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Azerbaijan activist convicted on 'trumped up' drugs charge

Authorities in Azerbaijan must immediately release a member of an opposition youth organization sentenced to two and a half years in prison on fabricated drug charges, Amnesty International said today.

Jabbar Savalan, a member of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party's (APFP) youth group, was apparently targeted for using Facebook to call for a "Day of Rage" inspired by protests in the Middle East and North Africa.

The 20-year-old was today convicted by the district court in the eastern city of Sumgayit for allegedly possessing 0.74g of marijuana.

Prior to his arrest in February, Jabbar Savalan was followed by police, who arrested him without explanation or reading him his rights.

He was handcuffed and manhandled in and out of a police vehicle before being searched at a police station. Police then claim to have found the drugs in his outer jacket pocket.

"All the evidence points to the fact that Jabbar Savalan has been convicted on trumped up charges," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"It's clear that the real reason he was tried and now convicted was to punish him for - and dissuade others from - calling for anti-government protests inspired by events in the Middle East. Jabbar Savalan is being punished for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression."

Jabbar Savalan was convicted despite a blood test showing he had not used drugs. The conviction was largely based on a confession he was forced to sign and has since retracted. He did not have access to a lawyer during the interrogation.

"Jabbar Savalan's conviction - and the recent arrests of other protest organisers - show how fragile the environment for freedom of expression in Azerbaijan is right now - and just how far the authorities are prepared to go to silence dissenting voices. Jabbar Savalan is a prisoner of conscience and he must be released immediately and unconditionally", added John Dalhuisen.

There has been no investigation into allegations that police planted the drugs on Jabbar Savalan.

After the court hearing, police violently dispersed people protesting against the verdict.

The police officer who first interrogated Jabbar Savalan also approached and threatened his lawyer after the trial, Amnesty International has learned.

According to lawyer Anar Gasimov, the officer told him that he did not like his closing speech, because it was critical of the state. The policeman added: "I know where you live. We will see what I will do for

you.” The lawyer now fears that he will have evidence planted on him.

Amnesty International recently visited Jabbar Savalan’s family and they were adamant that the activist has no history of drug use. This was confirmed by his friends and classmates.

One told Amnesty International: “Jabbar is not a smoker and doesn’t drink alcohol at all – there is no way he would be a drug user.”

Amnesty International has documented similar cases where drugs have been "found" on prominent critics of the government, such as Eynulla Fatullayev and Sakit Zahidov.

In December 2009 prison guards claim to have found heroin on imprisoned journalist Eynulla Fatullayev. He was convicted and sentenced to two and a half years in June 2010, shortly after the European Court of Human Rights had ordered his immediate release.

In 2006 another prominent critic of the government, journalist Sakit Zahidov, was sentenced to three years for allegedly possessing heroin, which he says police planted in his left pocket.