CHAPTER - VI

CONCLUSION
In most of the cases, studies of political development define it in the sense of western liberal democratic model. Therefore such studies focus on an elected parliament, independent judiciary, accountable executive, free and fair multi-party elections, vibrant civil society, independent media and constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights. If measured on these parameters the political system in Azerbaijan is only partially democratic.

Theoretically, Azerbaijan is a democracy in making. Largely Azerbaijan has a free press, and technically elections can lead to a turn-over of office-holders. A multi party system also exists. The constitution of Azerbaijan guarantees individual freedoms. After two decades of democracy functioning it seems to be taking roots in the newly developing country.

However, the realities of political life are more complex. During his 10-year term in office, Aliyev strengthened his hold on the country through an enormous concentration of power in the presidency. In October 2003, the Presidency changed hands when former Prime Minister Ilham Aliyev, son of Heydar Aliyev, gained the office following controversial elections that were deemed not free and fair by the OSCE. The 2005 parliamentary elections, including the reruns in May 2006, registered improvement in some areas. But it did not meet a number of international standards.

The political developments which unfolded in the independent Azerbaijan during 1991-2005 led to the establishment of a personality based political set-up where, despite all paraphernalia of modern democracy, power radiates from the command of the president and he actually dominates and controls the system. Constitution grants him extraordinary powers putting to ransom the independence of other organs of government, nullifying in practice the spirit of 'Separation of Powers'. Primary reason for this skewed nature of political Development lies in the series of events immediately before and after the country's Independence.

On the basis of this gap between the democracy in theory and in practice, this study argues that it is not appropriate to apply any particular theoretical framework of political development in Azerbaijan. Against the Western parameters of democracy, if
Azerbaijan is placed in a category then it would be a 'Presidential Monarchy' or at best a 'Managed Democracy'.

Another aspect which has significantly affected political developments in Azerbaijan is the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. This issue had also affected the polity of the Soviet era in Azerbaijan. The reasons of emergence of a strong presidency are linked to the developments on this conflict during the Soviet era. This has happened in two ways. First, Azerbaijansis from different sectors of the population, many of whom had relations in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia, were directly affected by the strife in the region. As a result, they were opposed to any change in the status of the province and condemned Moscow's handling of the conflict.

Second, most of the population felt that the communist leadership of the Republic blundered in the Nagorno-Karabakh. It had failed to maintain control over the disputed province; many joined the opposition forces at this time. Following the final declaration of the collapse of USSR an independent Azerbaijan came into existence. When Azerbaijan gained independence, it was marked by unstable polity, fragmented society, and a weak economy.

Such a hostile situation was not much conducive to the political developments in the country. Very soon Azerbaijan was fallen in political turmoil caused by the reverses on war front in Nagorno-Karabakh. Political instability and rising mass discontent coupled with Armenian victories in Nagorno-Karabakh provided the platform for ex-communist Polite Bureau member Hyder Aliyev to capture power in Baku. He seized upon the opportunity and became a fully fledged President following new elections held in October 1993. It was he who shaped the design of political development in Azerbaijan. As a result, personality based polity started taking firm roots in the country.

If we compare the democratisation experience of Azerbaijan and that of the East-Central European countries (with almost similar challenges of nation building and institution building) we find that Azerbaijan has lagged much behind. In their quest to join the western economic (EU) and security (NATO) structures, East-Central European countries went for far reaching changes in their established norms of behaviour (for example, in all these countries minority rights are guaranteed and protected by
constitution) which made the transition process a little bit easier (notwithstanding the bloody ethnic conflicts which marked the region).

However, no such incentive came in the way of Azerbaijani democratisation. Western World (OSCE) and Russia took interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict only in the initial years of independence. OSCE and Russia played key role in ending the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. But, Now the West and Russia are taking greater interest in other aspects of Azerbaijani life also.

This awakening of interest in Azerbaijan on the part of West and Russia is due to their own geopolitical and economic consideration. Azerbaijan is strategically located between Russia on the one hand and countries like Iran and Turkey on the other hand. It also controls a sizeable outlet to the Caspian Sea. EU and NATO enlargement have now reached the Black Sea. For these bodies, the role of countries like Azerbaijan shall be crucial in getting access to the Caspian Sea and making an inroad into West Asia. The 9/11 incident has further enhanced the geopolitical importance of the country. Bordered as it is by Iran and fired as it is by Azeri nationalism based primarily on religion, it can emerge as a probable hotbed of ‘Islamic terrorism’. Russia is alarmed at this possibility, because of volatile situation in Chechnya. The economic, political and social unrest in the country can be misused by the Islamic fundamentalists to foment anger against West and Russia. Russia and West do not want such situation.

Besides, the West and Russia are also interested in Azerbaijan because of its huge hydrocarbon resource base. In an age when Western world is looking for alternative to West Asia for supply source of hydrocarbon, Azerbaijan is counted among one of the peaceful supply sources of energy in the world. Azerbaijan should utilise this advantage to its favour. West and Russia need Azerbaijan as much as Azerbaijan needs them. Azerbaijan should put its energy resources to optimum use in its own favour. For this, regional cooperation should be encouraged. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was a major step in that direction.

It is because of these geopolitical considerations that the West and the Russia is developing stake in the transition process of Azerbaijan. International financial
institutions like, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and International Development Assistance (IDA) are extending helping hands to the Azerbaijani economy. Russia and the Western countries too are helping in the process of the stabilisation of Azerbaijani economy. These efforts started paying dividends by late 1990s and the economy started looking up a little bit. The task of institution building can be accomplished only when economy is well entrenched in comfort. The second round of political developments, leading to the establishment of a modern democratic order in Azerbaijan in true sense, can begin only in the background of economic development.

In this context it should be noted that poverty and corruption continue to pose serious challenges to any process of democratic consolidation in Azerbaijan. The World Bank estimates that a third of Azerbaijan’s 8.4 million population lived below the poverty line in 2007. The United Nations World Food Programme has estimated that food supplies are uncertain for between 400,000 and 600,000 residents of the country’s rural regions, which contain over 48 percent of the population. Corruption continues to be a pervasive and problematic issue for Azerbaijan, as the auditing capacity of the legislative branch remains weak and government investigations of former officials and civil servants appears to be politically driven. Much worse is the fact that the government maintains a strong presence in anti corruption commissions. Azerbaijan’s rating in the Transparency International’s 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index worsened to 2.1 from 2.4 from the year before, and the country was ranked 150 among the 163 surveyed (near the bottom of the scale, which signifies the highest level of corruption perception).

A major loophole in the whole process of political development of Azerbaijan has been the lack of a vibrant civil society. Civil Society plays tremendous role in closing the gap between the theory and practice of democracy in a transition country. NGOs, independent media, human rights groups, political think tanks etc. are either missing or controlled by the Government in Azerbaijan. By 1995, development on this front was minimal. But after that, gradually some space is being created for the civil society under western and Russian influence. In Azerbaijan, freedom of association is recognized and protected by Article 58 of the Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, which came into force in the country in 2002. While grassroots activity continues
to flourish, the Aliyev administration exerts a dominating influence on civil society organisations, particularly those critical of the government's democratic shortcomings, and the National Assembly has shown little willingness to engage NGOs in the legislative process or invite their input on draft legislation. There are approximately 2,100 NGOs in Azerbaijan. The strongest and most active are concerned with internally displaced persons (IDPs) of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, health and children's issues, human rights, women's rights, and environmental and ecology issues. There are also 74 international aid organizations active in the country, mainly assisting the roughly one million IDPs who have been expelled as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

However, NGO representatives continue to complain about government restrictions, in particular how the government keeps many groups in legal limbo by not registering them officially. Local financial support to NGOs is limited, as the tax code does not allow tax-deductible contributions. Therefore, most NGOs rely primarily on foreign grants to continue their activities. Azerbaijan has a long secular tradition during which religion has not played a central role in political or social life.

Post-independence government policies have aimed at developing a "national Islam" and diminishing Sunni-Shiite cleavages while strengthening the national identity. There are signs, however, that more radical strains of Islam have been developing in Azerbaijan. Many young Azerbaijanis are turning to the Salafi strain of Sunni Islam, a trend that has been attributed partly to the corruption and poor image of the local Shiite clergy, although a more radical version of Shiite Islam promoted by missionaries from Iran is also on the rise.

As far as independent media as an important constituent of civil society is concerned, The National Assembly adopted Azerbaijan's Law on Mass Media in 2000. It guarantees freedom of speech, support for media, access to information, and protection of journalists' rights. In practice, though, Azerbaijan's media sector encounters numerous obstacles to conducting its work and maintaining independence. This is especially true of media that are critical of official corruption and the government's democratic shortcomings. Azerbaijani authorities resist demands by the OSCE and the Council of