



JOINT STATEMENT

Azerbaijan: Renewed Human Rights Crackdown Ahead of Referendum

18 August 2016. Less than six weeks ahead of a constitutional referendum, the Azerbaijani authorities have unleashed a new wave of repression to silence critical voices. The undersigned members of the Sport for Rights coalition condemn this renewed crackdown, and call on the Azerbaijani authorities to take immediate steps to improve the human rights situation in the country, starting with the release of political prisoners.

On 12 August, prominent Azerbaijani economist and Executive Secretary of the opposition Republican Alternative (REAL) movement Natig Jafarli was arrested on charges of illegal entrepreneurship and abuse of power, and sentenced to four months of pre-trial detention. On 17 August, the Court of Appeals rejected the appeal for his release. According to Sport for Rights member the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, Jafarli has been locked up for his "peaceful criticism" of the country's upcoming constitutional referendum. The charges against Jafarli stem from a criminal case the Prosecutor General's Office launched against a group of NGOs in 2014. If convicted, Jafarli may face up to eight years of imprisonment.

On 13 August, NIDA civic movement activist Elgiz Gahraman was arrested, held incommunicado over the weekend, charged on 15 August with drug possession, and sentenced to four months' pre-trial detention. Also on 15 August, REAL movement youth activists Elshan Gasimov and Togrul Ismayilov were arrested and sentenced to seven days of administrative detention each on charges of resisting police. Authorities also harassed civic activist and former political prisoner Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, calling him in for questioning and then subjecting him to a court hearing that dragged out over three days, before fining him 100 AZN on charges of "minor hooliganism".

Sport for Rights considers the charges against Jafarli, Gahraman, and the other activists to be politically motivated, and calls for their immediate and unconditional release, along with the release of all of Azerbaijan's dozens of political prisoners - including opposition REAL movement leader Ilgar Mammadov, whose release has been ordered by the European Court of Human Rights; journalist Seymur Hezi; and youth activists Ilkin Rustemzade, Giyas Ibrahimov, and Bayram Mammadov.

This spate of repression takes place in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's latest mega event, the Formula One European Grand Prix, held in Baku in June. It also takes place on the eve of a constitutional referendum set for 26 September, which will decide a series of problematic amendments aimed at further consolidating power in Azerbaijan's already dominant presidency. The Azerbaijani government's proposal of these amendments immediately followed July's coup attempt in Turkey.

Events in Turkey have played a further role in Azerbaijan's renewed crackdown. On 15 August, the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General's Office announced it had opened a criminal case against supporters of the Turkish Gulen movement "to prevent illegal actions on the territory of Azerbaijan". Detained NIDA civic movement activist Elgiz Gahraman was linked to the Gulen movement in an article in the pro-governmental press that also targeted figures of the opposition Popular Front Party and the satellite Azerbaijan Saati ("Azerbaijan Hour") programme, signalling possible further pressure to come. On 17 August, the Caucasus University in Baku announced it had fired 50 Turkish instructors for alleged links with the Gulen movement.

Broadcast of Azerbaijan Saati was stopped on 27 July when Turkish television station Barış TV, which carried the programme, was among the media outlets shut down by a presidential decree in Turkey, alleging their connection to the Gulen movement. The transmission of another rare critical news source on developments in Azerbaijan, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's programme Azadlıq ("Freedom") A-LIVE, was halted without explanation by Türksat satellite on 8 August. In Azerbaijan, private national television station ANS TV remains off the air following a court order on 29 July to revoke the station's license in connection with an interview it had planned to broadcast with Fethullah Gulen.

All of this occurs against the backdrop of a dire overall human rights situation in Azerbaijan. The media remains completely dominated by the state, and critical journalists operate in a climate of fear. Excessive restrictions remain on civil society, severely hindering the ability of independent NGOs to operate. Travel bans continue to be used against journalists, activists, and politicians – including journalists Khadija Ismayilova, whose appeal to lift her travel ban was denied on 15 August, and Elchin Mammad, who was detained when trying to cross the Azerbaijani border on 9 August.

The Sport for Rights coalition calls for the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately cease these gross and systemic violations and take steps to improve the human rights situation in the country, starting with the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners held for their peaceful political activities or exercise of their right to freedom of expression. Sport for Rights further calls for sustained attention to Azerbaijan by the international community, and concrete action to hold the Azerbaijani government accountable for its human rights obligations.

Supporting organisations:

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Canadian Journalists for Free Expression
Civil Rights Defenders
Freedom House
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Human Rights House Foundation
Index on Censorship
Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
International Media Support
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Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Norwegian Helsinki Committee
PEN America
PEN International
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Reporters Without Borders
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)