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Azerbaijan: Another prominent human rights defender thrown behind the bars

Rasul Jafarov, a founder of the Human Rights Club (HRC) and a coordinator of the human rights campaign during 2012 Eurovision song contest hosted by Azerbaijan, was arrested on 2 August.

The same day, Baku court sentenced him to three months pre-trial detention, on charges of tax evasion (article 213 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan), illegal business (article 192) and “abuse of authority” (article 308.2). Jafarov had already been subject to travel ban prior to these charges.

Rasul Jafarov is facing criminal charges for his work as a human rights defender. He has been deprived of freedom in connection with his attempts to exercise his right to freedom of expression and association.

Background

Since its establishment in 2010, Azerbaijani authorities have been preventing Rasul Jafarov from registering his NGO on arbitrary grounds. The authorities are now using this to instigate a criminal case against him based on alleged financial irregularities.

His detention follows the arrest of another prominent human rights defender, Leyla Yunus, on similar charges on 30 July 2014. On 26 May 2014, Anar Mammadli, chairman, and Bashir Suleymanli, executive director of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, were sentenced to respectively 5 years and 6 months imprisonment and 3 years and 6 months on the same charges.

Independent human rights and pro-democracy organisations have long faced harassment and restrictions in Azerbaijan. The refusal to register NGOs leaves their leaders with no choice but to operate outside the strict legal framework, which is later used by the authorities as a pretext for their criminal prosecution. Rasul Jafarov is the fifth person to be prosecuted on these grounds in the last four months.

Amnesty International considers Rasul Jafarov to be a prisoner of conscience. There are no fewer than 20 other civil society activist in Azerbaijan who are POCs.

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