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Azerbaijan in downward spiral of oppression ahead of presidential elections

Harassment, intimidation, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, fabricated charges and unfair trials are all part of the arsenal the Azerbaijani authorities are employing in a downward spiral of oppression in the run up to the 9 October 2013 presidential elections, said Amnesty International.

“With new arrests of civil society activists reported almost daily, it’s hard to keep up with the sheer number and the speed at which dissenters are being persecuted at the moment,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Europe and Central Asia Director. “The persecution is so widespread and frequent it’s difficult to assess just how bad the current situation really is.”

“We have already adopted no fewer than 14 people as prisoners of conscience. These people are currently behind bars solely for expressing their views or taking peaceful action.”

In its new report published today, [Downward spiral: Continuing crackdown on freedoms in Azerbaijan](#), the organization documents and analyses how the government has been intimidating and silencing critics ever since the widespread protests in March and April 2011.

The report documents how the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media, critical and pro-democracy groups and opposition parties have come under attack:

- Independent media is silenced by the refusal of broadcasting licenses, the imposition of heavy fines for alleged defamation, and the harassment and occasional beating of journalists.
- NGOs are suffocating under excessive administrative regulation and unclear requirements which the authorities use arbitrarily to deny them registration, limiting their ability to secure funding.
- Civil society activists, opposition politicians and independent journalists are regularly targeted with arbitrary arrests and prosecutions on fabricated charges, especially in the run-up to the elections.

“This wholesale crackdown calls into question the value of holding an election. People must be free to form their opinion and share it with others; be free to protest when they see their rights violated, and be free to do so jointly with others. None of this is allowed in Azerbaijan, and those who dare, pay a heavy price with their personal safety and freedom. This must stop, said John Dalhuisen. “The government of Azerbaijan must immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience.”

Azerbaijan is a party to all key human rights treaties which protect the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, amongst other fundamental human rights. It is also a member of the Council of Europe, and an important trading partner for many of its members.

However, its international partners appear to have little traction. Concerns voiced by Azerbaijan’s international partners over the “continued pressure” on activists, civil society and independent media have been rejected by the Azerbaijani authorities.

“Azerbaijan should put an end to the harassment and suppression of civil society and independent

media. The international community must do everything in its power to ensure that the government of Azerbaijan fully respects and adheres to its obligations under international law,” said John Dalhuisen

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