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The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly remained suppressed as dissenting voices were silenced and imprisoned, and peaceful protests were violently dispersed by police. Persecution of government critics, including those forcibly returned from abroad, continued. Violation of due process and unfair trials were common; lawyers were harassed. Torture and other ill-treatment remained endemic, its perpetrators enjoying impunity.

Background

President Ilham Aliyev initiated several measures aimed at economic and political modernization. In October both the prime minister and the minister of economy were replaced. The influential head of the presidential administration, *Ramiz Mehdiyev widely regarded as the supporter of repressive politics in recent years, resigned on 23 October.*

Violations of the ceasefire in the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region were reported less frequently compared to previous years, after the establishment of a direct hotline with Armenia in October 2018.

Freedom of expression and association

NGOs critical of the government remained closed and unable to operate due to denial of registration and arbitrary legal proceedings initiated against them in previous years. Dozens of NGO leaders, activists and human rights defenders remained under a travel ban with their assets and bank accounts frozen. According to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) “continuing use of restrictive regulations by the authorities fails to offer favourable conditions for the proper and independent functioning of NGOs and leads, in some cases, to these organisations being unable to resume their work.” Persons belonging to national minorities also continued to face restrictions in setting up non-governmental organizations to represent their interests in the public sphere.

On 29 May, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Azerbaijan had failed to comply with its 2014 decision to immediately release political activist Ilgar Mammadov; end the prosecution of government critics and provide acquittal and reparation. In March, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan lifted the probation conditions and travel ban imposed on Ilgar Mammadov since his release from prison in August 2018, but did not to quash his convictions.

On 7 August Baku court upheld the conviction of former prisoner of conscience and journalist Khadija Ismayilova on trumped up charges of tax evasion, leaving her barred from leaving the country. She had previously served 18 months in prison on these charges.

Politically motivated prosecution

In March, over 400 prisoners received a presidential pardon, including some 50 people featuring on a list of over 150 victims of politically motivated prosecution compiled by local human rights groups. Nevertheless, government critics continued to be harassed, arbitrarily detained and jailed following unfair trials, including critics forcibly returned to Azerbaijan.

On 27 February, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes sentenced three opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) members – Saleh Rustamov, Agil Maharramov, and Babek Hasanov – to prison sentences ranging from three to seven years on questionable charges including illegal entrepreneurship, money laundering and illegal drug possession.

On 12 June, Polad Aslanov, editor of news websites *Xeberman* and *Press-az* who was reportedly investigating corruption in the tourism sector, was detained and charged with treason. In December new charges of threatening murder were added by the prosecution as the investigation into his case continued.

The government continued to seek the forcible return of its critics from abroad. On 28 February, the authorities arrested ethnic Talish activist Fakhraddin Abbasov upon his deportation from Russia. He was charged with inciting violent uprising and ethnic hatred and remanded in prison; his trial was ongoing at the end of the year.

Freedom of Assembly

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly remained severely restricted. Peaceful protests were violently dispersed by the police on several occasions, and those arrested were beaten and otherwise ill-treated in detention.

Between 30 and 31 March, police arrested four activists from the opposition party PFP for organizing a rally. Activists were jailed for between 15 and 30 days for purportedly “resisting police’s lawful orders”.

In October, police dispersed two peaceful protests in central Baku using excessive force.

On 19 October, police officers broke up a peaceful opposition rally and beat and dragged the protestors into police cars, detaining more than 60 people. Most were released with a warning, while approximately 20 people faced administrative charges. Several protestors detained during the protests, including opposition activists Ali Karimli and Tofiq Yagoblu reported being handcuffed, kicked and beaten in custody.

On 20 October, police dispersed a rally protesting violence against women. Police detained a dozen participants, all of whom were released soon afterwards. Some women protestors after the dispersal uploaded photos on social media showing their bodies with bruises and other injuries.

Torture and other ill-treatment

On 26 December, rapper Parviz Guluzade (“Paster”), whose song alluded to corruption involving the presidential family, was arrested by police for purportedly “disturbing public order”. He reported being beaten by the police during his arrest and interrogation and was jailed for 30 days under administrative charges.

On 28 December Mehman Huseynov, former prisoner of conscience and opposition candidate in a local election, was arbitrarily arrested by police in Baku, alongside five others, and jailed for 30 days. His complaints of a severe beating by the police were dismissed as “false” by the Interior Ministry. A previous complaint by Mehman Huseynov of beatings by the police was not only dismissed but resulted in Huseynov being imprisoned for two years for criminal libel in March 2017.

Harassment of lawyers

Human rights lawyers continued to face harassment, suspension and disbarment for performing their professional duties, affecting their independence and willingness to take on human rights cases.

On 22 February, Yalchin Imanov, a lawyer working on politically-sensitive cases, was disbarred for publicizing the ill-treatment of one of his clients.

On 25 February, lawyer Elchin Sadigov, representing several defendants in the Ganja Case (see above) was formally reprimanded by the bar for advising his client to “falsely” report torture, despite photographic evidence showing his client’s injuries and signs of beatings.

Shahla Sumbatova, another defence lawyer in the Ganja case, had her license suspended on 27 November pending disbarment on the basis of a complaint from a past client.

The right to a healthy and sustainable environment/right to health

Shah Deniz II, a major energy pipeline project between Azerbaijan and Turkey due to be completed in 2020, caused concern over its social and environmental impacts affecting hundreds of people. Expert international environmental monitors reported degrading air quality with associated health impacts for affected people, while access to information and legal remedies for local residents, including compensation mechanisms, remained limited.

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