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Clampdown on activists intensifies in Azerbaijan ahead of 2 April protests

Against the background of popular uprisings in the Arab world, attempts at online activism and public expressions of political discontent in Azerbaijan have been violently suppressed, further curtailing civil and political freedoms in the country.

Ahead of a 2 April protest organized by opposition political parties through Facebook, the authorities have today detained at least 11 prominent political activists, echoing the pre-emptive methods they used to suppress protests on 11 and 12 March.

The wave of arrests began on 29 March when Nazim Abbasli from the Azerbaijan Democrat Party was arrested and given five days' administrative detention.

Today two members of the youth wing of opposition party Musavat, Elchin Salimov and Rauf Mammadov, were arrested today by police and questioned about the 2 April rally. Elchin Samalov was sentenced to seven days administrative detention.

Police have also questioned the family of Musavat member Idris Emiraslanli in an attempt to ascertain his whereabouts.

Deputy Chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) Ilham Huseynli, APFP members Karim Mehdiyev, Mehdi Mehdiyev and Nemat Aliyev, Classical Popular Front Party member Yagub Babanli, and youth activists Khalid Amanli, Rovshan Nasili, and Tabriz Qasimov were all arrested today and remained in custody this evening.

Ilham Huseynli, Nemat Aliyev, Tabriz Qasimov and Mehdi Mehdiyev have already been given sentences ranging between five and seven days' administrative detention. They were convicted of "resisting police" or "disturbing the public order" despite the fact that the protests had yet to take place. Amnesty International is concerned that the trials were held behind closed doors.

When asked by Amnesty International about the recent arrests, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Internal Affairs said they were aware of them but refused to comment. Local rights groups and opposition political parties are concerned that arrests will continue in the days leading up to 2 April.

Meanwhile government supporters held a spontaneous rally outside the home of opposition leader Ali Karimli. The crowd chanted that he was a traitor and a homosexual, while police stood by and watched.

Young activists' calls for a protest on March 11 were similarly blocked by the authorities. Several youth activists who posted the announcement of the protest on the internet were arrested on questionable charges and convicted in trials that reportedly failed to meet international standards.

A peaceful protest organized by opposition parties on 12 March was violently dispersed in the capital Baku after the organizers were unreasonably denied permission to gather in a central square. Scores were detained and several beaten.

The latest call for protests on 2 April has met with a new wave of violence and intimidation directed against activists and journalists. As the environment inside Azerbaijan becomes ever more hostile towards all dissenting opinion, new cases of harassment of Azeri journalists and activists living abroad have sent chilling messages to those who thought they could express their opinions safely.

Attacks on Journalists

On 26 March Seymur Haziyeu, a journalist with opposition newspaper *Azadliq*, was abducted and beaten by six masked assailants.

Seymur Haziyeu told Amnesty International that he had been abducted as he was returning home from work to his village near Baku around midnight on 26 March. According to Seymur Haziyeu, six masked men approached him in a minivan, covered his head with a sack and forced him into the vehicle. He said the assailants beat him inside the minivan, after which they drove him to a house 25 minutes away and continued beating him. They took both his mobile phones and damaged his laptop before leaving him near the village of Binagadi at around 2:30 a.m.

At a 28 March press conference in Baku Seymur Haziyeu presented a medical certificate documenting soft tissue injuries to his chest and neck. Local human rights groups met with the Ministry for Internal Affairs, who say they have appointed a senior police officer to investigate the incident.

Seymur Haziyeu maintains that the attack against him is linked to his activities as an opposition activist, as well as some of the critical articles he has written as a columnist for *Azadliq*. "They told me to be smart and live quietly like everyone else in this country or I might face a tragic outcome in the future", he said.

Seymur Haziyeu said he had been threatened and beaten several times in recent years because of his articles criticizing President Ilham Aliyev. Seymur Haziyeu told Amnesty International that he had previously been arrested for participating in an opposition rally in May 2010 and beaten at a police detention centre, where police officers threatened him with worse if he continued writing articles critical of the government.

On March 18 another journalist and contributor to *Azadliq*, Fakhraddin Hajibeyli, was brutally assaulted in Berlin. He was admitted to hospital the same day with severe injuries.

Fakhraddin Hajibeyli told Amnesty International that at around 11pm during Novruz (advent of spring) celebrations in Berlin, he was approached by Tofiq Garayev, the head of Azerbaijan House in Germany, which is funded by the Azerbaijani government and operates under the patronage of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Berlin. Tofiq Garayev began to question Fakhraddin Hajibeyli about his article "Diaspora Equation", published in *Azadliq* on 8 April 2010. The article questioned the effectiveness of Azeri diaspora organizations in Germany, after they did not succeed in mobilizing enough people to conduct a large-scale demonstration in Berlin related to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Tofiq Garayev reportedly insulted Fakhraddin Hajibeyli and punched him in the face, at which point 10 other men surrounded him and started to beat him. The assailants continued beating him until he lost consciousness, after which they left him on the ground. He was later taken to hospital, where he spent five days suffering from broken ribs and concussion. Police in Berlin have interrogated Tofiq Garayev but not yet charged anyone with the assault.

Harassment of social network activists

Jabbar Savalan, a 20-year-old student, was arrested in Sumgayit on 5 February, after he posted on Facebook calling for a “Day of Rage” in Baku, echoing the calls for protest in the Middle East and North Africa.

He was arrested without explanation, taken to a police station and searched. Police claim to have discovered 0.74g of marijuana in his pocket and questioned him without a lawyer over the weekend, during which time police induced Jabbar Savalan to sign a confession which he has since retracted.

Friends and relatives of Jabbar Savalan insist that he had no previous history of drug use. A sample of Jabbar Savalan’s blood tested after his arrest revealed no traces of drug use. Despite this he has been remanded in custody for two months pending his trial. He faces a prison sentence of up to two years.

Youth activists responsible for organizing virtual protests on 11 March have met with a heavy handed response from the government. While most of the official creators of the 11 March Facebook protest page were Azerbaijani youth residing abroad, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a youth activist and reportedly the only official organizer of the 11 March protest living in Azerbaijan, was detained on 4 March for allegedly breaching a court order not to leave his native town of Ganja. The court order was put in place pending his trial for evasion of military service. Upon his arrest, he was questioned by police about the opinions he expressed on Facebook.

Recently, however, harassment and threats to online activists have increased in recent months, extending even to those living abroad.

Elnur Majidli, an activist living in Strasbourg and one of the founders of the 11 March and 2 April Facebook protests, told Amnesty International that he had received death threats by phone from Baku, as well as from some Azerbaijanis living in France. Prior to the 11 March protest he received a threatening phone call from a person introducing himself as Rzayev, who claimed to be from the General Prosecutor’s Office in Baku. He has reported the death threats to the police in Strasbourg.

Harassment of human rights organizations

The authorities have also targeted two international organizations working on human rights and democracy by claiming they fail to comply with registration requirements. These ‘failures to comply’ have resulted in demands by the authorities to immediately suspend all activity.

For example, on 10 March the Azerbaijani branch of Norwegian organization Human Rights House received a letter from the Ministry of Justice demanding the organization cease operations on the grounds that it was in breach of June 2009 amendments to the Law on Nongovernmental Organizations. Human Rights House had already been visited by police on 10 February, who threatened to evict them from their premises. The incident took place shortly after the organization hosted a press conference about the arrest and detention of Jabbar Savalan. Police have since warned the staff of Human Rights House Azerbaijan not to enter their offices.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the increase in the number of incidents of harassment and violence against civil society activists and journalists in Azerbaijan. The trend appears to illustrate the determination of Azerbaijani authorities to clampdown on any forms of critical dissent.

Amnesty International urges the Azerbaijani authorities to respect their obligation to guarantee freedom of expression in Azerbaijan and to take immediate action to end the harassment of activists and journalists by police, officials and non-state actors.

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