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Azerbaijan: human rights campaigner sentenced to years in prison

Azerbaijani prisoner of conscience, founder of the NGO Human Rights Club (HRC), Rasul Jafarov who has been in detention since August 2014, has been sentenced to six-and-a-half years' imprisonment today.

Rasul Jafarov is a high-profile human rights campaigner and outspoken critic of the Azerbaijani authorities. In 2012, he coordinated an impressive "Sing for Democracy" human rights campaign in Azerbaijan, which used the Eurovision Song contest, held in the capital Baku, as a platform to draw international attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in the country.

Rasul Jafarov is among scores of human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, bloggers and politicians prosecuted on trumped-up charges in the latest wave of a clampdown on dissent in Azerbaijan. He was arrested on 2 August 2014. The same day a court in Baku approved his remand for three months, which was later extended. Rasul Jafarov was charged with tax evasion, illegal business and "abuse of authority" and later with embezzlement and forgery.

In recent years Azerbaijan's legislation on NGOs has become increasingly restrictive and used to hinder their work. Several NGOs, particularly those working on human rights, have been arbitrarily denied registration. This has severely restricted their operations and fundraising opportunities, effectively confining their work to areas not expressly forbidden by law. The latest changes to the NGO legislation, introduced in early 2014, closed off the few remaining opportunities for unregistered NGOs to operate. Moreover, the changes were effectively applied retrospectively and used as a basis for criminal charges subsequently levelled against high-profile independent NGO leaders.

The new amendments to NGO legislation, which came into effect on 3 February 2014, introduced compulsory registration of donations for unregistered NGOs. Rasul Jafarov has not received any donations for HRC after this date. In previous years, starting in 2010, he had repeatedly applied for official registration for HRC, which was denied every time on insubstantial grounds. The prosecution also argued that Rasul Jafarov had abused "official authority" by acting as a legal representative on behalf of HRC.

Amnesty International considers Rasul Jafarov a prisoner of conscience. He has been jailed solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression, in connection with his outspoken criticism of the Azerbaijani government's appalling human rights record.

There are currently at least 20 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan, languishing in prison or in detention awaiting trial following trumped up charges ranging from fraud and embezzlement to abuse of drugs and even treason. All prisoners of conscience, including Rasul Jafarov, should be immediately and unconditionally released.

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