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Azerbaijani bloggers lose appeal against fabricated charges

Amnesty International has accused the Azerbaijani government of stifling dissent after a court turned down an appeal by two bloggers against their conviction on fabricated charges of “hooliganism”.

A Baku court on Wednesday upheld the convictions of Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli who were sentenced to two and to two and a half years respectively after they posted a video critical of the government on YouTube. Amnesty International believes their trial was unfair and that the two are prisoners of conscience.

“Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli have fallen victim to the increasingly repressive measures taken by the Azerbaijani authorities to crackdown on critics of the government,” said Andrea Huber, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“They were convicted on fabricated charges in a trial falling short of international standards for fairness solely because they were expressing their views.”

In none of the seven appeal hearings were the two key witnesses called to give evidence. The appeal court upheld the original court decision to reject evidence without explanation, including photographs of the bloggers’ injuries and video footage of the incident.

The bloggers were arrested on 8 July 2009 after they were attacked by two unknown men and were accused of “hooliganism”.

The two activists have used online networking tools, including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, to spread information about society and politics in Azerbaijan.

Emin Milli is the co-founder of an online community that discusses politics called Alumni Network, while Adnan Hajizade is a co-ordinator of the youth movement known as OL!, which advocates non-violence and tolerance.

A week before their arrest a video produced by Adnan Hajizade had been posted on video sharing channel YouTube.

The video is of a spoof press conference delivered by a donkey and was posted in the wake of a news story about how the Azerbaijani government had allegedly spent hundreds of thousands of dollars importing donkeys from Germany, in a deal that may have masked corruption or theft of public funds.

The video questions the purchase of the donkeys, the introduction of restrictive legislation for NGOs and the low priority the government attributes to human rights.

“Independent journalists and activists continue to face harassment and imprisonment in Azerbaijan despite the country’s international obligations to uphold the right to freedom of expression,” Andrea Huber said.