URGENT ACTION

FREE PROMINENT OPPOSITION LEADER

On 14 December 2023, the Azerbaijani authorities arrested a prominent opposition figure and unrelenting government critic, Tofig Yagublu, on spurious forgery and fraud charges. A wave of arrests in Azerbaijan that has been targeting independent journalists has now come for one of the country's most vocal opposition leaders. On 15 December, a court placed Tofig Yagublu in pre-trial detention for four months, which has been extended since. He denies all charges, he is being targeted because of his opposition activities.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President of Azerbaijan
Ilham Aliyev
Office of the President of Azerbaijan
19 Istiqlaliyyat Street
Baku AZ1066, Azerbaijan
Email: office@pa.gov.az

Dear President,

I am writing to draw your attention to prosecution of Tofig Yagublu, a prominent opposition figure, former journalist and outspoken government critic in Azerbaijan. He is a member of the Musavat Party and a senior politician in the National Council of Democratic Forces – a coalition of opposition parties and activists in Azerbaijan.

On 14 December 2023, police arrested Tofig Yagublu as he was exiting the metro in central Baku. They later claimed to have found 5,000 euros, 2,500 manats, and an unspecified amount of US dollars in his family's home. According to his daughter, Nigar Hazi, the money had been planted by authorities. Tofig Yaqublu was charged with fraud (Article 178.3.2 of the Criminal Code), forgery of a document (Article 320.1) and use of counterfeit documents (Article 320.2).

On 15 December 2023, the Narimanov District Court of Baku issued an order to hold Yagoblu in pretrial detention for a period of four months, which has been subsequently extended.

This is not the first time Tofig Yagublu has been detained on dubious charges. Tofig Yagublu has been arrested and subjected to ill-treatment for his political activism and criticism of government for more than a decade now.

I urge you to take necessary steps that will ensure Tofig Yagublu's immediate and unconditional release. I also urge you to end the misuse of the criminal justice system in Azerbaijan to target criticism and dissent.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Tofig Yagublu is a prominent opposition figure, a former journalist and an outspoken government critic in Azerbaijan. He is a member of the Musavat Party and a senior politician in the National Council of Democratic Forces – a coalition of opposition parties and activists. Yagublu has faced years in harassment for his peaceful activism and was recently arrested again as part of a series of arrests in Azerbaijan targeting independent journalists and government critics.

On 14 December 2023, police arrested Tofig Yagublu as he was exiting the metro in central Baku. The same day, about 20 police officers searched Yagublu's home, where they claim to have found €5,000 (about US$ 5,500), 2,500 Azerbaijani manat (about US$ 1,500) and an unspecified amount in US dollars. During the search, officers led Tofig Yagublu's wife Maya, who was home alone, upstairs, while others stayed downstairs. After searching upstairs, they went to the bedroom, told her to lift the pillows, and found the cash. The authorities allege that Yagublu conspired with someone else to provide fake documents to a third party to supposedly help him build an asylum claim.

On 15 December, the Narimanov District Court of Baku ordered to remand Yahublu in pretrial custody pending investigation on forgery and fraud charges, contending that Yagublu would abscond or interfere with the investigation without any evidence to substantiate this claim. The court also referenced the nature and gravity of the offense allegedly committed by Yagublu as a justification of his placement in the pretrial detention.

Yagublu has been repeatedly arrested and subjected to ill-treatment for his political activism and criticism of the government for more than a decade. He was first arrested in 2013 after traveling to the city of Ismayili, in northern Azerbaijan, on 23-24 January 2013, to observe demonstrations and riots that were taking place there at the time. In March 2014, following an unfair trial under politically motivated charges, the Shaki Court of Grave Crimes found him guilty of inciting mass violence and sentenced him to five years in prison. Amnesty International recognised Tofig Yagublu prisoner of conscience. The European Court of Human Rights subsequently ruled that the detention of Tofig Yagublu violated his right to liberty and security (*Yagublu v. Azerbaijan*, application no. 31709/13). Tofig Yagublu was released in March 2016 under a presidential pardon after spending more than three years in prison.

On 19 October 2019, Tofig Yagublu was placed in "administrative detention" for 30 days for purportedly failing to obey police orders at a peaceful protest rally violently dispersed by the police. Yagublu claimed that he was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention, but the authorities have failed to investigate these allegations.

Tofig Yagublu was arrested again on 22 March 2020 after a car accident, which he said was deliberately caused by the other party. Now police accused him of hooliganism and alleged that he had beaten a couple who were in the other car involved in the accident. On 3 September, a court in Baku sentenced him to four years and three months' imprisonment. In July 2021, he was released on parole with a probationary period of two years and six months.

On 1 December 2020, Tofig Yagublu was detained and handcuffed by police, who then placed a plastic bag over his head and severely beat him at the police station. He gave a video interview the following day, in which severe bruising and swelling was visible around his eyes. In the interview, Tofig Yagublu said that the officers who beat him up demanded that he say on camera that he would halt his political struggle and stop criticizing President Ilham Aliyev.

On 15 December 2020, Tofig Yagublu was arrested again among other protesters who took to the streets in central Baku demanding the release of imprisoned political activist Saleh Rustamli. Police surrounded the protestors and dragged them to police vans as soon as they began chanting slogans that called for the activist's release. Tofig Yagublu and other protesters were fined and then released.

Tofig Yagublu's unfounded prosecution is part of the Azerbaijani authorities' ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders, government critics, independent media and all dissent. Criticism of the authorities is routinely met with repression, and those who dare to challenge the government face trumped-up charges, unfair trials and lengthy prison sentences. Amnesty International has documented previously how the Azerbaijani authorities sought to rid the country of all critical voices ahead of major international events Azerbaijan was hosting. This is a familiar pattern observed ahead of the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP 29) which the country will host in November 2024 in Baku.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Azeri, English, Russian
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 12 November 2024
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Tofig Yagublu (He/him)