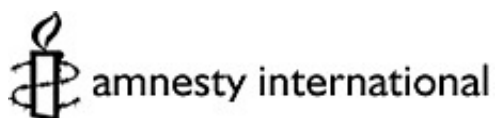


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Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 - Azerbaijan

Head of state: **Ilham Aliyev**

Head of government: **Artur Rasizade**

Death penalty: **abolitionist for all crimes**

Population: **9.3 million**

Life expectancy: **70.7 years**

Under-5 mortality: **33.5 per 1,000**

Adult literacy: **99.5 per cent**

Peaceful protests were banned and violently dispersed. Opposition activists were imprisoned. Protests and expression of dissent were repressed and freedom of expression, assembly and association were restricted.

Background

Increasing frustration with authoritarian rule, and tight controls over those expressing critical views, led to a series of protests in March and April. Hundreds of people gathered in the capital Baku to demand democratic reform and greater respect for human rights. These nascent signs of popular protest were repressed by the government with a new wave of repression and intimidation. The authorities imprisoned youth activists and opposition supporters behind the protests and stepped up the harassment of the civil society groups and media who could speak on their behalf.

Prisoners of conscience

On 26 May, following significant international pressure, Eynulla Fatullayev, halfway through serving an eight-and-a-half-year prison sentence on trumped-up charges, was released by a presidential pardon. On 26 December, opposition youth activist Jabbar Savalan was released following a presidential pardon. He had been arrested on 5 February, a day after calling for protests online and re-posting an article critical of the government. He was allegedly beaten while in police custody to force him to sign a false confession and was sentenced to over two years in prison on fabricated charges of drug possession.

However, 16 activists and opposition supporters remained imprisoned as prisoners of conscience in connection with the protests in March and April.

- Following the protests, 13 activists and members of opposition political parties were convicted of "organizing and participating in public disorder" and sentenced to up to three years in prison following unfair trials. No evidence was presented to show that any of those imprisoned was engaged in anything more than the legitimate exercise of their rights. Four of the 13 were additionally convicted of specific acts of violence allegedly committed during the protests.
- On 31 March, Shahin Hasanli, one of the protest organizers, was arrested and charged with illegal possession of pistol bullets. On 22 July he was convicted and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The prosecutors at his trial failed to present evidence that he was in possession of any firearms at the time of his arrest.
- On 18 May, Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, an opposition activist who called for an online protest on 11 March, was convicted of evading military service and sentenced to two years in prison. He had been arrested three times since he had stood in parliamentary elections in 2010, although he had only received a valid draft card at the time of his second arrest.
- On 27 August, human rights defender and former parliamentary candidate Vidadi Isgandarov was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly interfering with the 2010 parliamentary elections. Charges, previously dropped due to lack of evidence, were reinstated on 2 May, immediately after his detention for participating in the April protests had ended.

Freedom of expression – journalists

Independent and opposition journalists faced increased violence during the protests and were prevented from carrying out their work. By the end of the year, there had been no effective investigation into violent attacks on journalists and no one had been brought to justice.

- On 2 April, several journalists covering the anti-government protests were detained. They reported that law enforcement officials prevented them from photographing and interviewing protest participants.
- On 26 March, Seymur Haziyeu, a journalist with opposition newspaper *Azadlıq*, was reportedly abducted and beaten by six masked assailants. He reported that his abductors warned him against writing critical articles about the President.
- On 3 April, another *Azadlıq* journalist, Ramin Deko, was reportedly abducted, warned not to write critical articles about the President and physically assaulted.

Freedom of assembly

A ban on demonstrations effectively criminalized the protests in March and April, and led to imprisonment for many of those who organized and took part in them.

- On 11 March, police dispersed about 100 people attempting to rally in Baku and arrested 43 people. The police also detained and harassed individuals who tried to disseminate information about the protests before the event.
- On 12 March, police broke up peaceful protests by 300 people in the centre of Baku. Some 100 protesters were detained and 30 were sentenced to between five and eight days in prison in summary trials lasting 10 to 15 minutes.

- On 2 April, another opposition protest in central Baku of some 1,000 participants was violently broken up by the police using shields, truncheons and rifles to beat and arrest protesters. The peaceful protest turned violent as several protesters resisted arrest. Some 174 people were detained both before and after the protest; 60 people received from five to 10 days administrative detention and four organizers were jailed for up to three years.

Freedom of association

NGOs working on democratic reform and human rights issues faced increased pressure and harassment.

- On 4 March, three local NGOs located in Ganja, the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, Demos Public Association and the Ganja Regional Information Centre, were evicted from their premises by the authorities without any formal explanation or apparent legal grounds.
- The branches of two international organizations, the National Democratic Institute and the Human Rights House, in Baku were shut down on 7 March and 10 March respectively on the grounds that they had failed to comply with registration requirements.
- On 11 August the office of Leyla Yunus, director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, was destroyed, days after she had spoken against the government-endorsed forced evictions and the demolition of buildings in central Baku as part of a reconstruction project. The demolition began without any prior notice and despite a court order banning any demolition attempts on the property before 13 September 2011.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Several activists detained at and after the protests in March and April complained of ill-treatment at the moment of their arrest and subsequently while in police custody. By the end of the year none of these allegations had been effectively investigated.

- Bakhtiyar Hajiyev alleged that he had been ill-treated and threatened with rape while in police custody in March, but his allegations were dismissed without effective investigation.
- Tural Abbasli, leader of the youth wing of the opposition Musavat Party, maintained that he had been beaten when arrested on 2 April and again while in custody in Yasamal district police station in Baku.
- Tazakhan Miralamli, of the opposition Popular Front Party, was allegedly beaten with batons by the police while being taken into custody on 2 April. His left eye was badly injured. He maintained that he was beaten again in the Sabail district police department before being taken to hospital, where, in addition to the injury to his eye, he was diagnosed with a broken finger, kidney problems and extensive soft tissue damage.

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