

## Azerbaijan national day

## Great reforms help development of society, economy

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AMBASSADOR OF AZERBAIJAN

It is my great pleasure to address the readers of The Japan Times on the occasion of the National Day of the Republic of Azerbaijan — Republic Day — and to extend my warmest and sincere greetings to Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, the Imperial family, the government and the friendly people of Japan, as well as all Azerbaijanis living in Japan.

Located on the western shores of the Caspian Sea, the Republic of Azerbaijan is a transit country between East and West, North and South, and one of the main trade, transport and cultural centers on the historical Great Silk Road.

Azerbaijan was one of the places for Zoroastrianism or so-called fire worshipping. At that time our ancestors believed in natural phenomena: the sun and the moon. The spread of the religion was propagated by the spontaneous ignition of shallow oil deposits and escaping gas.

In the seventh century, Islam was introduced to Azerbaijan. The 12th century marked the emergence of "the age of the Muslim renaissance" in Azerbaijan. This renaissance owed its glory to the literary genius of Nizami Ganjavi, poets like Mahsati Ganjavi, Abu-l Ula Ganjavi, Falaki Shirvani, Khaqani Shirvani, and the architect Ajami Nakhchivani, among others. Azerbaijani literary and architectural masterpieces became an outstanding contribution to the world's cultural heritage.

During the mid-19th century, the oil industry began to flourish in Azerbaijan when Azerbaijan was a part of the Russian Em-

pire. The first industrial oil well was drilled in 1848. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, Baku was producing 95 percent of the Russian Empire's and about 50 percent of the world's oil. Westerners such as the Nobels and Rotchschilds were among the oil magnates of Baku.

The 20th century has entered into the annals of history not only as the century of science and technology, but also as the period of national revivals, collapse of colonial empires and the formation of national states.

Azerbaijan was one of the first countries in the East to establish, on May 28, 1918, the democratic republic with all democratic institutions, including a functioning parliament that gave voting rights to women. It was the first republic in the Muslim East. The international community, including the United States, recognized the sovereignty of the new country. Azerbaijan became one of the first nations in the region to adopt a secular, democratic form of government. It was also at that time that the Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibayov wrote his "Leyli and Majnun," the first opera in the Muslim world. However, the republic lasted for a very short time, ending in 1920.

Azerbaijan gained its independence again in 1991. On Aug. 30, 1991, Azerbaijan's parliament adopted the Declaration on the Restoration of the State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and on Oct. 18, 1991, the Constitutional Act on the State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan was approved. November 1991 marked the beginning of international recognition of Azerbaijan's independence.

In 1992, the country became a member of the United Nations and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), now known as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).



**Largest city:** Located on the southern coast of the Absheron Peninsula, which projects into the Caspian Sea, Baku is the capital and largest port in Azerbaijan. EMBASSY OF AZERBAIJAN

Since regaining its independence in 1991, the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan has been developing a democratic society based on such fundamental principles as the respect for political and civil rights and liberties; the protection of the interests of every citizen irrespective of ethnic, religious or any other affiliation; the division of power; and the rule of law.

Achievements in the field of democratic state-building include political pluralism, more than 600 functioning mass media outlets, the abolition of media censorship in 1998, the development of a civil society with approximately 1,400 non-governmental organizations and the establishment of a modern judiciary system.

Azerbaijan has also joined more than 40 conventions of the Council of Europe, which ensure human rights and democracy. Ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights and its relevant protocols allows Azerbaijani citizens to appeal directly to the European Court of Human Rights. A major step in advancing human rights was the establishment of an independent Office of the Ombudsman (Human Rights Commissioner) in 2002.

It is a symbol of support for our young republic, which has changed dramatically in the past 20 years, and has set very ambitious goals and is striving to achieve them. The changes that have occurred over 20 years have shown that Azerbaijan has

made great progress. We have made great changes in the political system and carried out fundamental political reforms. Today, Azerbaijan is a modern, democratic and open country where all political freedoms — the freedom of the press, the freedom of expression, a free Internet, the freedom of religion — are guaranteed.

We have implemented major economic projects. This has been a very important part of our agenda because we had to move from a planned to a market economy. In 20 years the share of the market economy in our gross domestic product (GDP) has exceeded 80 percent. Today, we can really feel the results of development and economic reforms. In less than 10 years our GDP has tripled. Industrial production has also increased three times. The poverty level has dropped from about 50 percent to 7.6 percent. The unemployment rate is 5.4 percent. We have not been affected by the "Dutch disease" and have diversified our economy in order not to depend on the energy sector.

We will continue our economic reforms because we are seeing their benefits for the population. We are very pleased that international financial institutions support and appreciate the work ongoing in Azerbaijan. Even in the years of the financial recession, the key financial agencies such as Standard & Poor's, Fitch Ratings and Moody's Investors Service upgraded our credit rating.

Today our economy is more competitive than in previous years. Our economic diversification is already a reality. We are now developing the information and communications technology (ICT) sector, creating a space industry. In short, we are building a modern and growing economy. We have set the goal of further doubling the already tripled GDP over the next 10 years and becoming a high-income country.

Of course, our regional initiatives in the political, economic, energy and other areas create a new situation. Our energy initiatives are changing the regional energy map and leading to prosperity and predictability in the region. We want to live in peace

with our neighbors and strengthen cooperation with our friends. Last year, the international community and the U.N. family supported us greatly by electing Azerbaijan as a non-permanent member to the Security Council. Today I want to thank all the countries that supported us. We are proud to have received the support of 155 countries.

We express our gratitude to all the countries that voted in favor of us. It is a symbol of friendship and support, an evaluation of the work we have done at home and globally. It also means tremendous responsibility. In the coming two years we will be sharing this responsibility with our partners in the Security Council. We can assure you that Azerbaijan will be an active and constructive member of the Security Council. After our election, H.E. Ilham Aliyev, president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, made a statement congratulating our people and noting that Azerbaijan would uphold justice and international law in the Security Council. We are committed to these principles and will do everything possible to contribute to peace and international cooperation, stability and development.

#### Diversity, cultural richness

Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. We are proud of that. This is the legacy we have inherited from the past. Regardless of the political system, Azerbaijan has always been a place where religions and peoples came together and lived like one family. We are very proud of the fact that over the 20 years we have not only preserved this important legacy of the past, but have also strengthened the spirit of cooperation, brotherhood and partnership.

We also conduct many international events promoting the idea of multiculturalism and co-existence of peoples of different backgrounds and religions.

Stability and peace in Azerbaijan, as well as its beautiful nature, are important factors that make our country a very attractive tourism destination. In recent years, dozens of four- and five-star hotels and resorts meeting international standards have been built throughout the country. 2011 was declared a year of

tourism in Azerbaijan, which means a large number of tourism projects is going to be implemented in the near future. As a result of all the work we have done, we observe a considerable increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is a country where national traditions are well-preserved. The religious holidays such as Qurban Bayrami (Thanks-Offering Day) and Ramazan Bayrami (End of Fasting) are celebrated as before. The Novruz holiday (the word "novruz" is translated as "a new day") is the most ancient and cherished holiday of a New Year and the coming of spring. It is celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox — March 21-22. Novruz is the symbol of nature's renewal and fertility. Agrarian peoples of the Middle East have been celebrating Novruz since ancient times. Preparations for the holiday start long before the day. People clean their houses, plant trees, make new dresses, paint eggs, make national pastries such as "shakarbura," "pakhlava" (baklava) and a great variety of other national dishes. On the eve of the holiday the graves of relatives are visited and tended. Novruz is a family holiday. In the evening before the holiday the whole family gathers around a festive table laid with various dishes to help bring riches in the New Year. The holiday goes on for several days and ends with festive public dancing and other entertainment by folk bands and local contests of national sports. In rural areas crop holidays are also marked.

The diversity and richness of natural resources in Azerbaijan stimulated the development of handicrafts and home industries: pottery, copperware, saddle-making, cotton, wool, silk manufacturing; carpet weaving; jewelry, wood, stone and metal carving.

The carpet industry is a traditional trade in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani carpet weavers derive their patterns from modern life and classic works of Azerbaijani literature. Carpets made in Azerbaijan are famous all over the world for their uniqueness and high quality. Wood and stone carvings are widely spread

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**Multicultural influences:** Constructed in the 12th century, the Maiden Tower in Baku is a UNESCO World Heritage site. EMBASSY OF AZERBAIJAN



**Traditional:** Azerbaijani carpet weavers derive their patterns from modern life and classic literature. EMBASSY OF AZERBAIJAN



# Azerbaijan national day



**Nature: Azerbaijan is home to a variety of terrain, from forests and mountains, to plains and deserts.** EMBASSY OF AZERBAIJAN

## Regaining independence, growth

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in Azerbaijan, often producing decorative designs for houses. In stone carving and other types of applied art, geometric ornaments and stylized inscriptions of plants are dominant.

Cuisine is something very traditional in the life of Azerbaijanis.

The bread of white wheat flour baked in "tandirs" (oven made of clay in a hole in the earth) is still preferred in villages. "Churek" and "lavash" — thin pancakes — are also baked. Butter, cheese and "katig" (yoghurt) are made from milk. The traditional Azerbaijani dish is "ash" (rice plate) — there are over a hundred variations of it. It is made of rice and goes with different meat, fish, vegetable or fruit seasonings. Meat dishes are flavored with chestnuts, dried apricots, raisins, and green herbs. In the northwestern region, "khingal" is a favorite dish — a flour-based meal with meat, fried onions and "kurut" (a dried cottage cheese). "Dolma" is also a generally widespread dish: ground lamb meat with rice and different spices is wrapped in grape leaves (or occasionally in cabbage). Eggplants, potatoes, pepper, apples are also stuffed with lamb meat. The cuisine of some regions has their peculiarities. In Lankaran, chicken is stuffed with nuts, onions and jelly and then fried on a spit. Fish is also stuffed and baked in a tandir. Apsheron is famous for its "dushpara" (small meat dumplings) and "kutabs," meat patties made in very thin dough. Favorite dishes for the first course are "pity," "kyufta-bosbash" (a clear soup with meatballs, rice, peas and potatoes), "khamrachi" (noodle soup), "dovga" (soup of sour milk and greens). On

holidays and other special occasions various cookies are baked such as shakarbura, a pie of thin dough with nuts and sugar, and pakhlava, a diamond-shaped layered sweet pastry with nuts. The thick syrup "doshab" is made of vine and "tut" (mulberry).

### Relations with Japan

I would also like to stress that we attach great importance to bilateral relations with Japan. This year we are celebrating the 20th year anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries. We cooperate in different spheres and have very strong political, economic and cultural relations based on mutual respect, interests and friendship. The recent official visit of H.E. Ilham Aliyev, president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, to Japan in 2006 greatly contributed to enhancing cooperation in all spheres of bilateral relations. In 20 years these relations have turned into a strategic partnership for both sides. I am confident that the future of our relations will also be very successful and relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Japan will continue to strengthen and develop based on mutual respect, interests and friendship.

At the present time Japan is handling the consequences of the March 11 disaster. From the very beginning of this calamity Azerbaijan has been with Japan and extended its assistance. We believe Japan will overcome this hardship.

Once again, I extend my warmest regards to the readers of The Japan Times and wish prosperity and every success to the people of Japan.



**Azerbaijani food: "Dolma" is ground lamb meat with rice and spices usually wrapped in grape leaves.** EMBASSY OF AZERBAIJAN

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