

By Shain Abbasov

Two months ago, my friend Ulviya told me a frightening story about the events that transpired after her 26-year-old brother was fatally hit by a car in Azerbaijan. “The relatives of the driver first offered compensation to withdraw our claim,” she said. “We refused, but the court finally decided that my brother committed suicide by throwing himself in front of the car, and the guy who killed him avoided punishment. As we found out later, [the driver’s relatives] paid the investigator and judge [17,601 manat] US\$20,000.”

When Azerbaijan obtained independence in the fall of 1991, we young students were full of hope for the future prosperity of our country. No one imagined the difficulties the country would face in its first 15 years of independence.

Today, people face bribery from the day they are born until the day they die. Although a free public health system officially exists, in reality delivering a child in a maternity hospital costs parents between 264 manat and 440 manat (US\$300 and US\$500), depending on the clinic and the doctor’s reputation. The documents marking the first and last moments of one’s life cannot be obtained without money. In addition to the official duty for birth certificates, relatives have to pay so-called *hermet*(respect) fees of nine manat (US\$10) or more to national registry office employees. Worse, bribes must be paid to cemetery administrators for a burial site: At some central cemeteries in the capital city of Baku, these can run up to 2640 manat (US\$3,000).

The 2005 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranked Azerbaijan 137th out of 146 countries. Experts have estimated the cost of corruption in Azerbaijan at several billion dollars per year, a level approaching the country’s total budget of 3.5 billion manat (US\$4 billion) in 2006. This entrenched malfeasance keeps the country’s citizens mired in poverty: The average monthly income in Azerbaijan is only 131 manat (US\$148.50), ranging from 174 manat (US\$198) in Baku to 87 manat (US\$99) in the rest of the country, and some 29 percent of Azerbaijanis live on less than 2 manat (US\$2) per day. One of the main reasons for Azerbaijan’s endemic corruption is its flawed separation of powers. Executive power dominates in this authoritarian country, and the inability of parliamentarians and judicial authorities to resist corruption make them links in a vicious cycle.

Everything in the judicial courts is for sale. Shortening sentences costs about 1,760 manat (US\$2,000) per year. A Supreme Court judge caught in 2005 releasing a prisoner early kept his job, although three justice ministry officials were convicted in the case. Any lawyer will tell you that any court judgment can be fought at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the weight of the

criminal offence or value of disputed property. For example, suspending a traffic accident investigation costs 880 manat (US\$1,000); dismissing a criminal case, 2,200 manat to 3,520 manat (US\$2,500 to US\$4,000); overriding substantial evidence in a judgment, 44,003 manat (US\$50,000).

Azerbaijanis learn about corruption early: Where people around the world pay to be taught, in Azerbaijan they pay to remain uneducated. If a high school student gets a grade of three – equivalent to an American ‘C’ – on his 8th grade final, his parents can pay about 176 manat (US\$200) to upgrade. Prices increase at universities. Depending on the popularity of the university or department, passing an exam or getting a good score costs students between 22 manat and 264 manat (US\$25 and US\$300). Professors who don’t want to waste time have been known to present students with their “price list.” Even well-prepared students often have to pay to get into the next grade.

A student group called the *Dalga* (Wave) Youth Organization conducted a survey of 5,000 students in 2005 that identified bribing as students’ biggest problem. The organization also listed the most corrupt universities in Azerbaijan. “It turned out that only four universities out of about 70 don’t accept bribes,” said *Dalga* leader Ramin Hajili. The survey results inspired *Dalga* to launch a public campaign called “Education without Bribes.”

“We openly blackmailed professors and chancellors through public statements: ‘If you continue to demand bribes we publish the list,’” Hajili said. However, the campaign resulted in some unexpected negative outcomes. “In some universities where professors were threatened, they increased bribe rates because of the increased risk, and now some students call us ‘troublemakers,’” Hajili said.

The Azerbaijani parliament introduced a new anti-corruption law in 2004, and increased penalties for corruption in 2006. Though the Commission on Fighting Corruption was established in 2005, not a single important case has been launched, and most of the cases it has opened appear politically motivated. In one case, a former economic development minister, who was fired and arrested in 2005 for cooperating with opposition forces that were planning a coup, was later accused by the commission of illegally privatizing national companies in the 1990s.

While the oil and gas industry is the most profitable in Azerbaijan, it is also among the least transparent. In 2005, the Baku-based magazine *Hesabat* published figures on office-supply procurement by the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), which provides more than 60 percent of the state’s revenue. Prices

paid under the contract were 10 times higher than market rates: Lamps that cost 0.22 qepik (US\$0.25) at any Baku shop were purchased for about 4 manat (US\$5). Tellingly, the publication did not prompt an investigation and no one was punished.

Some improvements are visible. Azerbaijan's new president, Ilham Aliyev, understands poverty's potential threat to the stability of the ruling elite, so his government has taken steps to improve the country's socio-economic situation. A huge inflow of oil revenues from high oil prices allowed the government to significantly increase state employee wages, decreasing day-to-day corruption. For example, the number of roadside bribes has decreased significantly since traffic police wages tripled in 2005. "Now traffic policemen stop you for real violations, and in most cases they refuse to take bribes and impose a legal fine," said Alekper Aliyev, a taxi driver in Baku.

Getting a new passport or changing an old one used to mean waiting in long lines in front of the police department and paying a 13 manat bribe (US\$15) for quick document processing. When I changed my passport in April 2006, the line was well organized, policemen were helpful and not even small bribes were demanded. However, obtaining my ID card the same month in the local police branch cost about 26 manat (US\$30).

Customs, tax services and the pension system have also reportedly improved. Anarchy no longer reigns at Baku International airport, where customs and border control officers once charged ordinary citizens between nine manat and 132 manat (US\$10 and US\$150) to enter and exit the country.

Though some things have changed for the better, ordinary Azerbaijanis are themselves to blame for the systemic corruption that has become part of their culture. According to one survey, 59.9 percent of people in Azerbaijan admitted to being happy to pay bribes in order to solve their problems quickly. About 90 percent of the Azerbaijani population pay or receive bribes, the survey found.

"I am against paying bribes," said a friend, Farid Arifoglu, who recently had a baby. "But when I was getting a birth certificate for my son, I had to 'thank' an employee of the registrar with [nine manat] US\$10. The mood there is paradoxical. Those who don't pay hermet feel guilty. It's hard to explain, but it's probably an issue of mentality. When it's a happy occasion you have to share your joy, in this case financially."