

AZERBAIJAN 2025

The government continued to suppress all forms of dissent, with hundreds remaining imprisoned on spurious and politically motivated charges. Independent NGOs and grassroots groups faced severe restrictions. Peaceful protests were suppressed. Torture and other ill-treatment, and impunity for the perpetrators, remained widespread. Women and LGBTI people continued to face discrimination, gender-based violence and state harassment.

Background

Azerbaijan continued deepening relations with the USA and the EU despite its deteriorating human rights record. The US-brokered Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement was signed in August and aimed to end the long-running conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Freedom of expression

The government continued to suppress all kinds of dissent. More than 300 individuals, including human rights defenders, journalists, academics and opposition figures, remained imprisoned on spurious and politically motivated charges.¹

Amendments introduced to the 2022 Law on Media expanded compulsory registration for all outlets and granted the Media Development Agency the power to arbitrarily block websites, remove content or shut down non-compliant foreign media offices. These provisions also criminalized the dissemination of “false information” on vague grounds, imposed arbitrary regulatory burdens on news agencies and prohibited publication of any print media not included in the Media Registry.

In February, the BBC Azerbaijani Service suspended its operations after authorities blocked its licensing process; in October, the authorities declared that its affiliate had been working illegally. TURAN news agency, one of the last independent outlets, also closed in February.

The authorities imposed travel bans to restrict journalistic activities; at least 40 civil society actors and journalists were placed under such restrictions without prior notification.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Journalists reporting on corruption or human rights violations were especially targeted and subjected to spurious charges of smuggling, money laundering, tax evasion and “illegal entrepreneurship”. Nearly 30 journalists remained in prison or under extended pretrial detention.²

In June, Abzas Media journalists Ulvi Hasanli, Sevinc Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, Elnara Gasimova and Mahammad Kekalov, as well as journalists Farid Mehralizada and Hafiz Babali, were sentenced to up to nine years’ imprisonment on charges including currency smuggling and forgery following unfair trials.

Between December 2024 and May 2025, journalists Ramin Deko, Aynur Gambarova, Khayala Aghayeva, Natig Javadli, Aysel Umudova, Fatima Movlamli, Nurlan Gahramanli, Shamshad Agha, and Ulviyya Guliyeva were arrested on currency-smuggling charges as part of a criminal case opened against the independent media outlet Meydan TV. Their pretrial detention was repeatedly extended.

Toplum TV journalists Farid Ismayilov, Mushfig Jabarov and Alasgar Mammadli, and Ahmad Mammadli of Yoldash Media, also remained in prison on similar trumped-up charges with their trials pending at year’s end.

Researchers and academics were also targeted. Igbal Abilov was sentenced to 18 years and Bahruz Samadov to 15 years following fabricated treason charges.

Opposition figure Azer Gasimli, arrested in December 2024, and Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) leader Ali Karimli, detained along with several party members in November, remained in custody at year’s end on questionable charges of bribery and treason, respectively.

Akif Gurbanov and Ruslan Izzatli of the political platform Third Republic and three staff members of the Institute of Democratic Initiatives – Ali Zeynalov, Ramil Babayev and Ilkin Amrahov – remained in pretrial detention at the end of the year on dubious currency-smuggling charges, with their trials pending.

Freedom of association

Independent NGOs and civil society activists continued to face severe restrictions, harassment and unwarranted prosecution.

In February, prosecutors reopened a 2014 criminal investigation targeting civil society groups. This was followed in March by coordinated raids during which police detained several civil society representatives including Bashir Suleymanli, Mammad Mammadzade, Asaf Ahmadov and Ahmad Mammadzade, together with social worker Zamin Zeki. Courts ordered their continued pretrial detention on fabricated financial

and abuse-of-office charges, while repeatedly rejecting motions for release despite serious health concerns.

NGO representatives Mehriban Rahimli, Hafiz Hasanov, Galib Bayramov and Nargiz Mukhtarova were placed under police supervision as part of the same investigation, with their hearings ongoing at year's end. At least 50 civil society figures were questioned as witnesses or suspects, reinforcing a climate of fear and self-censorship.

Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democratic Studies Center, remained in pretrial detention on spurious smuggling charges; these were expanded in April to include alleged tax evasion, forgery and unregistered economic activity. Civil society activist and co-defendant Anar Abdulla was remanded in custody in August after authorities claimed he had breached bail conditions.

Independent unions and grassroots groups were also targeted. The Confederation of Workers' Desk Trade Unions faced renewed pressure after its chair, Afiyaddin Mammadov, received a custodial sentence of eight years' imprisonment on spurious charges and several members were detained. The Young Veterans Public Union was effectively dismantled after its head, Haji Valiyev, was arrested on hooliganism charges, ill-treated in custody and held in extended pretrial detention. The group shut down in May.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Freedom of peaceful assembly remained severely and unduly restricted and the authorities continued to imprison those taking part in peaceful protests. Demonstrations linked to workers' rights, political dissent and religious practices were banned, and participants and organizers were harassed. In July, couriers planning a demonstration over wage cuts were summoned for questioning and pressured to remove social media posts.

Opposition party members were regularly prevented from assembling. In September, police blocked APFP leader Ali Karimli, National Council of Democratic Forces chair Jamil Hasanli and others from attending a public event, and several APFP activists were later arrested on unsubstantiated drug or hooliganism charges.

Restrictions were also imposed on religious gatherings. On 6 July, Shia communities were prevented from observing Ashura on the correct date, and several mosques were barred from holding ceremonies.

Violations of international humanitarian law

The Azerbaijani authorities failed to ensure accountability and protection for people affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In October, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Azerbaijan to provide information on the detention and health conditions of 23 Armenian prisoners, of whom eight were former de facto officials in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread with reports of beatings, threats, sexual violence, forced confessions and denial of medical care in detention. The authorities failed to carry out effective, independent investigations into any such allegations, thereby ensuring impunity for the perpetrators.

In June, the Muslim Unity Movement reported that one of its members, Elgiz Mammadov, had sustained injuries consistent with torture, allegedly to extract a video confession. In August, seven women detained while distributing religious offerings said they were beaten, threatened with sexual violence and denied lawyers.

Ill-treatment in detention remained systemic. Women journalists from Abzas Media and defendants in the Toplum TV case reported experiencing violence, punitive transfers and prolonged shackling during court hearings. Union activists Elvin Mustafayev and Afiyaddin Mammadov and war veteran Haji Valiyev were repeatedly placed in prolonged solitary confinement.

Denial of medical care was common, and the health of many of those arrested on spurious charges continued to deteriorate. Activist Mohyaddin Orujov received only painkillers despite a kidney illness.

Sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence

Women and LGBTI people continued to face discrimination, including gender-based violence and state harassment, with authorities failing to prevent, investigate or punish rights abuses.

On 8 March, LGBTI activist Rauf Heydarov was sentenced to 30 days' administrative detention after a solo protest in the capital, Baku.

On 4 November, LGBTI youth Yasin Ibadov, also known as Rüzgar, was fatally stabbed in Baku, reportedly by a family member, following prior threats linked to their sexual orientation. Witnesses reported a delayed police and medical response.

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1. ***Azerbaijan: No Sign of Hope for the Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan: Systemic and Serious Breaches of Human Rights Must be Strongly Condemned, 23 January.*** ↩
 2. ***Azerbaijan: From Newsroom to Cell. Persecution of Independent Journalists, 22 July.*** ↩