
Amnesty International

MONTHLY ACTION

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SEPTEMBER 2013

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS PROGRAMME

Azerbaijan: pre-election crackdown on dissent

Azerbaijan will hold a Presidential election on 9 October 2013. As the official campaign period for the October polls started last month, Amnesty International identified 14 new prisoners of conscience in the country. Those detained include: youth activists who have used social networks to call for free elections and free speech; an opposition presidential candidate; and human rights defenders.

Amnesty International has long been concerned by the Azerbaijani authorities' systematic violation of their citizens' rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Dissenting voices in the country are frequently targeted with trumped-up criminal charges, assault, harassment, or blackmail.

This year, the crackdown has intensified, and Amnesty International fears that the Azerbaijani authorities are becoming increasingly bold in their repression of dissent ahead of the Presidential election.

What you need to do:

Please read the background briefing and then write to the President of Azerbaijan, calling for prisoners of conscience to be released and the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly to be respected. Please make sure your letters arrive before the election on 9 October.

A sample letter is included in this mailing. Please photocopy this letter and ask each group member to sign and send one. Better still, use this as an example, but ask group members to write their own letters - writing in your own words will have even more impact!

Please be sure to send us copies of any responses – thank you.

Please post, fax or email your letter to:

President Ilham Aliyev
Office of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic
19 Istiqlaliyyat Street
Baku AZ1066
AZERBAIJAN

Salutation: Dear President

Fax: 0099 412 492 35 43, or 0099 412 492 06 25

Email: office@pa.gov.az

Please also send copies of your appeal letters to:

His Excellency Mr Fakhraddin Gurbanov, Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 4 Kensington Court, London, W8 5DL

Fax: 020 7937 1783 **Email:** london@mission.mfa.gov.az

If you would like to find out more about this issue or are interested in doing more work on this region please contact the Azerbaijan Country Coordinator, Barrie Hay: barrie.hay@amnesty.org.uk

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- The guidance sheet
- Background information
- POC information
- Appeal letter

GOT QUERIES OR WANT TO DO MORE?

If you have any queries about this action and for updates, please contact ruth.dawson@amnesty.org.uk in the Human Rights Defenders Programme

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS PROGRAMME

AZERBAIJAN: REPRESSION OF DISSENT

Country context

The Republic of Azerbaijan achieved independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, the country's wealth has increased dramatically, and Azerbaijan boasts some of the highest levels of economic growth in the world, due mainly to the exploitation of its rich hydrocarbon resources. However, more than twenty years of independence, economic prosperity and relative stability have failed to significantly improve the country's human rights record and the fundamental freedoms of its citizens.

President Ilham Aliyev

President Ilham Aliyev has presided over a deepening human rights crisis in the country since succeeding his father Heydar Aliyev as President in 2003. In the October elections he will run for a third consecutive term, after changing the constitution in 2009 to allow him to serve an unlimited number of terms.

It is important to note that Amnesty International takes no position on the politics involved in the election: we do not support or oppose any political parties or individual candidates, or have any interest in the outcome of the election. Our attention and concern is focused on the human rights situation in the country, and human rights violations which take place in the context of the election.

Crackdown on dissenting voices

Amnesty International has deep and long-standing concerns about the Azerbaijani authorities' systematic violation of their citizens' rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Dissenting voices in the country are frequently targeted with trumped-up criminal charges, assault, harassment, or blackmail. This crackdown on free speech has intensified in recent years.

- Peaceful anti-government protest has effectively been criminalised by banning demonstrations and imprisoning those who organise and take part in them.
- Police use excessive force to break up peaceful, but officially unsanctioned, demonstrations.
- Threats and intimidation against human rights defenders have been used together with legislative and administrative means to shut down and deny registration to civil society groups working on democracy and human rights issues.
- Self-censorship has increased. Criticism of the President and leading government figures is frequently punished – whether it is voiced through politics, journalism, satire, activism, education or even social networking websites.
- Journalists have been beaten, ill-treated, abducted, and imprisoned, while the range of independent media outlets has been curbed through laws banning foreign broadcasters from national airwaves.
- New methods of exercising the right to freedom of expression, such as the internet and social media, are also under siege. In an early attempt to discredit activists using online tools, state television broadcast a series of interviews and documentaries portraying Facebook users as “mentally ill”. Bloggers and reporters for online news sites have been harassed and imprisoned on trumped-up charges.

But Azerbaijani activists have not been deterred – despite knowing the grave consequences, they choose to run the risks of speaking out rather than to continue to live in a society where they cannot exercise their most basic human rights.

New prisoners of conscience

In August 2013, Amnesty International publicly identified 14 new prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan. These individuals include opposition candidates, journalists, pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders. Amnesty International believes that these individuals have been targeted in retaliation for their human rights or political activism, and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

An overview of these 14 cases is provided in the summary table included in this mailing. Further detail about these prisoners of conscience is available in Amnesty International's public statement [AI Index: EUR55/006/2013], issued 8 August 2013 and available on the IS website: <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR55/006/2013/en>

MONTHLY ACTION

Background information

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS PROGRAMME

New prisoners of conscience: case summary table

	Name	Identity	Details of arrest/ charges	Amnesty International's view	Current status
1	Dashgin Melikov	22 year-old male youth activist for opposition group Popular Front Party	Arrested without explanation on 26 March. Sentenced on 3 July 2013 on charges of drugs possession.	The charges have been fabricated in retaliation for his criticism of the President and the government	In prison serving two-and-a-half year sentence
2	Ilkin Rustamzade	Male, "Free Youth" activist	Arrested 17 May 2013 on 'hooliganism' charges, for his alleged involvement in a Baku version of the popular 'harlem shake' video.	The makers of the video, and all those performing in it, were exercising their right to peaceful expression. Ilkin Rustamzade has been targeted for his human rights activism.	In detention, pending trial - the charge carries a prison sentence of up to three years
3	Mahammad Azizov	All male, aged 17-28, members of the board of pacifist pro-democracy youth group NIDA	Arrested between 8 March and 1 April 2013, on charges of possessing explosives and/or drugs	The charges were fabricated. All seven NIDA activists were in fact arrested because of their continued outspoken criticism of the government, and specifically their involvement in organising a peaceful protest on 10 March 2013 which was violently dispersed by the authorities.	In detention, pending trial – face long prison sentences if convicted
4	Bakhtiyar Guliyev				
5	Shahin Novruzlu				
6	Rashad Hasanov				
7	Uzeyir Mammadli				
8	Rashadat Akhundov				
9	Zaur Gurbanli				
10	Ilgar Mammadov	Male, prospective presidential candidate	Arrested 4 February 2013 on allegations of inciting violent protests in the city of Ismayili	The two men have been targeted because of their political activism. They have no history of advocating or inciting violence, and are well-known critics of the government. The men arrived in Ismayili a day after rioting started and finished, to monitor and report on the situation.	In custody, pending trial – if convicted, they face up to 12 years in prison
11	Tofiq Yagublu	Male, journalist			
12	Bakhtiyar Mammadov	Male, lawyer	Sentenced on 27 February on charges of extortion and fraud	The charges have been brought in retaliation for his human rights work, and specifically in an attempt to halt his legal challenge to forced evictions	In prison, serving 8 year sentence
13	Ilham Amiraslanov	Male, Kur Civil Society activist	Sentenced on 12 September 2012 on charges of arms possession	The charges were trumped up and brought in retaliation for allegations he had made publicly that local officials had embezzled funds allocated for the victims of the Kura river floods in 2010	In prison, serving 2 year sentence
14	Hilal Mammadov	Male, activist for the ethnic Talysh minority group and editor of its newspaper	Arrested 21 June 2012 on drugs charges. Additional charges brought 3 July 2012 of treason and inciting religious and national hatred	The charges have been fabricated. He has been arrested for his work as a Talysh minority rights defender and for his peaceful expression of his views through publications, TV or other public forums	In detention, trial is ongoing

For more detail on these cases, please see AI's public statement at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR55/006/2013/en>