

MONTHLY ACTION

Community Organising Team, Amnesty International UK
HRAC, 17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA



May 2016

AZERBAIJAN: Prisoners of Conscience

Individuals at Risk: Khadija Ismayilova

Khadija Ismayilova was locked up by the Azerbaijani authorities for exposing corruption. She is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately.

Khadija Ismayilova is an award-winning Azerbaijani investigative journalist and an outspoken government critic. She has published numerous articles exposing human rights violations and corruption at the highest levels in the country. The authorities punished her first by running a prolonged and retaliatory smear campaign in the state-controlled media and later by bringing trumped-up criminal charges against her, including tax evasion, embezzlement and illegal business.

Khadija was detained on 5 December 2014 and was sentenced to seven-and-a-half years of imprisonment on 1 September 2015. The trial, which took place in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, was supposedly open, but on several occasions observers were not allowed into the courtroom.

The Azeri authorities are very sensitive to public criticism of their human rights record. Generating media attention is an important way to bring pressure on the regime to release political prisoners. On June 19th, Baku will be hosting the European Grand Prix. This will be a great opportunity to generate media attention in your area.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

- 1) **Call for Khadija's release.** Please write to the President asking him for the immediate and unconditional release of Khadija Ismayilova and allow Khadija to continue her journalistic investigation's unimpeded.

President Ilham Aliyev
Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
18 Istiqlaliyyat Avenue
Baku, AZ 1066
Azerbaijan

Salutation: Dear President Aliyev

- 2) **Raise Publicity through a stunt.** The Azerbaijan government is very sensitive to public criticism, especially of its human rights record, and in relation to the president in particular. On June 19th, the European grand prix will be staged in Baku. This is an excellent opportunity to raise Khadija's case in your local area.

Around the time of the Grand Prix, you can write a letter to the editor of your local paper, or to a national title. Key points to make:

- The European GP is happening in Azerbaijan on June 19th which will be a great spectacle.
- However, there are many people unable to witness the action, including those locked up simply for expressing their opinion or for criticising the government. People like Khadija Ismayilova.
- The Azerbaijani authorities love to use these major international moments to show that they are open for business and to gloss over their terrible human rights record.

- We want to remind the world that this regime is not all about glitz and glamour, but about severe restrictions on basic human rights.
- Call on President Ilham Aliyev to release Khadija and all other Prisoners of Conscience immediately and unconditionally, and to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression.

Hold a creative action on the theme of the GP, motifs using a race car can be eye catching and exciting. If you need support with ideas, please get in touch with us.

We have a network of Regional Media Support Officers ready to help you maximise your impact on local press, radio, and TV. Please contact James Baggaley in the AIUK office at james.baggaley@amnesty.org.uk and he will put you in touch with them.

3) Show Solidarity. Support Khadija or her mother Elmira Ismayilova with a solidarity action. You can send these to the Amnesty office C/O the IAR Team, or you can send them direct:

Khadija Ismayilova's address:

Khadija Ismayilova
 Baki Investigation Isolator (Kurdakhany Detention Facility)
 Sabunchu District
 Zabrat 2 settlement
 AZ1104
 Azerbaijan

To contact Khadija's mother, or if you would like her to hand deliver your messages of solidarity, please send them to the IAR team at Amnesty International UK and we will get them to her as she has requested we keep her address private.

Suggested messages:

"Biz sizinləyik" ("we are with you" in Azerbaijani)
 "Möhkəm ol" ("stay strong" in Azerbaijani)

If you have any queries about this action and for updates please contact:
activism@amnesty.org.uk / 020 7033 1675
 Local group's monthly mailing can be downloaded from: www.amnesty.org.uk/groups

Background Information

Individuals at Risk: Khadija Ismayilova

Khadija Ismayilova is a prominent investigative journalist and an outspoken government critic in Azerbaijan. She has done extensive reporting on corruption and wrongdoings in the country's government and has written many stories exposing shady business dealings involving the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's extended family. Shortly before her arrest in December 2014, Ismayilova published a list of the political prisoners in Azerbaijan that had been compiled by a group of human rights defenders, many of whom have since themselves been imprisoned. The day before Khadija was arrested, the Presidential Chief of Staff, Ramiz Mehdiyev, accused Azerbaijani journalists of treason. In his statement, Ramiz Mehdiyev referred to Khadija as "the best example" of journalists working against the government.

Khadija has been languishing behind bars since 5 December 2014 on charges of tax evasion, embezzlement and illegal business. The charges against her are trumped up. On 26 December 2014, the offices of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service, where Khadija worked, were raided and sealed off by members of the Prosecutor's Office without official explanation. Documents and other equipment were confiscated.

Khadija had been previously targeted and harassed by the authorities, including through the imposition of a travel ban prior to her arrest. She also faced charges of criminal libel and “incitement to suicide”, but the authorities later dropped these charges.

On 7 March 2012, an anonymous person sent Khadija copies of screenshots of a video depicting her private life, secretly taken of her in her apartment. Apparently someone had secretly placed hidden cameras in her home. The screenshots were accompanied by a note threatening to “shame” her if she did not abandon her work. At the time, Khadija was investigating allegations of links between President Ilham Aliyev’s family and a lucrative construction project in Baku. She refused to be silenced and publicly exposed the attempted blackmail, after which the threat was realised and her video appeared on the internet.

At the same time, government-controlled Azerbaijani press started a smear campaign against her, which caused Khadija and her family great distress, particularly to her 72-year old mother, Elmira Ismayilova. The 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 named the neighbourhood where Elmira Ismayilova lives. While Khadija Ismayilova’s mother was not an ethnic Armenian, the article sought to exploit widespread hostility towards the Armenians that has become deeply entrenched among many Azeris in the aftermath of 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.

Before she was arrested she made this public statement on Facebook:

“TO INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS: You are doing everything right. Keep doing it.

TO DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES, DIPLOMATS, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: Just in case, I want to remind my request to international community in terms of possible advocacy actions regarding my possible arrest.

Some of you want to help, but can do it only with private diplomacy. Thank you, but No.

WHEN MY CASE IS CONCERNED: if you can, please support by standing for freedom of speech and freedom of privacy in this country as loudly as possible. Otherwise, I rather prefer you not to act at all. I don’t want any private diplomacy for my case. I don’t believe in human rights advocacy behind closed doors. People of my country need to know that human rights are supported.”

Here are some links to the investigative journalism of Khadija Ismayilova:

[Latest report \(in Azeri\) is about Czech company of Arzu Aliyeva, president’s daughter.](#)

[2012 President awarded family stake in gold fields](#)

[2012 President’s family has a stake in Eurovision concert hall](#)

[2011 Tracking the President’s family business](#)