

AZERBAIJAN: THE REPRESSION GAMES

THE VOICES YOU WON'T HEAR AT
THE FIRST EUROPEAN GAMES



AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL





(Above) Flame Towers in downtown Baku © Amnesty International

The first ever European Games¹ are due to take place in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on 12-28 June 2015. This multi-sport event will involve around 6,000 athletes and features a new state-of-the-art stadium costing some US\$640 million.

The games will give a huge boost to the government's campaign to portray Azerbaijan as a progressive and politically stable rising economic power. According to the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, the hosting of the European Games 'will enable Azerbaijan to assert itself again throughout Europe as a strong, growing and a modern state.'²

But behind the image trumpeted by the government of a forward-looking, modern nation is a state where criticism of the authorities is routinely and increasingly met with repression. Journalists, political activists and human rights defenders who dare to challenge the government face trumped up charges, unfair trials and lengthy prison sentences.

In recent years, the Azerbaijani authorities have mounted an unprecedented clampdown on independent voices within the country. They have done so quietly and incrementally with the result that their actions have largely escaped consequences. The effects, however, are unmistakable. When Amnesty International visited the country in March 2015, there was almost no evidence of independent civil society activities and dissenting voices have been effectively muzzled.

Human rights activists and government critics have been silenced. Some are behind bars, others have left the country and many remain silent for fear of arrest or harassment. The offices of critical NGOs have been closed down, while international human rights groups have been forced to leave the country. The media has also been a focus of government repression. Most of the media is either government owned or pro-government and the authorities have used their virtual monopoly control over the press and television to smear their critics.

Key Country Facts

Head of State
President Ilham Aliyev

Head of Government
Artur Rasizadze

Population
9,583,200

Area
86,600 km²



CIVIL SOCIETY “PARALYZED”

“Civil society is eradicated in Azerbaijan. All NGOs who worked on human rights, about 20 of them, are closed. Some of their leaders are arrested, some had to flee the country and some like us remain paralyzed due to sanctions and having their accounts frozen.”

Asabali Mustafayev, Head of the NGO Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre

The authorities have deployed a whole array of measures to stifle dissenting voices, the cumulative effect of which has been to make it virtually impossible for independent civil society organizations to survive.

Over the years, hundreds of organizations have been refused registration by the authorities for no justifiable reason. More recently, the government has used new restrictive laws and complex reporting requirements to shut down organizations in any way critical of the government and to arrest and prosecute their leaders. Since May 2014, the authorities have also targeted NGO finances and resources, freezing the bank accounts of dozens of NGOs, raiding their offices and confiscating documents and equipment.

As a result of this systematic repression most human rights groups were either shut down or forced to cease their activities, including the prominent NGOs such as the Institute of Peace and Democracy, the Legal Education Society, the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, the Media Rights Institute and the Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre.

The Democracy and Human Rights Resource Centre, led by veteran human rights lawyer Asabali Mustafayev, has been providing assistance and legal representation to victims of political persecution and other human rights violations in Azerbaijan since it was founded in 2006. It has taken around 200 cases to the European Court of Human Rights, and while decisions on most are still pending, 25 of these have already been successful.

On 19 May 2014, the Prosecutor's Office froze the organization's bank accounts and imposed a fine, claiming that the organization had failed to register its grants as required by the newly introduced restrictive legislation. In fact, all grants were submitted to the Ministry of Justice for registration, as required by law. However, the Ministry failed to acknowledge the receipt of some of the submissions without explanation.

As a result, organization was forced to cease all activities.

Other NGOs have experienced similar treatment. They report that their applications for their own registration or the registration of grants received are either not acknowledged or simply refused, leaving them open to trumped-up charges of tax evasion or other criminal offences.

¹ www.baku2015.com

² Ilham Aliyev's speech at the meeting with the Azerbaijani national youth Olympic team on 1 September 2014, available at <http://en.president.az/articles/12751>

On 26 December 2014, officials from the Prosecutor's Office raided and sealed the offices of the international media outlet Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service. The officials confiscated documents and equipment. Twelve Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty employees were detained by law enforcement and questioned; they were released after signing a non-disclosure agreement. The Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service remains shut as an investigation is ongoing in connection with its foreign funding.

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety has been at the forefront of defending media freedoms in Azerbaijan since 2006. On 9 July 2014, the Azerbaijani authorities froze its bank accounts. On 8 August 2014, officials from the Prosecutor's Office raided the offices of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety and confiscated documents and equipment before shutting the office down. No court order authorizing the search and closure of the office was produced and no explanation for the raid was given. However, the organization's staff, including its leader Emin Huseynov, were questioned by officials about the NGO's activities and spending.

Emin Huseynov was criminally charged with abuse of authority, illegal entrepreneurship and tax evasion; almost identical charges have been brought against other NGO leaders arrested in recent months. In August 2014, Emin Huseynov fled to the Swiss Embassy in Baku. At the time of writing he remained at the Embassy and feared that he would be arrested immediately if he left the building. Other staff of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, including the Deputy Chairperson, Gunay Ismayilova, are subject to a ban on travelling outside the country.

Mehman Huseynov, Emin Huseynov's brother and a blogger who is an outspoken critic of the government, told Amnesty International that the authorities have systematically harassed him, both for his blogs and on account of his brother's work. Mehman Huseynov described how he was called into the Prosecutor's Office and threatened after his brother fled to the Swiss Embassy. He said officials threatened to rape their mother if Emin Huseynov did not hand himself in. Mehman Huseynov has been unable to leave the country since police confiscated his national identity documents in 2012.

The Media Rights Institute, another NGO under attack by the authorities, has provided legal aid to more than a hundred journalists targeted because of their work since 2002. In August 2014, it was forced to cease all activities following a campaign of harassment by the government. The authorities froze the assets and bank accounts of the NGO and its staff, raided its premises and fined the organization 53,000 manats (approximately US\$50,000) for failing to register grants. According to the organization's lawyer, the screenshots from the Ministry of Justice website showed that the grants had in fact been duly registered. However, this information disappeared from the website during the investigation.



(Above) Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty's office door remains sealed in Baku since December 2014 © Amnesty International

PRISONERS

Amnesty International is aware of at least 20 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan. They are being held for peacefully opposing the government and its policies or for helping victims of human rights violations. They are currently languishing in prison or in detention awaiting trial on spurious charges ranging from drug use to tax evasion and treason. These individuals should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Some of the prisoners of conscience, including prominent civil society leaders – Leyla Yunus, Khadija Ismayilova, Rasul Jafarov and Intigam Aliyev – are being held in the Kurdakhany detention facility, just outside Baku.



Kurdakhany detention facility © Private

OF CONSCIENCE

Abdul Abilov

A blogger, an administrator of a Facebook page critical of the government, and a member of the NIDA ('Nida' means exclamation mark in Azerbaijani language) youth pro-democracy movement was sentenced to five years of imprisonment on 27 May 2014.

Intigam Aliyev

A human rights lawyer and the head of the NGO Legal Education Society was sentenced to seven and a half years of imprisonment on 22 April 2015.

Rashadat Akundov

A member of the NIDA movement was sentenced to eight years of imprisonment on 6 May 2014.

Mammad Azizov

A member of the NIDA movement was sentenced to seven and a half years of imprisonment on 6 May 2014.

Khadija Ismayilova

Azeri investigative journalist at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has been detained since 5 December 2014.

Rasul Jafarov

The President of the NGO Human Rights Club and coordinator of the "Sing for Rights" campaign during the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest in Baku was sentenced to six and a half years of imprisonment on 16 April 2015.

Rashad Hasanov

A member of the NIDA movement was sentenced to seven and a half years of imprisonment on 6 May 2014.

Elvin Karimov

A blogger and an administrator of the popular Azad Soz (Free Expression) Facebook page has been detained since 18 January 2014.

Faraj Karimov

A journalist and a political activist from the Musavat opposition party was sentenced to six and a half years of imprisonment on 6 May 2015.

Siraj Karimov

Faraj Karimov's brother, arrested because of the political activism of his brother, was sentenced to six years of imprisonment on 12 March 2015.

Anar Mammadli

The Chairman of the main independent election watchdog in Azerbaijan, the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre was sentenced to five and a half years of imprisonment on 26 May 2014.

Hilal Mammadov

A journalist and a campaigner for the rights of Talysh ethnic minority in Southern Azerbaijan was sentenced to five years of imprisonment on 26 September 2013.

Ilgar Mammadov

A political activist and the Chairman of the Republican Alternative (REAL) political movement was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment on 26 May 2014.

Omar Mammadov

A blogger and a member of the NIDA movement was sentenced to five years of imprisonment on 4 July 2014.

Rashad Ramazanov

A blogger and the high-profile critic of the government on Facebook was sentenced to nine years of imprisonment on 13 November 2013.

Ilkin Rustamzade

A member of the NIDA movement was sentenced to eight years of imprisonment on 6 May 2014.

Yadigar Sadigov

The Deputy Chairman of the Musavat Party was sentenced to six years of imprisonment on 1 January 2014.

Tofiq Yagublu

The Deputy Chairman of the Musavat Party was sentenced to five years of imprisonment on 26 May 2014.

Leyla Yunus

A human rights defender and the President of the NGO Institute for Peace and Democracy has been detained since 30 July 2014.

Arif Yunus

A human rights defender, a prominent academic who worked for the Institute for Peace and Democracy and the husband of Leyla Yunus, has been detained since 5 August 2014.

KHADIJA ISMAYILOVA

Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, is an outspoken government critic. She faces several trumped-up charges, including “inciting someone to attempt suicide” even though the “victim” later stated that he had been forced to file a complaint against her and that his attempted suicide had nothing to do with Khadija Ismayilova. The charges against Khadija Ismayilova are punishable by up to 12 years in prison.

Khadija had been investigating alleged links between the family of the President Ilham Aliyev and a lucrative construction project in Baku. She has endured persistent harassment for her critical reporting. In 2012, she was secretly filmed in her home by unidentified individuals who sought to coerce her into abandoning her work. When she refused, video footage of intimate scenes of her was posted online.

The negative publicity surrounding the video footage caused her and her family great distress, particularly to Khadija Ismayilova’s 72-year-old mother, Elmira Ismayilova. The pro-government press ran stories blaming her mother for her daughter’s “shameless lifestyle”, while the local press published an article entitled “Khadija’s Armenian Mother Should Die” which contained details of the Baku district where Elmira Ismayilova lives. The allegation that Khadija Ismayilova’s relatives were Armenian tapped into widespread hostility towards Armenians following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s. The local press also attacked Khadija Ismayilova’s sister, calling her a “pimp” and claiming that the sisters had appeared in pornographic films.

Despite the relentless public onslaught, Elmira Ismayilova told Amnesty International that she wholeheartedly supported her daughter’s struggle for justice and has never regretted Khadija’s decision to become an investigative journalist.

“My daughter has done a great job by her investigative journalism. Khadija would never leave Azerbaijan, even though she had ample opportunities to do so. She was needed here and I knew this. Now, whenever I call her in prison, I always tell her to keep her spirits up... After all, it is not that bad that she was jailed, because she could have been killed”.

Elmira Ismayilova, Khadija Ismayilova’s mother



(Above) Khadija Ismayilova Radio
© Free Europe/Radio Liberty



Elmira Ismayilova © Amnesty International

LEYLA AND ARIF YUNUS

Leyla Yunus is a prominent human rights defender in Azerbaijan. Since 1995 she and her husband, Arif Yunus, have headed the Institute for Peace and Democracy. Both Leyla and Arif Yunus are historians and their human rights activism stems from their attempts to find a peaceful solution to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict which cost thousands of lives and resulted in mass displacement in the early 1990s. Leyla Yunus has also emerged as a fierce critic of the repressive domestic policies of the Azerbaijani government.

Leyla Yunus has received several prestigious awards for her human rights work, including the Knight of the National Order of the Legion of Honour in France and the Theodor Haecker Prize in Germany. She was also among the finalists for the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and has been nominated for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.

She was arrested on 30 July 2014, five days after she called for a boycott of the European Games because of the country's dire human rights record. Arif Yunus was arrested days later, on 5 August.

The couple's daughter, Dinara, lives in the Netherlands where she has been granted asylum. She has not seen or spoken to her parents since their arrest. Dinara is particularly worried about her mother's health; Leyla Yunus has diabetes and Hepatitis C and requires medication and a special diet which are not available in detention.

At the time of writing, Leyla and Arif Yunus are not permitted to communicate with each other: Leyla is held in the Kurdakhany detention facility while Arif is in the Ministry of Security detention centre. They are awaiting trial on trumped up charges of financial fraud and treason.

“Mr President, can you tell me why my mother is in prison after she was critical of the upcoming Games? What are you scared of Mr President? Why do you choose repression over freedom?”

Dinara Yunus





**“BUT THE MOST
DIFFICULT OF ALL
IS THAT YOU ARE
NOT NEARBY.**

**FOR 36 YEARS
WE HAVE
ALMOST NEVER
BEEN APART!”**

*Extract from a public letter written by
Leyla Yunus for her husband, dated 26
August 2014. Leyla and Arif Yunus are not
allowed to communicate with each other.
Leyla often writes public letters to Arif
in the hope that they might reach him.*

INTIGAM ALIYEV

Intigam Aliyev, a human rights lawyer, has educated generations of human rights defenders and for decades has helped victims of politically motivated persecution in Azerbaijan.

On 22 April 2015, he was sentenced to seven and a half years' imprisonment following an unfair trial on charges based on fabricated evidence. He was found guilty of large-scale embezzlement and fraud, conducting an illegal business and tax evasion in his capacity as a head of the human rights NGO, the Legal Education Society.

Intigam Aliyev was instrumental in providing international human rights bodies, as well as international NGOs, with information on human rights violations in Azerbaijan, including compiling a list of those arrested on politically motivated grounds. His arrest came shortly after the European Court of Human Rights issued a communication to the government regarding complaints he had submitted relating to human rights violations during the 2010 parliamentary elections. Intigam Aliyev's arrest and the closure of his NGO means that one of the very few remaining organizations assisting victims of human rights abuses to seek justice outside Azerbaijan has been closed.

Intigam Aliyev's son, 19-year-old Necmin Kamilsoy, told Amnesty International the family had been expecting his arrest. Sitting in his father's study in the family home in the city of Sumgait, he proudly showed the awards his father has received for his work. Among them was the Sakharov Freedom Award in recognition of courageous and outstanding work to promote human rights which Intigam Aliyev received on behalf of "political prisoners in Azerbaijan" because, in the words of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee which awarded the prize, these were "too numerous to all be mentioned".

"We knew his work was risky and when other human rights lawyers and journalists were starting to be arrested we knew he'd be next... The prosecution started inventing new accusations and coming up with new charges when he was already in jail. They started bringing fake witnesses and coercing them to testify against my father... We miss him and we want him home."

Necmin Kamilsoy talking about his father, Intigam Aliyev, during an Amnesty International interview, March 2015



RASUL JAFAROV: “SPORTS FOR RIGHTS”

A week before Intigam Aliyev was sentenced, another human rights defender, Rasul Jafarov, had been sentenced to six and a half years' imprisonment on similar trumped-up charges.

Rasul Jafarov is the founder of the Human Rights Club and coordinator of the human rights campaign during the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, which was hosted by Azerbaijan. The campaign was called “Sing for Democracy” and used the Eurovision Song Contest as a platform to draw international attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

The sentencing of Rasul Jafarov appears to have been motivated by the authorities' desire to ensure that such an experienced campaigner was not free to use the European Games as a platform to highlight human rights abuses in Azerbaijan. His arrest prevented him from launching a planned “Sport for Rights” campaign ahead of the June 2015 Games.

“Everyone who campaigned against political arrests either ended up in prison or had to flee the country. We feared for Rasul, but he was adamant that if we wanted justice in Azerbaijan, he had to keep fighting ...”

Sanan Jafarov, brother of Rasul Jafarov

(Left) Intigam Aliyev - human rights defender and lawyer in Azerbaijan. Along with other human rights activists, he was jailed in 2014 as part of a country-wide crackdown © RFE

(Below Left) Necmin Kamilsoy looks at the awards, which his father, Intigam Aliyev received for his human rights work © Amnesty International



POLITICAL ACTIVISTS HARASSED

“I am still locked up, even though the highest body in Europe said that I am locked up unfairly. Even when the highest court in Europe may decide on my innocence, in Azerbaijan I will not be released until I sign a confession and ask for a pardon for a crime I have not committed.”

Ilgar Mammadov on his imprisonment despite the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights on his case



© Demotix

The crackdown on dissent extends to all forms of free expression in Azerbaijan, including political activism. According to local NGOs, 80 people remain in jail on politically motivated charges in Azerbaijan.

Outspoken political activists and those who use social media to express or disseminate views critical of the government are routinely harassed and the authorities have often used drug or hooliganism-related charges to imprison them.

The opposition Republican Alternative (REAL) movement has been the target of harassment and repression ever since it was founded in 2008. In 2013 the authorities detained the head of REAL, Ilgar Mammadov, on trumped-up charges and board member Rasul Jafarov (see above) has been imprisoned.

Two other prominent members of REAL, Natiq Jafarli and Erkin Gadirli, described the constant pressure and harassment that they face to Amnesty International:

“Those who are not yet in prison are systematically interrogated and harassed by the authorities.”

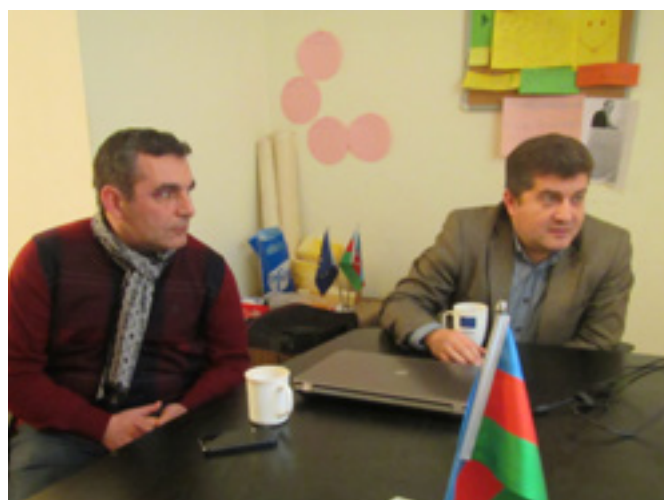
Natiq Jafarli, co-founder of the REAL movement

“They [police] can come and arrest us anytime, we've already got used to that feeling.”

Erkin Gadirli, co-founder of the REAL movement

Other opposition political party activists have also been targeted in this way.

The Deputy Chairman of the Musavat opposition political party, Tofiq Yagublu, was falsely accused of inciting violent anti-government riots on 23-24 January 2013 in Ismayili, Northern Azerbaijan. People had taken to the streets after the local media reported that the nephew of the local governor had assaulted a local man in a road rage incident. Tofiq Yagublu had gone to Ismayili to observe and report on the protests. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment.



(Above) Natiq Jafarli (left) and Erkin Gadirli (right) © Amnesty International

(Far Right) A poster in the Musavat's head office in Baku depicting Faraj (left) and Siraj (right) Karimovs. The poster reads in Azerbaijani: 'Free Karimov brothers!' © Amnesty International

(Right) A poster in the Musavat's head office in Baku depicting the deputy Head of the Musavat Tofiq Yagublu. The poster reads in Azerbaijani: 'Free Tofiq Yagublu!' © Amnesty International



PUNISHING THE FAMILIES

“The police planted drugs and arrested my younger son, to punish Tural for organizing protests abroad. He is now under house arrest, but they did not take away the charges to remind us that he can be put back to jail anytime.”

Alorsat Sadigli, father of exiled activist and blogger Tural Sadigli

In order to increase the pressure on the political party opposition, the authorities have resorted to targeting not just leading political figures themselves, but their families and other loved ones.

On 17 July 2014, police arrested Siraj Karimov. His brother, Faraj Karimov, is a Musavat Party activist and an outspoken government critic. Siraj Karimov was held on the basis of trumped-up charges and fabricated evidence of drug possession. His arrest was in apparent retaliation for his brother's political activities. Faraj Karimov himself was arrested six days later on similar charges. The brothers told their lawyer that while they were detained, they were tortured and questioned repeatedly about Faraj Karimov's political activities. On 6 May 2015, Siraj Karimov was sentenced to six years in prison. The trial of Faraj Karimov was continuing at the time of writing.

Some activists have managed to flee abroad to safety, but for their relatives back in Azerbaijan the harassment and repression

are an ever-present threat.

According to local activists, police visited the homes of the activists who have taken part in anti-Azerbaijani government protests abroad and interrogated members of their families. Popular opposition blogger, Tural Sadigli, fled Azerbaijan in February 2014 after being threatened with arrest for his blogs. Just before he left, a fellow blogger, Elvin Karimov (a prisoner of conscience) had been arrested on trumped-up drug charges.

On 21 January 2015, Tural Sadigli took part in a protest near the German Chancellery during the Azerbaijani President's visit to Germany. A few weeks later, on 13 February 2015, Azerbaijani police detained Tural Sadigli's brother, Elgiz Sadigli on drug-related charges. The following day, their father, Alorsat Sadigli, was detained for purportedly resisting police as he went to see his son in a police station. Alorsat Sadigli was released the same day after a pre-trial hearing. However, Elgiz Sadigli was initially remanded in prison for two months pending trial. Following an international outcry, this was later commuted to house arrest. If convicted, Elgiz Sadigli could face up to 12 years in prison.





SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISTS INTIMIDATED

Azerbaijan is a dangerous place for young activists. Just daring to voice criticism of or discontent with government policies on Facebook can have serious consequences.

The NIDA movement is a youth organization with approximately 350 members that campaigns for greater democracy in Azerbaijan. The authorities' treatment of NIDA shows what those who dare to express any level of dissent can expect from the Azerbaijani authorities.

Ten NIDA activists – Abdul Abilov, Rashadat Akundov, Mammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Zaur Gurbanli, Rashad Hasanov, Uzeyir Mammadli, Omar Mammadov, Shahin Novruzlu and Ilkin Rustamzade – were detained between

March 2013 and January 2014 on various charges, including, possessing explosives and intent to cause public disorder and later sentenced to between six and eight years in prison. Amnesty International believes that the charges against them were unfounded and that the real reason for their arrest was their criticism of the government and online activism calling for peaceful demonstrations.

After months of international campaigning by local and international human rights organizations, two of the activists, Zaur Gurbanli and Uzeyir Mammadli, were released on 29 December 2014 and Shahin Novruzlu and Bakhtiyar Guliyev were released on 18 October 2014. All four were granted a presidential pardon. However, six other NIDA members remain behind bars for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association and are prisoners of conscience.

Some of the arrested NIDA activists were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment while in detention in order to extract confessions. Shahin Novruzlu was 17 years old when he was interrogated. His legal guardian was not present when he was questioned, in breach of Azerbaijani law. While in state custody, between the time of his arrest and his first appearance in court, he had lost four of his front teeth. Mammad Azizov, lost his hearing in one ear as a result of the beatings sustained in custody.

Both lodged formal complaints of torture which have never been properly investigated.

NIDA members who are not in detention are under constant harassment from the authorities. Local police regularly visit the homes of the NIDA members, claiming they are “just registering people” implying that these are just routine random checks.

“Since the crackdown started, Azerbaijani civil society has been swept away and nobody is left to protect vulnerable people from injustice.”

Zaur Gurbanli, former prisoner of conscience and NIDA member

“There is a reign of terror – everybody is afraid... The attack on NIDA sent a strong message to other activists – if the government can break even NIDA, a group of educated and intelligent young people, they can do anything to anybody who dares to speak out.”

Turgut Gambar, NIDA board member

(Above) Amnesty International activists in Vienna, Austria protest human rights abuses in Azerbaijan as Azerbaijan prepares to chair the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in May 2014

(Left) NIDA members and former prisoners of conscience: Shahin Novruzlu, Zaur Gurbanli and Uzeyir Mammadli, © Amnesty International





LEGACY OF THE EUROPEAN GAMES

The crackdown on human rights defenders has effectively left Azerbaijan without independent voices.

Starting from July 2014, in the space of just a few weeks, a sweeping campaign of arrests saw the leaders of some of Azerbaijan's most active independent NGOs thrown behind bars. This not only curtailed fundamental freedoms, it also cut off independent channels of information to the international community and left people facing human rights abuses without assistance; the people targeted had been providing international organizations with valuable information about the human rights situation on the ground.

The human rights situation in Azerbaijan is grave and deteriorating: The freedoms of expression, association and assembly are being systematically suppressed and those who speak out against this face the very real risk of being thrown behind bars. An adequate response from the international community is urgently needed to prevent yet more attacks on fundamental human rights in the country.

The fact that Azerbaijan is hosting the European Games in June 2015 provides a rare opportunity to turn the spotlight on human rights violations in the country. International sporting events such as the European Games vaunt the legacy that they leave behind both in the host country and in the wider world. Action needs to be taken now to ensure that the legacy of these Games is not above all one of repression and human rights violations.

The attacks on journalists, news outlets, media organizations, human rights groups and other civil society actors are indisputable. They cannot be reconciled with the human rights principles of the Olympic Charter – equally applicable to the European Games – on press freedoms and human dignity.

In awarding the first European Games to Azerbaijan the European Olympic Committee (EOC) had a responsibility to consider the principles of the Olympic Charter and whether the host state would uphold these principles.

'The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'.

Second fundamental principle of the Olympic Charter

The International Olympic Committee's [IOC] role is 'to promote a positive legacy from the Olympic Games to the host cities and host countries'.

Article 2.14 of the Olympic Charter

'The IOC takes all the necessary steps in order to ensure the fullest coverage by the different media and the widest possible audience for the Olympic Games'.

Article 48.1 of the Olympic Charter

The crackdown on critical voices and press freedom described in this report should be serious concern for the EOC. The context in which Games are hosted is important, not only in relation to the principles of the Olympic movement, but because of the message sent to both the authorities and the civil society when human rights abuses are ignored by awarding bodies such as the EOC.

(Above) One of the many construction projects in Baku ahead of the European Games
© Amnesty International

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

THE AZERBAIJANI AUTHORITIES MUST RESPECT ITS HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS AND:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience;
- Stop the harassment and persecution political activists, journalists, and civil society, including human rights defenders;
- Abolish the excessive legal restrictions and administrative hurdles faced by NGOs;
- Stop using torture and other ill-treatment to extract confessions and publicly condemn this practice;
- Investigate officials alleged to have fabricated evidence to support trumped-up criminal charges against activists, as well as those who used torture and other ill-treatment, and ensure that those who are responsible are brought to justice.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES AZERBAIJAN'S INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS - FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO:

- Call on the Azerbaijani government to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and to respect freedoms of expression, association and assembly;
- Raise concerns regarding human rights violations in Azerbaijan at every opportunity in bilateral and multilateral forums, monitor the human rights situation in the country and report on the findings.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES THE EUROPEAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE AND THE EUROPEAN NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES:

- In line with the commitment to leave a positive legacy in host states, to call on the government of Azerbaijan to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and to respect freedoms of expression, association and assembly - and continue to press for these actions during and after the Games;
- The European National Olympic Committees, which make up the European Olympic movement, should ask their own governments to condemn the crackdown in Azerbaijan and urge the authorities to stop these human rights violations. The context in which the first European Games are played, and the legacy they leave, should be a concern for all European states and National Olympic Committees.



Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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(BACK COVER IMAGE)

The National Flag Square in Baku with one of the world's tallest flag poles
© Amnesty International

(FRONT COVER IMAGE)

The newly constructed Baku Olympic Stadium will host the European Games
© Amnesty International

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