical and armed forces never attracted a mass following. After the collapse of the USSR in August 1991, Azeri authorities declared statehood and independence from Moscow. A brief period of rule under the presidency of former Communist Party chief Ayaz Mutalibov ended with his resignation after mounting protests and civic pressure led by the APF. Despite a widening conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a competitive presidential election in June 1992 was won by the APF-backed candidate, Abulfaz Elchibey.

Azerbaijan's leadership has pledged to advance a democratic reform program but has been slow to do so in practice. Elections since 1992 have often been mired in fraud or intimidation, and fighting took place between demonstrators and security forces prior to the 2003 presidential elections. Nevertheless, elections occur with some regularity.