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Azerbaijan: No more running scared

2012 EUROVISION HOST COUNTRY AZERBAIJAN MUST ALLOW ALL VOICES TO BE HEARD

"We want an end of corruption, we want to be free, we want our future"
Azerbaijani protester, Spring 2011

Last May, Azerbaijan secured the right to host this year's Eurovision song contest thanks to its winning entry "Running Scared". Only a few months earlier, this is, quite literally, what hundreds of peaceful protesters were doing in downtown Baku, as police violently sought to silence them.

This May Azerbaijan will do its Sunday best as it welcomes thousands of Eurovision visitors and basks in the international attention it will bring. A multi-million dollar PR campaign is seeking to portray the country as modern and progressive. Indeed there are achievements; the country of over 9 million people has adult literacy rates of close to 100 percent and its oil wealth is fuelling an economic boom that is transforming Baku's skyline.

But there is another story. 20 years of independence, economic prosperity and relative stability have failed to translate into greater fundamental freedoms for its citizens, while the consolidation of authoritarian rule under President Aliyev has been largely ignored by the outside world over the last decade.

While Eurovision will offer an opulent stage for voices from across Europe, at home few critical voices are tolerated. Self-censorship has increased. Criticism of the President and leading government figures is frequently punished - whether it is voiced through politics, journalism, satire, activism, education, or even social networking websites. This crackdown on dissenting opinion is being facilitated by a muted response from members of the international community, whose eyes would appear to be more firmly fixed on petro-dollars and energy security than the rights of ordinary Azeris.

Peaceful anti-government protest has effectively been criminalized by banning demonstrations and imprisoning those who organize and take part in them. Police use excessive force to break up peaceful, but officially unsanctioned demonstrations. Threats and intimidation against human rights defenders have been used together with legislative and administrative means to shut down and deny registration to civil society groups working on democracy and human rights.

Journalists have been beaten, ill-treated and abducted, while the range of independent media outlets has been curbed through laws banning foreign broadcasters from national airwaves.

New methods of exercising the right to freedom of expression, such as the internet and social

media, are also under siege. Bloggers and youth activists have been harassed and imprisoned on trumped-up charges. The government is currently considering ways to control and monitor internet use.

As frustration with these increasingly tight controls grew, hundreds of people gathered in the streets in March and April 2011 demanding democratic reform and greater respect for human rights.

The authorities of Azerbaijan suppressed these nascent signs of popular protest with a new wave of repression and intimidation. Following the protests, 14 people were convicted for organizing and/or participating in the anti-government rallies. The authorities also used trumped up charges to arrest and imprison three activists; two young members of the opposition and a human rights defender.

Youth activist Jabbar Savalan was released on 26 December 2011 after an international campaign on his behalf, but Amnesty International still counts 16 prisoners of conscience who remain behind bars following the spring protests.

Prisoners of conscience

Two activists who called for the protest using their face book page have been imprisoned following unfair trials:

On 5 February 2011, opposition youth activist Jabbar Savalan was arrested one day after calling for protests online and re-posting an article critical of the government on Facebook. He said he was beaten while in police custody into signing a false confession and was sentenced to over two years in prison on fabricated charges of drugs possession. He was released on 26 December 2011 following a Presidential pardon.

On 18 May 2011, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, another opposition activist who called for an online protest on 11 March, was convicted of evading military service and sentenced to two years in prison. He had been arrested three times since he had stood in parliamentary elections in 2010.

Those who took part in the peaceful protests expressing discontent with government and calling for reforms and respect for human rights shared a similar fate; following the protests in the spring of 2011, activists and members of opposition political parties were convicted of “organizing and participating in public disorder” and sentenced to up to three years in prison following unfair trials. No evidence was presented to show that any of those imprisoned was engaged in anything more than the legitimate exercise of their rights when seeking to organise a protest rally that had been unreasonably and unlawfully prohibited.

In addition, trumped-up charges not directly related to their participation in the protests were brought against a human rights defender and an opposition leader. They remain imprisoned following unfair trials:

*On 31 March 2011, Shahin Hasanli, one of the protest organizers, was arrested and charged with illegal possession of pistol bullets. On 22 July he was convicted and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The prosecutors at his trial failed to present any evidence that he was in possession of any firearms at the time of his arrest.

*On 27 August 2011, human rights defender and former parliamentary candidate Vidadi Isgandarov was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly interfering with the 2010 parliamentary elections, charges that had been dropped for lack of evidence in 2010.

Freedom of expression - journalists

Journalists continue to be targeted with impunity. Independent and opposition journalists faced increased violence during the protests and were prevented from carrying out their work.

To date there have been no effective investigations into several violent attacks on journalists and no one has been brought to justice.

*On 26 March 2011, Seymur Haziyeu, a journalist with opposition newspaper *Azadliq*, was reportedly abducted and beaten by six masked assailants. He reported that his abductors warned him against writing articles critical of the President.

* On 2 April 2011, several journalists covering the anti-government protests were detained. They reported that law enforcement officials prevented them from photographing and interviewing protest participants.

*On 3 April 2011, another *Azadliq* journalist, Ramin Deko was reportedly abducted, warned not to write articles critical of the President and physically assaulted.

Freedom of assembly

The city authorities formally prohibit public gatherings in the centre of Baku on the grounds that it disturbs the leisure activities and normal functioning of commercial entities. Protesters in Baku are only allowed to assemble in officially designated areas, most of which are outside the city centre and cut off from the fabric of daily life in the capital. Even here, however, opposition political parties and anti-government protesters have been banned from holding demonstrations - effectively criminalizing the protests that took place in March and April 2011, and which led to the imprisonment of many of those who organized and took part in them.

*On 11 March 2011, police dispersed about 100 people attempting to rally in the capital city Baku and arrested 43 people. The police also detained and harassed individuals who tried to disseminate information about the protests before the event.

*On 12 March 2011, police broke up peaceful protests of 300 people in the centre of Baku, after applications to hold the demonstration in authorised locations were rejected by the city authorities. Some 100 protesters were detained and 30 were sentenced to between five and eight days in prison in summary trials lasting 10 to 15 minutes.

*On 2 April 2011, another banned opposition protest in central Baku of some 1,000 participants was violently broken up by police using shields, truncheons, and rifles to beat and arrest protesters. Some 174 people were detained both before and after the protest; 60 people received from five to 10 days of administrative detention and four organizers were jailed for up to three years.

Freedom of association

NGOs working on democratic reform and human rights issues face pressure and harassment and are often denied registration or closed on arbitrary grounds:

*On 4 March 2011, three local NGOs located in Ganja, the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, Demos Public Association and the Ganja Regional Information Centre, were evicted from their premises by the authorities without any formal explanation or apparent legal grounds.

*The branches of two international organizations, the National Democratic Institute and the Human Rights House in Baku were shut down on 7 March and 10 March respectively on the grounds that they had failed to comply with registration requirements.

*On 11 August the office of Leyla Yunus, director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy was destroyed, days after she had spoken against the government-endorsed forced evictions and the demolition of buildings in central Baku as part of a reconstruction project. The demolition began without any prior notice and despite a court order banning any demolition attempts on the property before 13 September 2011.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and ill-treatment remains an issue of concern in Azerbaijan. Several activists detained at and after the protests in March and April 2011 complained of ill-treatment at the moment of their arrest and subsequently while in police custody. To date, none of these allegations have been effectively investigated.

*Bakhtiyar Hajiyev alleged that he had been ill-treated and threatened with rape while in police custody in March, but his allegations were dismissed by authorities without effective investigation.

*Tural Abbasli, leader of the youth wing of the opposition Musavat Party, maintained that he had been beaten when arrested on 2 April and again while in custody in Yasamal district police station in Baku.

*Tazakhan Miralamli, of the opposition Popular party, was allegedly beaten with batons by the police while being taken into custody on 2 April. His left eye was badly injured. He maintains that he was beaten again in the Sabail district police department before being taken to hospital, where, in addition to the injury to his eye, he was diagnosed with a broken finger, kidney problems and extensive soft tissue damage.

Background

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the conflict with neighbouring Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh exploded into outright war. Public anger over military setbacks swept away the government of Azerbaijan's first president Ayaz Mutalibov, the former leader of Soviet Azerbaijan. The country's first and only genuinely contested elections were held in 1992, which brought former dissident Abufaz Elchibey to power. However, continued failures in the war and chaos throughout the country led soldiers to rebel, and President Elchibey fled the capital a year later. He was replaced by Heydar Aliyev, who had been in charge of Soviet Azerbaijan between 1969 and 1982.

The war with Armenia led to the internal displacement of some 600,000 people in Azerbaijan. Armenian troops occupied large areas of Azerbaijan. President Heydar Aliyev signed a ceasefire with Armenia in 1994 that remains in place today. He also began the large-scale exploitation of Azerbaijan's oil and gas riches, signing deals with western consortia that paved the way for much of the country's current economic growth.

In October 2003, following Heydar Aliyev's death, his son Ilham Aliyev formally assumed office after an election that was widely criticized by international observers. The judiciary is beholden to the executive, and the weak parliament is dominated by members of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party.

See also:

[Jailed Azerbaijani youth activist freed](#) (AI Index: PRE01/647/2011)

[The spring that never blossomed: freedoms suppressed in Azerbaijan](#) (EUR 55/011/2011)

[Azerbaijan: Don't let them be silenced: Azerbaijani activists imprisoned for speaking out](#) (EUR 55/010/2011)

[Azerbaijan: Discrimination and segregation compound problems of internal displacement for hundreds of thousands of people](#) (EUR 55/012/2007)

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