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World Report 2024



Azerbaijan

Events of 2023

A rally against the authorities' targeting of government critics on May 14, 2022, outside the Interior Ministry in Baku

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Long-term human rights concerns persisted in Azerbaijan in 2023. The government severely restricted freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Despite some progress on a notorious torture case, torture and ill-treatment in police custody and places of detention persisted.

The May presidential pardon included a handful of people whose convictions were believed to be politically motivated, yet dozens remained wrongfully imprisoned. Authorities sentenced numerous critics to 30-day detention terms, following perfunctory misdemeanor trials, and arrested two civic activists, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and Gubad Ibadoghlu, who face long prison terms.

The authorities' violent crushing of two separate grassroots protests over environmental issues highlighted their intolerance for public expression of legitimate concerns as well as public frustration with the government's failure to protect the environment.

The prosecutor's office closed criminal investigations against several NGOs targeted in 2014. Investigations against others appear to have remained open. Restrictive laws impeded civil society groups from operating independently and accessing funding.

Nagorno-Karabakh

On September 19, Azerbaijan launched a military operation to regain full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Nagorno-Karabakh forces surrendered after one day of fighting. More than 100,000 ethnic Armenians—nearly the entire Armenian population of the area—fled to Armenia. The military operation followed months of acute shortages of food, medication, hygiene products, and other essential supplies to the area due to Azerbaijan’s disruption of vehicular and pedestrian traffic between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh that started in December 2022.

Starting in mid-June, Azerbaijan blocked all humanitarian goods transport and periodically blocked International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) patient transports. Azerbaijan also cut power and gas lines, causing regular, daily blackouts. Even before the military operation in September, military skirmishes had periodically broken out in other areas along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and in Nagorno-Karabakh, threatening the safety and livelihoods of civilians residing in those areas.

Azerbaijan refused to implement February and [July interim measure](#) decisions by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) calling on Azerbaijan to ensure “unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions.”

Following the September military operation, Azerbaijan [arrested several leaders](#) of the de facto authorities, charging them with, inter alia, financing terrorism, establishing illegal armed formations, and illegal border crossing.

A historic December 2023 joint statement between the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships on steps to normalize relations announced Azerbaijan’s intention to release “32 Armenian servicemen” and Armenia’s intention to release “2 Azerbaijani military servicemen.”

Governments and intergovernmental organizations expressed alarm about the humanitarian situation. In an [October resolution](#), the European Parliament called on Azerbaijan to “allow the safe return of the Armenian population” and “offer solid guarantees regarding the protection of their rights” and also called for the establishment of an international monitoring mission under UN auspices.

In an October [joint statement](#) at the UN Human Rights Council, 34 countries called on Azerbaijan to “promptly create conditions for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return” of ethnic Armenians and provide for international monitoring of the situation.

Prosecutions of Government Critics

Among those freed under presidential pardon was Ali Aliyev, a politician sentenced in 2022 to 3.5 years in prison on a variety of politically motivated charges.

Authorities continued to target leading activists, opposition politicians, and rank-and-file members of opposition political parties.

In December 2022, authorities arrested Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, a prominent activist, on hooliganism and contempt charges, which Hajiyeu refuted. Starting in February, Telegram and Meta accounts leaked intimate photos and messages—some of them fake, others apparently stolen from Hajiyeu’s private Facebook account—in what appeared to be an effort to smear his reputation. In June, Hajiyeu [faced](#) four new sets of charges. Hajiyeu remained in pretrial custody and faces six years in prison.

In May, a court sentenced Alizamin Salayev, senior politician with the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), to four years on criminal hooliganism charges.

In July, authorities [arrested](#) renowned economist and anti-corruption activist Gubad Ibadoghlu on charges of counterfeiting and possession of religious extremist materials. During his arrest, police assaulted Ibadoghlu and his wife; she had multiple bruises as a result. Remanded to pretrial

detention, Ibadoghlu is facing 12 years in prison. Authorities denied him access to adequate medical treatment in custody, causing his pre-existing health conditions to deteriorate.

Freedom of Expression and Media

Critics whom authorities jailed for up to 30 days included: in February, APFP member Orkhan Bakhishli (detained the day after his media interview criticizing Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu's arrest), Vali Shukurzade (a freelance journalist, detained shortly after he requested information from police for a journalistic investigation), and APFP activist Zaur Usubov (detained for his social media posts); and in May, social media activist Amrah Tahmazov (detained 11 days after his Facebook post called on President Ilham Aliyev to release Alizamin Salayev).

In June, a court sentenced activists Elmir Abbasov and Giyas Ibrahimov to 32 and 20 days of detention, respectively, on resisting police and other charges following their Facebook posts criticizing police brutality against protesters in Soyudlu.

In July, authorities [detained](#) Vugar Mammadov, editor-in-chief of the online news outlet Hurriyat, together with a guest of his program after they criticized corruption in the Defense Ministry. A court [sentenced](#) both to 30 days of administrative detention on charges of disseminating prohibited information online, an offense that is not strictly defined in law and that is often used against government critics.

The authorities arrested at least nine civic activists who criticized online the September 19 military operation in Karabakh. These included Amrah Tahmazov, Nurlan Gahramanly, and Emin Ibrahimov, each sentenced to 30 days in administrative detention on charges of sharing prohibited information online; Nemat Abbasov, for allegedly disobeying police; Ruslan Vahabov, charged with drug trafficking; and Afiyeddin Mammadov, charged with hooliganism and inflicting intentional bodily harm. Vahabov and Mammadov remain in pretrial custody.

In November, authorities arrested Ulvi Hasanli and Sevinc Vagifgizi, top leaders of Abzas Media, an independent media outlet known for investigating and exposing corruption, and Mahammad Kekalov, a social entrepreneur who also worked with the outlet, on bogus smuggling charges. At time of writing, the three remained in pretrial custody.

Freedom of Assembly

The authorities remain hostile toward protests, violently dispersing several of them, in some cases unlawfully, and jailing peaceful protesters.

In February, a court [sentenced](#) activists Afiyeddin Mammadov and Samir Sultanov to 30 days' detention on disobedience charges for their involvement in an unsanctioned protest against Hajiyeu's detention.

In March, police in Saatli district, central Azerbaijan, used [tear gas and rubber bullets](#) to disperse villagers who attempted to block a road to protest longstanding critical water shortages. Residents [told](#) a media outlet that two people, including a 15-year-old boy, were seriously [injured](#) by rubber bullets.

In March, a court sentenced two APFP members, Sahladar Isganderli and Jeyhun Novruzov, and journalist Nurlan Jafarli to 25, 30, and 15 days, respectively, for their involvement in an unsanctioned, peaceful protest demanding Alizamin Salayev's release.

In June, in the western Azerbaijan village of Soyudlu, riot police [forcibly dispersed](#) a peaceful demonstration against plans for an artificial lake to hold waste from a nearby gold mine. Police used tear gas and physical violence [against protesters](#), reportedly injuring dozens. Police restricted

access to and from the village for several weeks, physically removing at least three journalists and confiscating mobile phones. Authorities sentenced at least eight village residents on administrative charges and remanded three others to pretrial custody on spurious criminal drug charges. A court also sent a former parliamentarian, Nazim Baydamirli, to four months' pretrial detention on extortion charges after pro-government media accused him of coordinating the protests.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

Torture and ill-treatment remain common in police custody, with human rights groups and the media reporting on credible allegations of torture. Impunity for torture and ill-treatment remains the norm.

In February, police arrested Jeyhun Balashov, a religious activist with the Muslim Unity Movement, on what he said are bogus drug possession charges. His father, who met him later in prison, [told independent media](#) that his son had visible bruises on his arms and had difficulties standing.

In July, police beat journalist Elmaddin Shamilzadeh to [compel him to remove](#) his Facebook posts of photographs of police who he said were involved in the dispersal of the Soyudlu protest.

In an exception to the pattern of impunity for torture, proceedings continued to address the 2017 torture of hundreds of military officers in Terter region accused of spying for Armenia. In 2023, four were released by presidential pardon and one by a court ruling. In December 2022, 19 were acquitted of treason charges and released. The trial of four people accused of torture continued. At least seven other wrongly imprisoned military officers continued to serve their terms.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to face ill-treatment, extortion, arbitrary detention, and discrimination by state and non-state actors.

For example, in May, police [detained](#) at least two transgender women in Baku following a confrontation with police. The next day, police detained several LGBT rights activists who had gathered in front of the police station to protest those women's arrest. At least two were sentenced to 15 days' detention on disobedience charges. Two others, who received fines on charges of hooliganism and drug possession, told the media that police used anti-LGBT slurs against them in custody, handcuffed them, and forced them to take drug tests.

Key International Actors

Numerous governments and intergovernmental organizations spoke out about the arrest of Gubad Ibadoghlu, calling for Azerbaijan to ensure his due process rights and access to needed medication. In September, the European Parliament [adopted](#) an "urgency resolution" demanding his immediate and unconditional release, stating that the finalization of a future EU-Azerbaijan partnership agreement should be conditional on the release of all political prisoners, and calling for targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani officials who have committed human rights violations. Various [members](#) of the [US Congress](#) and a Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) of the Council of Europe (CoE) official called for Ibadoghlu's immediate release. Also in September, the European Court of Human Rights adopted interim measures ordering the government to take urgent steps to ensure the protection of Ibadoghlu's health.

In its annual meeting of the Subcommittee on Justice, Freedom, Security and Human Rights and Democracy with Azerbaijan in May, the European Union [expressed concerns](#) about the continuous persecution of independent voices in the country.

Foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations condemned Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu's arrest and called for his immediate release. In February, the US State Department [stated](#) that the charges against Hajiyeu were "understood as politically motivated." The Baku delegation of the EU [urged](#) authorities to release Hajiyeu "expeditiously."

In May, the US Embassy in Azerbaijan [welcomed](#) the presidential pardons of "Azerbaijanis incarcerated for exercising their fundamental freedoms," noted that many remained imprisoned for exercising those rights, and called for their release.

In March, a joint opinion by the CoE's Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) [expressed](#) serious concern about several provisions of the Law on Political Parties, which could potentially chill pluralism in the country. The EU also [called on](#) Azerbaijan to address the report's recommendations, saying that "vibrant, accountable and inclusive multiparty systems must be guaranteed."

During their June visit, PACE co-rapporteurs [raised](#) concerns about persisting restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and association, noting that NGOs "continue to operate in a very restrictive environment." They noted continued imprisonment "on politically motivated charges" and called on the authorities to amend the Media Law.

In her July [letter](#) to the Interior Minister, the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic raised concerns about the use of disproportionate force in Soyudlu.