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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Azerbaijan

NOT FREE

10

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 2 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 8 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

10 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the [report methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

Overview

Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution. The authorities have carried out an extensive crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, leaving little room for independent expression or activism. In 2020, Azerbaijan won a conflict over control of Nagorno-Karabakh, at the cost of over 2,700 soldiers.

Key Developments in 2020

- Azerbaijan and Armenia engaged in armed conflict over control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh between September and November, when a Russian-backed cease-fire was finalized; over 2,700 Azerbaijani soldiers died in the fighting. Under the agreement's terms, Azerbaijan maintained control over parts of the territory gained during the conflict, along with adjacent land previously occupied by Armenia.
- The ruling Yeni (New) Azerbaijan Party (YAP) maintained control of the parliament in snap elections held in February. The contest was marred by procedural and tabulation concerns, electoral misconduct, and an opposition boycott; authorities arrested opposition leaders along with activists planning to hold a protest over the elections' conduct later that month.
- Azerbaijani authorities sought to restrict media freedom and limit online discussion regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Several journalists received prison sentences or detention for reporting on the crisis, while some internet users were forced to remove material critical of the government's pandemic response from social media platforms and websites.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president is directly elected for seven-year terms. There are no term limits. Since the early 1990s, elections have not been considered credible or competitive by international observers. A February 2018 presidential decree moved that year's presidential election, originally planned for October, up to April. President Ilham Aliyev—who succeeded his father, Heydar, in 2003—won a fourth term with some 86 percent of the vote amid evidence of

electoral fraud and a boycott by the main opposition parties. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers found that the election lacked genuine competition due to a restrictive political environment in which the seven nominal opposition candidates did not openly confront or criticize the president.

In 2017, President Aliyev appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, as vice president. The post had been created via constitutional changes that were pushed through in 2016 without meaningful parliamentary debate or public consultation.

The prime minister and cabinet are appointed and dismissed by the president. In October 2019, Prime Minister Novruz Mammadov—in office since April 2018—was replaced by Ali Asadov.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The 125 seats in Azerbaijan’s unicameral Milli Mejlis, or National Assembly, are filled through elections in single-member districts, with members serving five-year terms.

Aliyev dissolved the parliament in December 2019, and snap elections were held in February 2020. The ruling YAP won 70 parliamentary seats, while independents won 41 and the remainder were won by smaller parties; contests for 4 seats were not immediately decided. Turnout stood at 46.8 percent. A major opposition alliance, the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF), boycotted the elections. OSCE monitors criticized the conduct of the poll, noting procedural and tabulation concerns and ultimately questioning “whether the results were established honestly.”

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 0 / election management bodies? 4

The electoral laws and framework fall short of international standards and do not ensure free and fair elections. The nomination process for members of electoral commissions places the bodies under the influence of the ruling party. Commission members have been known to unlawfully interfere with the election process and obstruct the activities of observers. Complaints of electoral violations do not receive adequate or impartial treatment.

Election observers have repeatedly condemned restrictions on freedom of assembly, the inability of candidates to obtain permission to hold rallies or appear on television, political interference with courts investigating electoral violations, and noncompliance with past European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decisions on election issues. OSCE monitors present during the February 2020 parliamentary elections noted pervasive electoral misconduct, including verbal and physical abuse directed against candidates’ representatives and monitors.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these 1 / competing parties or groupings? 4

The political environment in Azerbaijan is neither pluralistic nor competitive. The ability of opposition parties to operate and engage with the public is limited by the dominance of the YAP. A number of laws restrict candidates’ efforts to organize and hold rallies, and the opposition has virtually no access to coverage on television, which remains the most popular news source. The regime has cracked down violently on any Islamic political movement that reaches national prominence.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 0 / elections? 4

The Aliyev family has held the presidency since 1993. The biased electoral framework and repressive media and political environment effectively make it impossible for opposition parties to gain power through elections. The traditional opposition parties boycotted the most recent parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections rather than take part in an unfair process.

Opposition figures complained that moving the 2018 presidential election forward by six months further disadvantaged them by leaving inadequate time to prepare their campaigns. Similar concerns were raised about the February 2020 snap parliamentary elections.

Opposition politicians and party officials are subject to arbitrary arrest on dubious charges, physical violence, and intimidation. Musavat (Equality) Party leader Arif Hajili and Republican Alternative (ReAL) leader Ilgar Mammadov were arrested ahead of a planned rally in front of CEC headquarters in mid-February 2020. (Mammadov had previously been imprisoned in 2014 over accusations of stoking unrest, but was allowed early release in 2018 and was acquitted in April 2020.)

In March 2020, Musavat vice chairman Tofiq Yaqublu was arrested over a traffic incident that observers believe was fabricated. Yaqublu received a four-year prison sentence over charges of hooliganism in September, but was transferred to house arrest later that month after engaging in a hunger strike. Yaqublu was previously imprisoned between 2013 and 2014 over politically motivated charges, and was reportedly tortured during a short detention in October 2019.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political 1 / sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4

The authoritarian system in Azerbaijan excludes the public from any genuine and autonomous political participation. The regime relies on abuse of state resources, corrupt patronage networks, and control over the security forces and criminal justice system to maintain its political dominance.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 0 / relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

The political system does not allow women or minority groups to organize independently or advocate for their respective interests. There are no meaningful mechanisms to promote increased representation of women and ethnic or religious minorities. The government has worked to stifle public expressions of ethnic Talysh and Lezgin identity, among other targeted groups.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who left Nagorno-Karabakh and settled in other parts of Azerbaijan after the 1994 cease-fire have been unable to participate in municipal elections where they subsequently settled, and are instead directed to vote for their former districts. IDPs have not historically pursued office in Azerbaijan since the 1994 cease-fire.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 0 / of the government? 4

Neither the president nor members of parliament are elected in a free or fair manner, and the parliament is unable to serve as a meaningful check on the powerful presidency. Lawmakers and lower-level elected officials essentially carry out the instructions of the ruling party.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is pervasive. In the absence of a free press and independent judiciary, officials are held accountable for corrupt behavior only when it suits the needs of a more powerful or well-connected figure.

Investigative reports published by foreign media in recent years have revealed evidence that Aliyev family used their positions to amass large private fortunes. In 2017, a network of international media outlets exposed a \$2.9 billion slush fund that was held within United Kingdom-registered shell companies and linked to the Azerbaijani ruling elite, including the Aliyev family. The resources were reportedly used in part to improperly influence the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in order to minimize criticism of electoral conduct and alleged rights abuses. In September 2020, the *Times of Israel* reported that a publicly owned Israeli aerospace firm transferred at least \$155 million to that slush fund, though the firm’s specific purpose was unclear.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

Government operations are opaque. Although public officials are nominally required to submit financial disclosure reports, procedures and compliance remain unclear, and the reports are not publicly accessible. There are legal guarantees for citizens’ access to information, but also broad exceptions to this right, and authorities at all levels systematically refuse to respond to information requests.

In 2017, Azerbaijan withdrew from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), an international platform that promotes good governance and transparency in resource-rich countries. Azerbaijan, an important producer of oil and gas, had been suspended due to ongoing noncompliance with EITI human rights standards.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Constitutional guarantees for press freedom are routinely and systematically violated, as the government works to maintain a tight grip on the information landscape. Defamation remains a criminal offense. Journalists—and their relatives—face harassment, violence, and intimidation by authorities. Legal amendments passed in 2017 extended

government control over online media, allowing blocking of websites without a court order if they are deemed to contain content that poses a danger to the state or society. Independent news sites are regularly blocked or struck with cyberattacks.

Journalists face detention or imprisonment on false charges, along with travel bans. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) counted four imprisoned journalists in the country in 2020. In November, Azel.tv editor in chief Afgan Sadygov received a seven-year prison sentence for bribery, a charge the CPJ reported was fabricated. Later that month, Polad Aslanov, editor in chief of news site Press-az, received a 16-year prison sentence for selling state secrets to Iran. Aslanov, who planned to appeal, claimed that he was targeted for reporting on corruption.

The authorities are known to restrict artistic expression. Azerbaijani musician Parviz Guluzade was given a 30-day administrative sentence in December 2019 for public intoxication after making a critical reference to a bank connected to the Aliyev family in one of his songs. Guluzade, who was tortured in detention, was released in late January 2020.

Azerbaijani authorities also sought to restrict media freedom after COVID-19-related measures were instituted in late March 2020. In late April, the International Press Institute reported that three journalists covering the government’s COVID-19 response had been jailed by courts, while another was detained.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4

The regime exercises control over religion through state-affiliated entities such as the Caucasus Muslim Board. Religious communities that attempt to operate independently face burdensome registration requirements, interference with the importation and distribution of printed religious materials, and arrest and harassment of religious leaders with international ties or a significant following. For example, Haji Taleh Bagirzade and members of his Muslim Unity Movement, a nonviolent conservative Shiite group, have been subjected to mass arrests, torture, and imprisonment as part of a crackdown that began in 2015.

A number of mosques have been closed in recent years, ostensibly for registration or safety violations. Jehovah’s Witnesses face harassment as well as prosecution for evading military service.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

The authorities have long curtailed academic freedom. Some educators have reported being dismissed for links to opposition groups, and students have faced expulsion and other punishments for similar reasons. The Azerbaijani history curriculum is known to include negative and discriminatory references to Armenians.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

Law enforcement bodies monitor private telephone and online communications—particularly of activists, political figures, and foreign nationals—without judicial oversight. The escalation of government persecution of critics and their families has undermined the assumption of privacy among ordinary residents and eroded the openness of private discussion. Even state officials have been punished for their and their family members’ social media activity, and activists have been imprisoned—on unrelated fabricated charges—for critical Facebook posts. In recent years, activists have been targeted by spear-phishing campaigns designed to install malicious software on their computers or steal personal information. Activists report that harassment on social media, often highly sexualized for female activists, is commonplace.

In March 2020, the parliament amended the Law of Information to allow the prosecution of those accused of disseminating purportedly false news in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Human Rights Watch (HRW) counted at least 10 cases where the internet users were subsequently compelled to remove material criticizing the government’s pandemic response by year’s end.

Social media users and antiwar activists who signed a statement calling for a peaceful resolution to the September-to-November 2020 conflict over control of Nagorno-Karabakh were harassed and threatened online, prompting at least one activist to remove their signature.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

The law imposes tight restrictions on freedom of assembly, which is contingent on the protection of “public order and morals.” Activists have complained that in practice, the obstacles to public gatherings include additional, extralegal measures. Unscheduled assemblies can draw a harsh police response and fines for participants, and the government largely stopped issuing permits for rallies in Baku in 2019. Even when permits are issued, the government typically confines demonstrations to relatively isolated locations, where it can track attendees through facial-recognition technology and mobile-phone data.

In February 2020, police in Baku arrested several dozen protesters who intended to demonstrate against the conduct of that month's parliamentary elections in front of CEC headquarters, along with opposition leaders. In July, as many as 30,000 demonstrators in Baku called for war against Armenia after Azerbaijani and Armenian forces fought earlier that month. While that protest was tolerated, security forces clashed with a group of participants who then broke into the parliament building, with President Aliyev subsequently blaming the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AXFP) for the incident. Some 17 party members were among at least 80 people detained on charges that observers considered spurious.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

Repressive laws on NGOs have been used to pressure both local and foreign organizations, many of which have suspended operations when their bank accounts were frozen or their offices raided. Nearly all organizations or networks that work on human rights are forced by the state to operate in a legal gray zone. The government has refused to permit the European Union to provide grant support for local civil society groups. Civic activists are routinely subjected to harassment, intimidation, detention, and abuse by police.

Activists also faced government scrutiny during the September-to-November 2020 conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Civil society activist Giyas Ibrahimov was briefly detained over his activity in September. In October, he was questioned by prosecutors for signing a petition calling for a peaceful resolution along with activist Narmin Shahmarzade.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Although the law permits the formation of trade unions and the right to strike, the majority of unions remain closely affiliated with the government, and many categories of workers are prohibited from striking. Most major industries are dominated by state-owned enterprises, in which the government controls wages and working conditions.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is corrupt and subservient to the executive. Judges are appointed by the parliament on the proposal of the president. The courts' lack of political independence is especially evident in the many trumped-up or otherwise flawed cases brought against opposition figures, activists, and critical journalists.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Constitutional guarantees of due process are not upheld. Arbitrary arrest and detention are common, and detainees are often held for long periods before trial. Political detainees have reported restricted access to legal counsel, fabrication and withholding of evidence, and physical abuse to extract confessions.

In 2019, the so-called Ganja case provided prominent examples of due process violations. The case stemmed from a 2018 incident where two police officers died during a demonstration, following the attempted assassination of the mayor of Ganja. In response, police charged 77 suspects, 10 of whom died in custody or while being detained. The government claimed that the protests were an attempted Islamist uprising, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Authorities were unable to provide a coherent version of events in trials held in 2019.

Although nominally independent, the Azerbaijani Bar Association acts on the orders of the Ministry of Justice and is complicit in the harassment of human rights lawyers. Legal amendments that took effect in 2018 stipulated that only Bar Association members could represent clients in court. Since then, the association has disbarred, suspended, or threatened most of the country's active human rights lawyers for speaking to the media about violations of their clients' rights. In nearly all disciplinary cases, the courts have upheld the Bar Association's decisions without a thorough assessment or public justification.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

International observers have consistently concluded that both torture and impunity for the perpetrators of such abuse are endemic in the Azerbaijani criminal justice system. Police regularly administer beatings during arrest or while breaking up protests. In April 2020, five Ganja-case defendants accused the authorities of torturing them and forcing them to sign documents implicating themselves in criminal activity in an ECtHR filing.

Prison conditions are substandard. Medical care is generally inadequate, and overcrowding is common. Prisoners are also at risk of contracting COVID-19; in June 2020, relatives of inmates held in a Baku prison warned that most of the population had COVID-19 symptoms, despite government claims to the contrary. Adherence to some mitigation measures, like the use of face masks, is reportedly inconsistent in prisons.

Azerbaijanis were affected by armed conflict with Armenia during 2020. In July, Azerbaijani and Armenian forces fought along the border, resulting in the deaths of four Azerbaijani soldiers. The two countries engaged in a full-scale conflict over control of Nagorno-Karabakh in late September, with civilian and military casualties reported on

both sides. In October, the city of Ganga was bombed, with one death reported. The conflict ended in early November after a Russian-brokered cease-fire was agreed; under its terms, Azerbaijan would retain control of parts of Nagorno-Karabakh gained during the fighting, along with adjacent land held by Armenia. In early December, the Azerbaijani government reported 2,783 soldiers died in the fighting, while at least 143 civilians on both sides were killed.

The conflict was marked by reported acts of mistreatment, desecration, and vandalism. In early December 2020, HRW accused Azerbaijani forces of physically abusing Armenian prisoners of war, several dozen of whom were reportedly in Azerbaijani custody at year's end. Later in December, Azerbaijani prosecutors accused two soldiers of desecrating the corpses of Armenian soldiers, and accused two others of vandalizing gravestones in Nagorno-Karabakh.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Members of ethnic minority groups have complained of discrimination in areas including education, employment, and housing. Women are subject to discrimination in employment, including both de facto bias and formal exclusion from certain types of work under the labor code.

While IDPs from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that ended in 1994 are entitled to special assistance, they face severe infringements on their economic and social rights and freedom of movement. Many are housed in dormitories or substandard housing and are unable to change their place of residence, which is often located out of range of sources of employment or adequate medical care.

Although same-sex sexual activity is legal, LGBT+ people experience societal discrimination and risk harassment by the police. In 2017, police fined or detained dozens of people for weeks in a coordinated crackdown that led many LGBT+ residents to flee the country.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, 1 / employment, or education? 4

The government restricts freedom of movement, particularly foreign travel, for opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society activists. While travel bans were lifted for some dissidents during 2019, many others remained in place, including for some of the political prisoners released that March; others fled the country to avoid further persecution. Some travel bans remained in effect in 2020.

IDPs from the previous Nagorno-Karabakh conflict enjoy freedom of movement in law, but not in practice. IDPs are legally registered at their place of initial resettlement, which are sometimes in rural areas and far from any source of employment. The process of changing registration is difficult, and IDPs who change their place of registration risk losing their status and accompanying state assistance. As a result, many families are separated, with usually male wage-earners relocating to urban centers for work while their families remain at their place of registration.

Freedom of movement was curtailed under COVID-19 measures for much of 2020. In late March, the government introduced a national quarantine, extending those measures in April and May. While some restrictions were relaxed in May, others were retained; measures were tightened in October, and wide-ranging restrictions were reintroduced in December as COVID-19 cases increased.

People with disabilities and psychiatric patients are routinely institutionalized; there is no clear procedure to review their confinement.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 1 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

Property rights are affected by government-backed development projects that often entail forced evictions, unlawful expropriations, and demolitions with little or no notice. Corruption and the economic dominance of state-owned companies and politically connected elites pose obstacles to ordinary private business activity.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

The law generally grants women and men the same rights on personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and child custody. Domestic violence is a notable problem, and related legal protections are inadequate. Conservative social norms contribute to the widespread view that domestic violence is a private matter, which discourages victims from reporting perpetrators to the police. However, the growth of social media and the movement of rural populations to Baku in recent years have spurred public discussion of the issue.

The hijab has been formally banned in Azerbaijani schools since 2011, and women who choose to wear it have increasingly complained of discrimination by both private and public employers.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Legal safeguards against exploitative working conditions are poorly enforced, and many employers reportedly ignore them without penalty. Children are vulnerable to forced labor, especially in the agriculture sector. A 2019 US Department of Labor report also noted that some children were forced to engage in the sex trade.

The government has taken some steps to combat forced labor and sex trafficking, including by prosecuting traffickers and providing services to victims, but the problem persists, notably among Romany children and foreign household workers. In 2017, the authorities extended a preexisting moratorium on workplace inspections through 2020.

As a result of corruption and a lack of public accountability for the allocation of resources, the state's oil and gas revenues tend to benefit privilege elites rather than the general population, narrowing access to economic opportunity.

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