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AZERBAIJAN: ACADEMICS DEALT LONG PRISON SENTENCES ON SPURIOUS CHARGES

Academics Bahruz Samadov and Igbal Abilov, sentenced to 15 and 18 years respectively on fabricated charges of treason following unfair trials, must be immediately and unconditionally released. Their prosecution and sentencing reflect the Azerbaijani authorities' ongoing campaign against critics, academics and human rights defenders who are prosecuted solely for peaceful, free expression that may challenge or fall outside of official state narratives.

BAHRUZ SAMADOV: SENTENCED TO 15 YEARS FOR PEACE ADVOCACY AND JOURNALISM

On 23 June 2025, Azerbaijani researcher, peace activist and OC Media contributor Bahruz Samadov was sentenced to 15 years in prison on trumped-up charges of "high treason."

The charges against Bahruz Samadov stem from his peaceful activism, advocacy for dialogue and peace with neighbouring Armenia, and criticism of the expulsion of the ethnic Armenian population from the break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which Azerbaijan brought under its control by military force between 2020 and 2022.[1] His prosecution was politically motivated, with no credible evidence ever publicly presented – or known otherwise – to justify the allegations of high treason and the severe sentence. The trial was effectively held behind closed doors: only a few individuals, including his grandmother (his closest living relative), friends and several activists were permitted in the courtroom for the verdict.

Bahruz Samadov, a PhD candidate at Charles University in Prague, has long been a vocal critic of human rights violations in Azerbaijan and an advocate for peace in the South Caucasus. Since 2020, after he co-signed the "Anti-war Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth,"[2] he has been publicly vilified by the Azerbaijani state media,[3] experts and officials as "pro-Armenian" and a "traitor" for his anti-war views and calls for peace.

He was arrested on 21 August 2024 while visiting Baku from Prague,[4] and was charged with "high treason" under Article 274 of the Criminal Code. His family and the lawyer of his choice were unable to contact him for two days following his arrest. He was refused bail, and his defence's petition to move him to house arrest and allow him to contact his family during his pretrial detention was denied.

According to the prosecution, the evidence of his "guilt" was his correspondence with three Armenian nationals, as well as his writing and translating articles critical of Azerbaijani authorities, which the prosecution claimed he did "on orders from the Armenian special services."

Bahruz Samadov has denied all charges, stating there is no evidence of any collaboration with Armenian intelligence services. His writings, published in respected regional and international outlets including OC Media, Eurasianet, and openDemocracy, were focused on peaceful solutions to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, and on human rights, and so were his posts on social media.

In response to the prosecutor's request for a 16-year sentence, Bahruz Samadov went on a hunger strike. According to his grandmother, he also attempted to take his own life in detention, but was saved by a fellow inmate. His lawyer and

[1] Amnesty International. *Azerbaijan: As Azerbaijani forces assume full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, it must respect and protect the rights of local ethnic Armenians,* 29 September 2023 https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/7254/2023/en/

[2] Libcom.org. *Anti-war Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth*, 2 October 2020 https://libcom.org/article/anti-war-statement-azerbaijani-leftist-youth

[3] Baku TV / YouTube. *Bəhruz Səmədov niyə ermənilərə işlədi? – ARAŞDIRMA,* 31 August 2024 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrtGQuakSCg*

[4] Amnesty International. *Azerbaijan: Release Bahruz Samadov and other government critics targeted during election campaign*, 2 September 2024 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/azerbaijan-release-bahruz-samadov-and-other-government-critics-targeted-during-election-campaign/

local activists have since raised urgent concerns over his mental and physical health, and have requested an immediate visit by the Public Defender (Ombudsman) and supervising penitentiary service officials. No such visit has followed.

IGBAL ABILOV: SENTENCED TO 18 YEARS FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON MINORITY RIGHTS

On 20 May 2025, Igbal Abilov, a Talysh academic, was sentenced to 18 years in prison by the Lankaran Court for Grave Crimes on charges of "high treason" and "inciting ethnic hatred." As an ethnic Talyshi scholar, Abilov had long advocated for the preservation of Talysh language, history, and culture. His conviction follows a deeply flawed, closed-door trial in violation of fair trial rights.

The charges against Igbal Abilov appear to stem from his long-standing academic work on Talysh minority issues, language, history, and cultural identity. Reportedly the main evidence presented in the court against him consisted of exchanges about minority rights issues with a fellow academic from Armenia, which the prosecution argued amounted to espionage and treason. Igbal Abilov has consistently denied all charges, and his colleagues told Amnesty International that the exchange was part of a scholarly collaboration, focused on linguistic and ethnographic studies, with no indication that any classified or sensitive information was ever shared.

Igbal Abilov's trial was held behind closed doors – excluding independent observers, journalists, and human rights monitors – raising serious concerns about the impartiality of the proceedings. Azerbaijani officials and state media portrayed Abilov as a traitor and guilty of treason, long before the trial concluded, violating his right to be presumed innocent. Similarly to the case of Bahruz Samadov, no credible evidence ever publicly presented – or known otherwise – to justify the allegations of high treason and the severe sentence.

The sentencing of Igbal Abilov and Bahruz Samadov to lengthy prison terms on fabricated charges is part of the Azerbaijani authorities' efforts to suppress academic criticism, and discourage engagement with politically sensitive topics.

Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Bahruz Samadov and Igbal Abilov. Pending their release, they must have access to adequate health care, and independent observers and the Public Defender must be allowed to visit them in detention. Additionally, Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to end broader reprisals against peaceful critics, journalists and activists,[6] and ensure that Azerbaijan fully complies with its obligations under international human rights law.