

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: PRE 01/495/2011

3 October 2011

Azerbaijan: Opposition activists sentenced over peaceful protests

The Azerbaijani authorities must immediately release three leading opposition activists imprisoned for organizing and taking part in peaceful protests, Amnesty International said today after a court in Baku sentenced them to two and a half years each in prison on Monday.

Arif Hajili, Chairman of the Musavat Party, Tural Abbasli, head of Musavat's Youth Organization and Mahammad Majidli, of the Popular Front Party (PFP) were convicted of "promoting social disorder" after taking part in a pro-reform protest on 2 April, which was violently dispersed by police.

"Today, few critical voices are tolerated in Azerbaijan. Increasingly, the government is targeting leading activists in an attempt to silence the opposition, and in the hope that making examples out of the most outspoken will dissuade others from speaking out," said Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International's Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"These men are being locked up simply for taking part in a peaceful demonstration calling for political reform and an end to government corruption. This systematic harassment and imprisonment of opposition activists and anyone who dares to speak out against President Aliyev's government must end," she said.

"The convictions Arif Hajili, Tural Abbasli and Mahammad Majidli must be overturned and they should be released immediately and unconditionally," she added.

A fourth opposition activist, deputy chairman of the PFP Fuad Gahramanly was given a suspended two-year prison sentence. The judge ruled that he be placed under house arrest for two years.

"This judgment is completely unjust and politically motivated," Fuad Gahramanly told Amnesty International.

"Being convicted of criminal charges without any proof and receiving the heaviest penalties shows that in practice, freedom of assembly is considered a criminal offence by the authorities," he added.

No journalists or opposition party members were allowed into the court. Several police officers surrounded the building, while a large crowd of supporters for the four men gathered in front of the court building.

Tural Abbasli, 29, was arrested during the 2 April protests and says he was beaten while in custody.

His lawyer, Anar Gasimov, was not allowed to see him for the first two days of his detention and said that when he finally managed to visit his client at the police station, he had visible bruises around his eyes and on his hands.

According to his lawyer, no evidence has been presented against him other than his party membership.

Arif Hajili, 49, told the court that the police had physically abused him during his arrest on 2 April, despite offering no resistance whatsoever in their attempt to arrest him.

Mahammad Majidli says police dragged him to a bus and sprayed him with teargas. He was then held at the Sabail District Police Department in Baku for 30 hours without water, he told the court.

Amnesty International considers the three imprisoned activists to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

2011 has seen a marked increase in the number of people in Azerbaijan prosecuted on trumped-up charges in response to their attempts to speak out against an authoritarian and corrupt government.

The overwhelming majority of these individuals are convicted after unfair trials and sentenced to long prison terms.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org
International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK