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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2023

Azerbaijan

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

1
/100

Democracy Percentage	1.19 /100
Democracy Score	1.07 /7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

1 /100

Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.



Author

- Anonymous

Status Changes

- No changes in 2023.

Executive Summary

In 2022, the government of Azerbaijan continued to scale up the authoritarian measures deployed in previous years. The executive branch maintained its consolidated power and demonstrated an unwillingness to conduct real democratic reforms. The national legislature and local municipalities remained powerless and incompetent institutions as they carried out their activities under the directives of the presidential office. Meritocracy in the country is largely compromised and undermined by deep-rooted nepotism and clientelism, ¹ and bribery and corruption remained widespread in most government agencies. Although the 2019 anticorruption campaign continued into 2022, it primarily served to eliminate high-ranking officials who had lost favor with the regime over time.

The nationalist fervor that surged with Azerbaijan's victory over neighboring Armenia in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War continued into 2022, boosting President Ilham Aliyev's popularity and impeding the opposition's ability to criticize officials for poor democratic governance. ² Citizens and civil society are effectively barred from participating in political processes and national governance. The executive branch kept its complete grip over the legislature and judiciary, having eliminated any meaningful checks and balances among the three branches of government. Media access to government information was severely restricted. Azerbaijan's unicameral parliament, the Milli Majlis—or National Assembly—tended to justify the executive branch's authoritarian policies and thus remained largely unaccountable to the public. Azerbaijan's land borders remained closed during the year as air travel prices soared, creating enormous challenges for students and those seeking medical treatment abroad. ³

The executive branch continued its tight control over the country's electoral processes. The government targeted opposition political parties that refused to engage in dialogue with the ruling party. Opposition party members were detained, imprisoned, tortured, and subjected to demeaning treatment on false charges during the year. Defamation charges are specifically used by the government to target political opponents. ⁴ A new draft law on political parties, which severely restricts political participation, ⁵ was presented before the National Assembly ⁶ and adopted in November. ⁷

The civic sector also received threats and pressure from the police and security services during the year. Some civil society members were detained and tortured, others were imprisoned on false charges, and police failed to investigate crimes against antigovernment activists. The rise in violence against political opponents and critical voices in 2022 generated antigovernment protests with the campaign slogan "We do not want a criminal state." However, the protests were dispersed, with 30 demonstrators detained. ⁸ Marginalized groups such as LGBT+ people continued to receive threats and violence. The ILGA 2022 Rainbow Europe Map and Index placed Azerbaijan in the lowest rank among 49 European countries, ⁹ underscoring how LGBT+ people faced countless hate crimes, violence, threats, and employment discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. ¹⁰

No serious action was taken to improve the media environment in Azerbaijan, ¹¹ where freedom of expression and media freedoms are strictly constrained. Journalists faced harassment and death threats or were detained on dubious defamation charges during the year. ¹² Approved by the president on February 8, ¹³ the Law on Media gave new powers to the government to persecute journalists who investigate corruption and other crimes committed by high-ranking officials. ¹⁴ The quick adoption of the law without sufficient public discussion and hearings demonstrated the government's disrespect for democratic values. ¹⁵

No considerable reforms over the judiciary were observed in 2022. Judges have been shown to cooperate with prosecutors, police, and security services to suppress dissenting voices and views under directives from the presidential office. Human rights advocates face arrests when they attempt to defend political opponents and critical voices in court. In one such case, prosecutors investigating

the severe beating of Tofiq Yagublu, a prominent opposition figure, concluded that he had intentionally injured himself—although such self-injury is unlikely, if impossible, while in police custody. ¹⁶ Several leading opposition members from the Popular Front Party were detained and sentenced on false charges. On September 10, Elchin Sadigov, an independent lawyer known for defending political prisoners, was arrested on charges of facilitating bribery. Although later released under house arrest, his case illustrates the hostile environment lawyers face in defending the rights of antiregime voices. ¹⁷

Local governance structures also received no democratic reforms in 2022, and municipalities remained ineffective and incompetent. The chiefs of local executive bodies kept their excessive powers, leaving no room for local decentralization of government, and were found to be involved in corruption and bribery. Several officials from local executive bodies were detained on charges of corruption and misuse of position and government resources. ¹⁸

Corruption remained widespread in Azerbaijan during the year, although the State Security Service continued its recent anticorruption campaign ostensibly targeting local executives, high-ranking officeholders, and cabinet ministers. ¹⁹ Some reports suggest that these campaigns are actually intended to weaken old clans or eliminate officials who have lost the support of the political regime, particularly since government anticorruption bodies have shown no interest in investigating cases of wrongdoing ²⁰ reported by international watchdogs. ²¹

At-A-Glance

Azerbaijan's national governance is consolidated authoritarianism in which there is no effective system of checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The government controls the electoral process, and elections are held with fraudulent voting and corruptive practices. Civil society members are regularly detained and subjected to degrading and inhumane treatment by law enforcement when they criticize the government or attempt to organize antigovernment protests. Media are under state control, and independent journalists are regularly detained and sometimes imprisoned on false charges when they investigate corruption cases and other crimes committed by high-ranking officials. Local governance is not democratic since municipalities, the backbone of local self-governance, are strongly dependent on local executive

chiefs, who are directly appointed by the president. The judiciary is not independent since judges collaborate with prosecutors, police, and security services to imprison political opponents and critical voices under the directives of the executive branch. Corruption remains widespread in the country, and anticorruption campaigns target only those who have fallen out of favor with the regime.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	1.00 /7.00
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- Azerbaijan's system of governance is consolidated authoritarianism. The constitution and other national legislation are repeatedly violated, and citizens are effectively barred from participating in political processes and decision-making. There is no sign of a system of checks and balances since the executive branch has accumulated excessive power, controlling the judiciary and legislature. Access to government information by the media and citizens is strictly limited. The opposition, journalists, and civil society members are frequently targeted when they criticize the government. In 2022, the state-controlled media continued to publicize narratives glorifying President Ilham Aliyev's persona and solidifying his legacy after Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh War with neighboring Armenia. ²² The 2020 victory provided the government with new opportunities to target critical voices who call for democratic openings. ²³
- Azerbaijan's 125-seat unicameral parliament, the Milli Majlis—or National Assembly—is unaccountable to the public and completely dependent on the executive branch. Mass media and citizens have limited access to lawmakers and legislative processes. As a result, the parliament is unlikely to reflect citizens' preferences, provide an effective forum for discussing societal challenges, or adopt necessary laws to increase the population's living standards. The National Assembly has primarily served to defend policies implemented by the executive body rather than effectively check its rising power. The scandalous parliamentary snap elections on February 9, 2020, maintained the executive branch's tight control over the legislature. ²⁴ Widespread voting fraud and corruption during the elections wiped out the

previous years' atmosphere of optimism over democratic openings and reforms. **25**

- The executive branch of government is also unaccountable to the public. Like the Milli Majlis, the executive branch does not consult citizens, the media, or civil society in its decision-making processes, and almost all policies are formulated and implemented without meaningful public discussions. The government has kept the country's land borders closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing the spread of the virus as the primary reason. **26** The ensuing high cost of air travel has sparked outrage among the public. The government-owned Azerbaijani Airlines established a monopoly over flights to and from Azerbaijan, creating barriers for ordinary citizens needing to travel for education or medical treatment. **27** Entering and leaving the country is now only possible via air. The government has largely ignored public pleas over these challenges and kept the land borders closed despite protests, **28** demonstrating a lack of transparency and accountability in communicating about these policies.
- In 2022, major political issues brought increased focus to Azerbaijan's tense and dynamic foreign policy, foremost by the attempts to improve peace processes with Armenia. Fragile talks and disagreements over border delimitation and demarcation, the status of Karabakh, political prisoners, and landmines led to several military confrontations between the sides. **29** Despite hopes for reaching a peace treaty by the end of 2022, no breakthrough was achieved, and peace efforts remained fruitless. **30**
- The Azerbaijani government also made efforts to retake control over the natural resources of Karabakh, which nonetheless remained under control of the territory's Armenian ethnic group based on the November 2020 trilateral agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed after the 44-Day War. Azerbaijani activists with alleged ties to the government organized protests on the Lachin corridor, a mountain road that connects the ethnic-Armenian controlled part of Karabakh with Armenia, disrupting transportation flows between these Armenian ethnic kin. While Armenians claim that the Azerbaijani government is behind the protests, Baku has denied the allegations. **31** Activists state that they are "opposing illegal mining operations" **32** and the transfer of weapons from Armenia to the ethnic-Armenian controlled part of Karabakh. **33**

- Azerbaijan also confronted neighboring Iran in 2022. While Iran accused Baku of collaborating with Israel, Azerbaijan expressed concerns over Tehran's military drills close to the Azerbaijani border. In response to the drills, Azerbaijan conducted joint-military training with Turkey near the Iranian border. **34** Azerbaijan also detained 19 people, accusing Iran's intelligence services of funding and training them to carry out illegal acts to disrupt state security in the country. **35**

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

1.00
/ 7.00

- In 2022, Azerbaijan's political regime made efforts to consolidate its control over the electoral process, eliminating any chances for transparent, free, and competitive elections. On November 29, the National Assembly adopted the Law on Political Parties. **36** Some provisions of the new law are likely to establish significant barriers to party participation in future elections and tighten the government's grip over electoral processes in coming years. The new law stipulates that political parties are to be abolished if they fail to participate in parliamentary, presidential, or municipal elections twice in a row. At least 10,000 members and 200 cofounders are needed to set up a new party. Current parties with fewer than 10,000 members are given 90 days to increase their ranks to this required minimum. **37** Only those who have permanently resided in Azerbaijan for the past 20 years are allowed to establish a political party. Parties are also required to provide executive officials with membership data, including members' names, their fathers' names, individual identification numbers, birth dates, addresses, and phone numbers within 60 days after the law is adopted and to report any changes twice a year. While progovernment figures and party leaders in the National Assembly stressed the important role of the new law in addressing "modern development realities and requirements" and providing incentives for political pluralism, the opposition parties were alarmed by these provisions, which allow the government to expand its control over the electoral process and party participation. **38** For instance, Ali Karimli, chair of Popular Front Party, claimed that the new law provides the government with "mechanisms

for canceling, suspending, and not registering real opposition parties.” ³⁹ Arif Hajili, head of Müsavat Party, pointed out that “participation in elections is a right, not a duty.” ⁴⁰

- The government also targeted opposition party members to weaken electoral processes and eliminate the possibility of a growing opposition. On January 13, Ali Aliyev, leader of Citizens and Development Party, was sentenced to five months in prison on slander charges based on a lawsuit filed by a State Border Service officer. ⁴¹ New charges were raised against Aliyev in the following months to prolong his prison term. ⁴² The politician decried the accusations as groundless and politically motivated, and was recognized as a political prisoner by human rights activists, ⁴³ who emphasized Azerbaijan’s broad interpretation of defamation charges in order to silence the regime’s political opponents. ⁴⁴ On May 9, Eyvaz Yahyaoglu, a member of Nationalist Democratic Party, was detained and sentenced to 28 days of administrative arrest on charges of disobeying the lawful demands of police. ⁴⁵ His arrest came after he was repeatedly warned to cease criticizing state officials on his YouTube channel, which was shut down after he was detained. Yahyaoglu denied all allegations as fabrications, and Reporters Without Borders called for his immediate release. Current and former members of Popular Front Party were also targeted by the government. For instance, on May 20, the police detained Ziya Ibrahimli, a former party member and political immigrant deported from Germany, upon his arrival at the Baku airport. ⁴⁶ He had been forced to leave the country after he had criticized fraud that occurred during the 2018 presidential elections. ⁴⁷

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.	1.25 /7.00
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- Azerbaijan’s civic sector functions under restrictive legislation and a repressive environment. The police and security services target civil society members whenever they criticize the government for its human rights

abuses. On April 21, 2022, Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, a well-known Azerbaijani activist, was kidnapped by four men in masks and taken to an unknown location where he was subjected to degrading treatment and tortured. ⁴⁸ The failure of law enforcement agencies to investigate the kidnapping raised concerns that the police might be responsible for the crime. ⁴⁹ On December 9, Hajiyeu was arrested on charges of hooliganism and contempt of court. ⁵⁰ US and EU officials expressed concerns about his arrest, and international civil society and human rights organizations demanded his immediate release. ⁵¹

- On May 14, activists rallied in the capital Baku calling for an end to impunity for attacks on government critics, including journalists, human rights defenders, and political activists. ⁵² Three major human rights abuses triggered the protests: the torture of opposition politician Tofig Yagublu, ⁵³ the kidnapping of activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, ⁵⁴ and the attack on journalist Aytan Mammadova. ⁵⁵ Although law enforcement launched criminal investigations into these cases, the alleged perpetrators were never found and brought to justice. Victims of the attacks claim that law enforcement is reluctant to search for the individuals because the Ministry of Interior has ordered secret agents to attack political dissent, specifically critics of the minister. With the campaign slogan “We do not want a criminal state,” protesters stressed that the immunity for officials from criminal investigations and fair trials—notwithstanding claims and evidence put forward by journalists, activists, and political opponents—encourages more violence. At the Baku rally, approximately 30 protesters were detained and later released. ⁵⁶ The British Embassy condemned the police use of force against the demonstrators and called upon the government to thoroughly investigate all allegations of violence. ⁵⁷
- On September 20, Ahmad Mammadli, leader of the prodemocracy D18 Movement, was convicted of deliberately disobeying the police and received a 30-day administrative imprisonment. ⁵⁸ The arrest followed his posts on Facebook criticizing President Aliyev, ⁵⁹ and other political activities. On November 11, Orkhan Zeynalli of D18 Movement was also arrested. ⁶⁰ Rovshan Mammadov was detained on the same day on charges of disobeying police during demonstrations organized by Popular Front Party. Protesters demanded the opening of land borders, release of political

prisoners, reforms, and freedom of assembly. The protests were dispersed by police. ⁶¹

- LGBT+ people and women in Azerbaijan did not see progress in their rights in 2022. The country remained at the lowest rank (2 percent) among 49 countries on the ILGA 2022 Rainbow Europe Map and Index, which ranks states based on their policies towards LGBT+ people. ⁶² The ILGA Europe Annual Review also demonstrated that LGBT+ people in Azerbaijan face countless hate crimes, violence, threats, and employment discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. ⁶³ As one prominent example, on February 22, Avaz Shikhmammadov, an Azerbaijani reporter and gay rights activist, was stabbed to death at his home after repeatedly asking law enforcement agencies to provide him with protection against threats to his safety and life. ⁶⁴
- Gender-based violence remained pervasive, and women's rights violations were underreported. COVID-19 restrictions worsened domestic violence in the country, increasing the number of women seeking shelter. Azerbaijani feminist activists have raised alarms about domestic violence, ⁶⁵ protesting femicide, standing up for women's rights, and providing shelters for women across the country. ⁶⁶ Feminists organized an annual demonstration and march in Baku on March 8 to draw attention to the challenges that women face in the society. For the first time in its history, the annual march in the capital did not meet with interference from law enforcement. ⁶⁷

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

1.00
/7.00

- In 2022, no serious changes in Azerbaijan's media environment were reported. ⁶⁸ Freedom of expression and media freedom remained constrained in the country. Reports show that journalists are imprisoned on "dubious charges" or receive threats from unidentified individuals with alleged ties to the secret service and law enforcement agencies when they attempt to investigate corruption and human rights violations. ⁶⁹ Journalists are asked to terminate their investigations and warned of deadly

consequences if they refuse to comply. ⁷⁰ For instance, on May 8, Aytan Mammadova, a freelance journalist, was threatened by an unknown assailant with a knife pointed towards her throat inside the elevator of her apartment block, who demanded she terminate her investigation of a high-profile murder trial and warned that her daughter would suffer if she did not comply. ⁷¹

- On July 26, a former high-level Georgian official, currently imprisoned, accused Georgia's former prime minister of personally ordering the 2017 abduction of Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who reported on alleged corruption between Azerbaijani and Georgian officials ⁷² and fled Azerbaijan during the government crackdowns on journalists and other critical voices starting that year. ⁷³ Mukhtarli was sentenced in 2018 to a six-year prison term in Azerbaijan after being abducted in Georgia.
- On February 8, the contested Law on Media entered into force after being approved by President Aliyev, ⁷⁴ despite calls from civil society and international organizations to overturn the law ⁷⁵ because of its undemocratic nature ⁷⁶ and quick adoption without sufficient public discussion. ⁷⁷ While the government stated that the new law attempts to modernize the country's media legislation, bringing it closer to international standards and augmenting professionalism in the press, ⁷⁸ independent experts say the statute fails to comply with international human rights standards of media freedom and freedom of expression. ⁷⁹ In an open letter, Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, raised concerns that the law does not meet international standards and gives discretionary powers to the government to control media "through licensing, excessively restricting journalists' work, and introducing several limitations to the financial, legal, and operational activities of media companies and entities." ⁸⁰
- On October 11, the Committee on Legal Issues and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) held discussions about ongoing threats to the safety of human rights defenders and journalists in Azerbaijan. The PACE committee appointed a new rapporteur to investigate threats against journalists and human rights activists and human rights violations in Azerbaijan. ⁸¹

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

1.25
/7.00

- Elected directly by citizens, Azerbaijan’s municipal governments are considered the backbone of the country’s local self-governance. They are not government institutions but self-ruled public administration organizations established to decentralize government management systems and facilitate progress in the civic sector. Yet municipal elections are usually held with fraudulent voting, and independent observers reported countless cases of carousel voting, fabrications, and pressure on independent candidates during the latest polls in December 2019. ⁸²
- In reality, municipalities are under the informal control of local executive chiefs, who are directly appointed by the President of Azerbaijan. The appointed chiefs usually amass excessive power over local areas and issues, leaving no room for decentralization of government powers and responsibilities. They tend to use their official positions to become involved in corruption, bribery, and other illegal activities, eliminating any form of effective local democratic governance. ⁸³ Local authorities are not subject to clear and consistent transparency and accountability standards, and citizens and the media are not given regular access to public information and records at the local level. ⁸⁴
- Municipalities remained underfunded with no real authority in 2022. Some were not only incapable of realizing public projects but also had debts to the State Social Defense Fund and were unable to compensate their employees. ⁸⁵ The 2021 monitoring report of the Council of Europe’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities stated that municipalities “remain unable in practice to exercise the basic functions attributed to them by legislation,” and their responsibilities are limited to “the maintenance of municipal roads, cemeteries, and some aspects of the delivery of social care.” ⁸⁶ Some municipalities even lacked the necessary capacity and training to complete these limited responsibilities.
- Citizens are less likely to have meaningful participation in decision-making since local governments are unwilling to invite important societal groups, including civil society, trade unions, and business circles, to consult when officials make and implement local policies. Municipalities are sometimes

involved in illegal land transfers to business interests in exchange for bribery or under directives of local executive chiefs. For instance, the chair and officials of Saray municipality were arrested on July 30 on charges of misuse of authority, land sales, and corruption. ⁸⁷ There were also citizen complaints against the chairs of Kurdakhani ⁸⁸ and Bilasuvar ⁸⁹ municipalities over the mishandling of land sales and transfers.

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.	1.00 /7.00
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- Prosecutors and judges in Azerbaijan are controlled by the executive branch, although the constitution nominally guarantees judicial independence. Judges and prosecutors cooperate to jail political opponents, including opposition figures, civil society members, investigative journalists, and dissidents, on false charges based on political orders from the executive branch. These informal circles deploy the criminal justice system to undermine critical voices and political opponents.
- On January 17, prosecutors concluded their investigation into the severe beating of Tofig Yagublu, a leading opposition politician. The Prosecutor's Office stated that the politician had injured himself by hitting the police car door with his head while he was being arrested and claimed that he later punched himself while in police custody. ⁹⁰ He was among the dozens arrested on December 1, 2021, while peacefully protesting the long-term detainment of opposition activist Saleh Rustamov. ⁹¹ Although prosecutors were initially unwilling to examine the case, they were pressured to start the investigation after public scrutiny and calls from human rights groups for "a prompt, impartial, and thorough" probe into the violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrations in Baku. ⁹² However, prosecutors concluded that Yagublu had "suffered from self-inflicted injuries." ⁹³
- On March 2, the Baku Court of Appeal upheld terrorist charges against Niyameddin Ahmedov, a bodyguard for Popular Front Party chairman Ali Karimli. ⁹⁴ Ahmedov had been sentenced on October 8, 2021, to 13 years in prison on charges of financing terrorism, ⁹⁵ after being detained on April 16,

2020, on charges of violating the quarantine regime and disobeying the police. ⁹⁶ He was severely tortured and pressured to testify against Karimli but refused to do so and was therefore kept in jail.

- On March 10, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that the detention and deportation of four Turkish nationals from Azerbaijan to Turkey in 2017–18 had been “extrajudicial rendition.” ⁹⁷ The ECtHR decided that State Migration Service officers had not complied with standard extradition proceedings while detaining and deporting Turkish citizens, and Turkish nationals had been denied necessary protections against arbitrary *refoulement* (forcible return). On March 24, the ECtHR ruled that the confiscation and destruction of journalist Ganimat Zayidov’s book manuscript about his experience while detained in Azerbaijan had violated his right to freedom of expression. ⁹⁸
- On May 31, parents of political immigrants who were deported to Azerbaijan from Germany protested in front of the German Embassy. ⁹⁹ One reported that their son had undergone a secret judicial proceeding with no relatives allowed to participate in the trial. ¹⁰⁰
- On September 10, Elchin Sadigov, an independent lawyer known for defending political prisoners, was arrested on charges of facilitating bribery between journalist Avaz Zeynalli and the family of Rasim Mammadov, the imprisoned former chair of Baku Steel Company. Zeynalli was convicted of accepting an \$11,764 bribe from Mammadov, and Sadigov was found guilty of facilitating the bribery. ¹⁰¹ Both were sentenced to four months of pretrial detention. ¹⁰² Human rights defenders believe their detainment was politically motivated. ¹⁰³ Sadigov claimed his detention was punishment for his defending the rights of political prisoners. ¹⁰⁴ On September 16, he was released under house arrest, while Zeynalli remained in pretrial detention. Legal experts believe he cannot be tried under current corruption laws, which only stipulate wrongdoing committed by government officials.

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

1.00
/ 7.00

- Corruption remained widespread in Azerbaijan in 2022. There was ample evidence that government officials and local executive chiefs misused their power to seize public resources, ¹⁰⁵ and business owners were pressured to bribe revenues to government officials. High-ranking officials and local executive chiefs have been sacked and imprisoned on corruption charges when they fall out of political favor and are no longer useful for the regime's interests, instead of when actual crimes are committed. Corruption charges are an effective tool for the executive branch to remove unwanted government officials since many have been involved in corruption to a certain degree. Targeting unwanted officials also generates a public perception that the government is in charge. But anticorruption campaigns largely serve as government window dressing. ¹⁰⁶
- Azerbaijan's State Security Service continued its recently developed anticorruption campaign into 2022, targeting high-ranking officials, cabinet ministers, heads of local governments, and military officers. ¹⁰⁷ On February 13, it conducted a search of offices at the Ministry of Defense and detained four high-ranking officers on grounds of embezzlement of over \$5.9 million. ¹⁰⁸ On April 4, President Aliyev approved the 2022–26 National Action Plan to Strengthen the Fight against Corruption, which aims to reinforce the efforts of various government agencies and civil society organizations to coordinate in combatting corruption. ¹⁰⁹ Anticorruption campaigns continued into late November and December, when several high-ranking officials from the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic were arrested on corruption and embezzlement charges. ¹¹⁰
- Local analysts claim that the anticorruption campaign reflects clashes between new and old clans in the government since many officials at the highest levels of government remain untouched, although they have been involved in countless corruption practices ¹¹¹ according to international watchdogs. ¹¹² As reported, this type of government purge has its limits in actually combating corruption, and is instead used to target certain figures when they fall out of favor with the regime. The domestic political process suggests that the presidential office has taken a step toward weakening some clans and consolidating power around the ruling family. As such, corruption charges are a handy tool to remove certain political figures connected to clans. ¹¹³

- International watchdogs also reported about corrupt practices in Azerbaijan in 2022. Relying on documents from the oil giant BP, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that two Azerbaijani companies owned by the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) had siphoned \$1.7 billion from Shah Deniz 2, a BP-operated project, from gas production in Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas field in the Caspian Sea.
114 The OCCRP report also demonstrates that BP, although repeatedly alerted, had turned a blind eye to the corruption allegations.

Footnotes

- 1** "Azerbaijan Country Report 2022", BTI Transformation Index, 2022, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/AZE>
- 2** Bahruz Samadov, "Azerbaijan's new reality", OC Media, 24 December 2020, <https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-azerbaijans-new-reality/>
- 3** Heydar Isayev, "Two years on, Azerbaijan's land borders remain closed", Eurasianet, 29 April 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/two-years-on-azerbaijans-land-borders-remain-clo...>
- 4** "Azerbaijani opposition activist convicted for slander for the third time in six months", Jam News, 23 June 2022, <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijani-opposition-activist-convicted-for-slan...>
- 5** "New draft law "On Political Parties" presented at the Milli Majlis", Meydan TV, 8 September 2022, <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/new-draft-law-on-political-parties-pre...>

More footnotes



On Azerbaijan

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

9/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

37/100 **Not Free**

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