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Republic of Azerbaijan

Head of state: **Ilham Aliyev**

Head of government: **Artur Rasizade**

The crackdown on civil society and persecution of political dissent continued. Human rights organizations remained unable to resume their work. At least 18 prisoners of conscience remained in detention at the end of the year. Reprisals against independent journalists and activists persisted both in the country and abroad, while their family members also faced harassment and arrests. International human rights monitors were barred and expelled from the country. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment persisted.

BACKGROUND

The national currency lost a third of its value in US dollar terms after the government devalued it in response to plummeting oil prices. The economy remained heavily dependent on oil, leading to considerable price hikes and falling real income.

In June, the first European Games, a major international sporting event intended to showcase Azerbaijan, were held in the capital, Baku. They came at considerable economic cost, amid reports of the government pressuring businesses for financial contributions and salary reductions for public sector employees.

The ruling New Azerbaijan party comfortably won Parliamentary elections on 1 November. The main opposition parties boycotted the elections due to constant harassment by the authorities. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) cancelled its election monitoring mission because of restrictions imposed by the government, while the OSCE representation in Baku had discontinued its operations in July.

International human rights monitors were barred and expelled from the country. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International delegates were refused entry and expelled on arrival, as were several international journalists during the European Games. In September, the government cancelled a visit planned by the European Commission to the country, after the European Parliament called on the government to release

imprisoned human rights defenders. In October, the Council of Europe withdrew from the joint working group on human rights issues in Azerbaijan, in protest at the deteriorating human rights situation.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Leading human rights NGOs were unable to resume their work, as a result of the freezing of their assets and ongoing harassment – including criminal prosecution – of their members. Several NGO leaders remained in prison while others were forced into exile for fear of persecution.

After 10 months spent inside the Swiss Embassy to avoid prosecution on trumped-up charges, the founder and leader of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS), Emin Huseynov, was allowed to leave the country on 12 June but was stripped of his citizenship. The IRFS office had been raided and sealed off by the authorities in 2014, and its online broadcasting channel, Obyektiv TV, taken off air.

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

At least 18 government critics, including prominent human rights defenders, remained behind bars on fabricated charges at the end of the year.

Following their arrest in 2014, four NGO leaders were sentenced to lengthy prison sentences on trumped-up charges of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion and abuse of authority. Rasul Jafarov, founder of the Human Rights Club, was sentenced to six and a half years' imprisonment on 16 April; Intigam Aliyev, head of the Legal Education Society, to seven and a half years on 22 April; Leyla Yunus, president of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, and her husband and co-worker Arif Yunus to eight and a half and seven years respectively on 13 August. Leyla and Arif Yunus were given conditional sentences on appeal on 9 December, and both released. Investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova, also under arrest since 2014, was sentenced to seven and a half years' imprisonment on 1 September.

Prisoners of conscience Bashir Suleymanli, co-founder of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, and opposition activist Orkhan Eyyubzade were released under a presidential pardon on 18 March.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

All mainstream media remained under government control; independent outlets faced harassment and closure. Independent journalists continued to face intimidation, harassment, threats and violence.

On 26 January, deputy chair of the IRFS Gunay Ismayilova was attacked by an unidentified man in the lobby of her apartment building in Baku. An investigation into the incident was still ongoing at the end of the year.

In May, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty decided to close its office in Baku. It had been raided and searched by the authorities in December 2014, and remained sealed since.

On 8 August, Rasim Aliyev, journalist and chair of the IRFS, was severely beaten by a group of men in Baku and died in hospital the following day. He had reported receiving threats on social media related to his Facebook post on a famous footballer. Six men were arrested and charged in connection with his death.

On 16 September, police apprehended two reporters from Meydan TV, an independent, online Azerbaijani-language media outlet. Aytaj Ahmadova was released after questioning but Shirin Abbasov was held incommunicado for two days and sentenced to 30 days' administrative detention for allegedly resisting police; he served his full sentence.

On 8 December, Fuad Gahramanli, deputy chairman of the opposition Popular Front Party, was arrested in connection with his posts on Facebook criticizing the government and calling for peaceful protest and resistance. He was remanded for three months as a criminal suspect, accused of calling for government overthrow and incitement of religious hatred.

Arrests of journalists' relatives

Relatives of media workers who work from abroad and are critical of the government faced harassment by the authorities. On 13 February, police detained Elgiz Sadigli, brother of Tural Sadigli, a blogger who had participated in a street protest in Berlin during President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Germany. Elgiz Sadigli was remanded for two months on drug-related charges and then released following international outcry.

In June, Meydan TV exiled director and former prisoner of conscience Emin Milli reported receiving threats from the authorities following his disapproving coverage of the European Games. On 23 July, his brother-in-law Nazim Aghabayov was arrested on drug-related charges and placed in detention. His cousin, Polad Abdullayev, was arrested on 27 July and released within a few days after several relatives wrote an open letter repudiating Emin Milli's work.

In July, police arrested three relatives of Ganimat Zahid, an exiled journalist and former prisoner of conscience, who runs the Turkey-based TV SAAT, a broadcasting channel available online. His nephew and cousin were arrested on 19 and 22 July for resisting police orders and released after serving 25 and 30 days respectively of administrative detention. Another nephew was arrested on 22 July and charged with drug possession.

On 13 October, police arrested and remanded Vakil and Raji Imanovs, brothers of Meydan TV exiled editor Gunel Movlud, in two separate raids in different parts of the country, also on drug-related charges.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Peaceful street protests were prevented or dispersed by police using violence.

On 22 August, several hundred residents of the city of Mingechevir gathered peacefully to protest against the death of a man in police custody. They were violently dispersed by tear gas and sound bombs, and chased and beaten by baton-wielding riot police.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be committed with impunity for the perpetrators, in the absence of effective investigations and prosecutions.

Prisoner of conscience Ilgar Mammadov told his lawyer that on 16 October he had been knocked onto the floor, kicked and punched by two prison guards and the head of prison, who warned that he would not leave prison alive. His lawyer noticed injuries and bruises on his head and neck when visiting him the next day.

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