

AI Index: PRE01/571/2011
16 November 2011

International community must act on Azerbaijan crackdown

"We want an end of corruption, we want to be free, we want our future" Azerbaijani activist

The international community must not turn a blind eye to human rights violations in Azerbaijan, Amnesty International said today in a new report cataloguing a clampdown on dissent since protests erupted in March.

The spring that never blossomed: Freedoms suppressed in Azerbaijan, details a wave of intimidation and arrests around protests against corruption and the increasing suppression of independent media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and opposition parties.

Since then, youth activists and opposition figures have been jailed on arbitrary or trumped up charges while journalists and human rights defenders have been threatened and harassed.

Amnesty International considers 17 people convicted around the time of the protests to be prisoners of conscience and asks for their immediate release.

"The clampdown has sent out a clear and calculated message - that public expression of dissent will not be tolerated, and nor will any attempt to galvanise public opinion against the current regime," said Natalia Nozadze, Amnesty International's Azerbaijan researcher.

"The European Union and other international partners of Azerbaijan must take every opportunity to press for the release of the prisoners of conscience and to put an end to the suppression of peaceful protest, critical opinion and political opposition."

Hundreds of people gathered in the streets of the capital Baku in March and April this year demanding democratic reforms and greater respect for human rights. Inspired by mass protests in the Middle East and North Africa, opposition activists used social media to organize and disseminate information.

The Azerbaijani authorities responded by banning the protests and harassing and arresting bloggers and activists.

Following the protests 14 activists and members of opposition political parties were convicted of "organising and participating in public disorder" and sentenced to up to 3 years in prison. Amnesty International believes that there is no evidence that any of the imprisoned opposition supporters were engaged in anything more than the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association in seeking to organise peaceful protests in central Baku.

The crackdown intensified the already heavy-handed approach of the authorities.

Criminal and civil defamation charges continue to be used to silence critical media, while foreign media outlets were banned from national airwaves in 2009.

Ganimat Zahid, the editor of pro-opposition newspaper Azadlig told Amnesty International: “The government is tightening the noose on any form of communication by restricting access to information, printing paper and distribution outlets for independent media thus leaving the public in informational black-out. Increasingly, we rely on social media to fill the vacuum for informed debate.”

The government is also currently considering laws that could potentially restrict web users’ access to information and criminalizing “misinformation”, further restricting online freedom of expression.

“The cumulative effect of these practices, together with the long-standing impunity of the authorities for such actions, has instilled a climate of fear and self-censorship in Azerbaijani society, which is stalling, indeed reversing, the country’s transition to a stable democracy,” said Natalia Nozadze.

“In oil-rich Azerbaijan, 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 over the last decade has been largely ignored by the outside world.”

“The Azerbaijan authorities must reverse this trend and their international partners must make it clear that they will not do deals with those who carry out human rights violations.”

Cases

In February 2011, history student and opposition activist Jabbar Savalan was arrested after re-posting critical of the government articles on Facebook and using the social media to call for protests inspired by those in the Middle East and North Africa. He was beaten while in police custody to force him to sign a false confession and was sentenced to over two years in prison for the alleged possession of marijuana. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, an opposition activist and co-founder of the Facebook group calling for the 11 March virtual protest against government corruption and oppression, was arrested three times starting in November 2010 for evading conscription and failing to register with the police. While in police custody he was punched and threatened with rape, allegations which have not been investigated. On 18 May 2011, Bakhtiyar was convicted of evading military service and convicted to two years in prison. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.