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Azerbaijan must stop harassment of activists inspired by Egypt protests

Amnesty International has urged the Azerbaijani authorities to stop the harassment of activists, after two members of an opposition youth organization were apparently targeted this week for using Facebook to call for anti-government protests.

Jabbar Savalan, a member of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party's (APFP) youth group, has been jailed for two months pending trial on drugs charges after he posted on Facebook calling for a "Day of Rage" inspired by protests in the Middle East and North Africa.

Elcin Hasanov, also a member of the APFP youth group, was summoned by the police on 9 February, after he posted on Facebook calling for youth action against Jabbar Savalan's detention. The police questioned him and told him to retract his comments and apologize. He has not done so.

"The authorities have already effectively muzzled much of the mainstream media. By clamping down on online activism they are silencing one of the few remaining platforms for the open discussion of critical views in Azerbaijan," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"These drugs charges could be being used as a pretext to punish Jabbar Savalan for his political activism. There is a striking similarity between his case and others in which the Azerbaijani authorities have brought drug-related charges against prominent critics."

Jabbar Savalan, a 20-year-old student, was arrested by police in the city of Sumgayit as he returned home from an APFP meeting on the evening of 5 February, the day after he had posted on Facebook calling for protests to take place in Freedom Square in the capital Baku.

Police searched his home while he was at the meeting, claiming to be acting on an anonymous tip-off.

A month before his arrest Jabbar Savalan had reposted an article critical of Azerbaijan's President on Facebook originally published in a Turkish newspaper. He had also taken part in an anti-government protest on 20 January.

Jabbar Savalan's lawyer said that police officers handcuffed him and forced him into a police car without searching him or giving a reason for his arrest.

He was later searched at the police station, where police say they found 0.74 grams of marijuana in his coat pocket. He was charged with "possessing narcotics with intent to supply."

On 7 February, Sumgayit District Court ordered Jabbar Savalan to spend two months in pre-trial detention. If convicted, he could face a prison sentence of up to three years.

Jabbar Savalan's family and friends say that he has no history of drug use. His lawyer has called for an independent drugs test to be carried out.

The evening of his arrest, Jabbar Savalan was interrogated without a lawyer and pressured into signing a confession which he later retracted.

Jabbar Savalan's lawyer was only allowed to see him two days after his arrest. His family has not been allowed to visit him in detention.

"Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to justify Jabbar Salavan's pre-trial detention or release him immediately, pending a trial in line with international fair trial standards," said John Dalhuisen.

Journalists and civil society activists in Azerbaijan are frequently subjected to threats, harassment and violence and prevented from carrying out their work, sometimes through the excessive use of force by police officers.