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Republic of Azerbaijan

Head of state: **Ilham Aliyev**

Head of government: **Artur Rasizade**

At least six prominent human rights defenders were imprisoned and leading human rights organizations forced to shut down or cease their activities. Independent journalists continued to face harassment, violence and trumped-up criminal charges. Freedom of assembly remained restricted. There were frequent reports of torture and other ill-treatment.

Freedom of association

NGO leaders continued to face threats and harassment from the authorities, including raids by security forces, the confiscation of equipment and imposition of travel bans. At least 10 leading human rights NGOs were prevented from operating as their bank accounts were frozen under a high-profile criminal investigation from May onwards.

Additional restrictions concerning NGO registration and activities were introduced in the law and used arbitrarily to open criminal proceedings against several NGO leaders. On 13 May, the Prosecutor General's Office launched an investigation into a number of foreign and local NGOs leading to the arrest of six prominent human rights defenders in connection with their organizations' activities.

Prisoners of conscience

The authorities continued to imprison government critics, political activists and journalists. At the end of the year, there were at least 20 prisoners of conscience.

Journalist Hilal Mammadov, sentenced in earlier years under charges of drug possession and treason, remained in prison.

Khadija Ismayilova, an outspoken investigative journalist who had published extensively on corruption and human rights violations, was arrested on 5 December on charges of "inciting someone to attempt suicide". She also faced separate charges of criminal libel. Khadija Ismayilova had been previously targeted and harassed by the authorities, including with the imposition of a travel ban prior to her arrest.

Online and social media activities critical to the authorities continued to be prosecuted on fabricated charges, typically drugs-related. Among these cases were Abdul Abilov and Rashad Ramazanov, both arrested and sentenced in 2013, to five and a half and nine years in prison respectively. Political activist Faraj Karimov, who co-ordinated popular Facebook groups calling for the resignation of the President, and his brother Siraj Karimov, were arrested in July on spurious drugs charges.

Nine activists from the pro-democracy youth organization NIDA were arrested between March and May 2013 and in January 2014 on trumped-up charges ranging from illegal drugs and weapon possession to organizing public disorder. They were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from six to eight years in May. All claimed innocence at the time of detention, although some later made confessions, allegedly under duress. Shahin Novruzlu and Bakhtiyar Guliyev were released on 18 October under a presidential pardon after they had sent clemency appeals to the President, thereby "recognizing" their crimes. Activists Zaur Gurbanli and Uzeyir Mammadli were released on 29 December following a presidential pardon. Mammad Azizov, Rashad Hasanov, Rashadat Akhundov, Ilkin Rustamzade and Omar Mammadov remained imprisoned.

Opposition activists Ilgar Mammadov, Tofiq Yagublu and Yadigar Sadigov, arrested in 2013 on charges of inciting public disorder and hooliganism, were given prison sentences of seven, five and six (reduced to four on appeal) years respectively. On 22 May, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the actual purpose of Ilgar Mammadov's arrest was to "silence or punish" him for criticizing the government.

In a major crackdown on human rights activists, six prominent NGO leaders were remanded on charges of fraud, illegal entrepreneurship and "abuse of power".

On 26 May, Anar Mammadli, chairman, and Bashir Suleymanli, executive director, of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS) were sentenced to five years and six months' and three years and six months' imprisonment respectively. EMDS had exposed electoral violations during the presidential election in October 2013.

Prominent human rights defender Leyla Yunus, director of the Peace and Democracy Institute, was arrested on 30 July, followed by her husband Arif Yunus' arrest on 5 August. They were charged with "crimes" relating to their NGO work, including treason in connection with activities to promote peace and reconciliation with Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Rasul Jafarov, founder of the NGO Human Rights Club (HRC), was arrested on 2 August. HRC had been denied registration since its establishment in 2010. Intigam Aliyev, a human rights lawyer renowned for helping in dozens of cases reaching the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), was arrested on 8 August 2014.

Former prisoners of conscience, human rights defenders Bakhtiyar Mammadov and Ihlam Amiraslanov, were released on 9 December 2013 and 26 May 2014 respectively under presidential pardon. Youth activist Dashgin Melikov was released on parole on 8 May 2014, and journalist Sardar Alibeyli was released on 29 December 2014.

Freedom of expression

Independent journalists continued to face threats, violence and harassment. On 26 December, the offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service were raided and sealed off by members of the Prosecutor's Office without official explanation after confiscating documents and equipment. Twelve radio employees were detained and questioned, and released after signing a document on non-disclosure.

On 21 August, journalist and NGO activist Ilgar Nasibov was severely beaten by several men who stormed the office of the Democracy and NGO Development Resource Centre in Nakhichevan, an autonomous exclave of Azerbaijan. He suffered severe head injuries, including broken facial bones. The authorities opened an investigation against one alleged assailant. Charges were also brought against Ilgar Nasibov for allegedly stepping on the assailant's foot first.

Freedom of assembly

Demonstrations remained effectively prohibited outside officially designated, and typically remote, areas. In central Baku, the capital, law enforcement authorities used violence and excessive force to prevent and break up "unauthorized", peaceful assemblies throughout the year.

On 1 May, around 25 youth activists peacefully gathered in Sabir Garden, in Baku, to commemorate May Day. Within minutes, dozens of plain-clothed and uniformed police officers violently broke up their assembly. Protesters were beaten and dragged into police cars. Six were arrested, including two minors who were released the same day. The remaining four were sentenced to administrative detention ranging from 10 to 15 days.

On 6 May, some 150 people gathered peacefully outside the court building in Baku where NIDA activists were standing trial but were forcefully dispersed by plain-clothed and uniformed police officers. At least 26 protesters, including one journalist, were dragged into a bus and taken to a police station. Five were sentenced to administrative detention ranging from 15 to 30 days, and 12 protesters received fines of 300-600 manats (US\$380-760) for participating in an "unauthorized demonstration".

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment was frequently reported, but allegations were not effectively investigated.

Kemale Benenyarlı, an activist of the opposition party Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, was arrested on 6 May during the NIDA trial. She complained of beating and other ill-treatment inside Nasimi District Police Station after she refused to sign a "confession" written by the police. She was punched, dragged and locked in a cell, where she was kept without food or water until her trial the following morning. Another arrested protester, Orkhan Eyyubzade, reported being stripped naked, dragged by the hair, punched, kicked and threatened with rape after he engaged in an argument with police officers during his detention on 15 May.

Three of the arrested NIDA activists, Mahammad Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev and Shahin Novruzlu, appeared on national television on 9 March 2013, "confessing" their plans to use violence and cause disorder during a forthcoming "unauthorized" street protest. Mahammad Azizov told his lawyer that he had been forced to "confess" under threats of prosecution against members of his family. Shahin Novruzlu, who was 17 at the time, was questioned without the presence of his legal guardian. Four of his front teeth were missing as a result of beating when he subsequently appeared in court. No investigation was launched into his ill-treatment.

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