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## **Azerbaijan: Opposition candidate arrested ahead of Presidential elections**

Azerbaijan authorities must release two opposition leaders facing what Amnesty International believes to be trumped up charges of organizing rioting in the town of Ismayili.

The riots started a day before their arrival and carried on for two more days after they visited Ismayili to monitor the situation.

Arrested on 4 February, Presidential candidate Ilgar Mammadov and activist Tofiq Yagublu were remanded yesterday in custody for two months pending trial, during a closed hearing.

“The case has all the hallmarks of a politically motivated prosecution” said David Diaz-Jogeix, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“Ilgar Mammadov and Tofiq Yagublu have been jailed on charges of starting a riot that had begun spontaneously, before they even set foot in town. The prosecution so far has not presented any evidence supporting these charges.”

Both opposition leaders have been charged with organizing and participating in ‘mass disorder’ and ‘violently resisting police’ - charges which together could carry sentences of up to ten years imprisonment. According to the lawyers, no evidence has been presented to prove that the accused have committed a crime or incited others to do so.

The riots were sparked on 23 January by a road rage incident in which the influential nephew of the local governor is reported to have drunkenly assaulted a local man and shouted insults at onlookers.

A crowd gathered around the incident before attacking the family’s businesses and police. Others took to the streets calling for the city governor’s resignation.

The following evening Ilgar Mammadov, leader of the opposition group REAL (Republican Alternative) and candidate in Azerbaijan’s October 2013 Presidential elections, travelled to Ismayili. His lawyer told Amnesty International he went to investigate the underlying tensions which led to the unrest and to monitor the reaction of local authorities.

Tofiq Yagublu, a journalist and the deputy chair of the opposition Musavat Party, travelled separately to Ismayili to report on the events for the Yeni Musavat newspaper. Tofiq Yagublu had published several articles in Yeni Musavat aiming to expose government corruption.

The two activists have no history of advocating or inciting violence. They are both well-known critics of President Ilham Aliyev’s government.

Ilgar Mammadov has long criticized the government’s clampdown on free expression and peaceful assembly and said he had recently received threats from ruling party MPs for criticising a new law that drastically increased fines for participation in unsanctioned protests.

Days of unrest in Ismayili were met with hundreds of arrests and violent repression by police, and followed by allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention. To date, there has been no investigation into these allegations.

The Ismayili protests prompted peaceful demonstrations in the capital Baku on 26 January, where scores of protesters were dispersed and arrested by the police using excessive force. Five were subsequently tried unfairly, convicted, and sentenced to prison time.

“Following the recent rejection of a resolution on Azerbaijani political prisoners at the Council of Europe, Amnesty International fears that the Azerbaijani authorities are becoming increasingly bold in their repression of dissent ahead of this year’s presidential elections,” said Diaz-Jogeix.