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World Report - Azerbaijan

- Area: 86100 sq. km.
- Population: 8,177,717
- Language: Azeri
- Head of state: Ilham Aliyev, since October 2003

2011 was a bad year in Azerbaijan. For the first time in six years a journalist, Rafiq Tagi, was murdered. Assaults, kidnappings, threats – the most violent methods were brought out again to put down pro-democracy demonstrations during the first half of the year. Rising tension with Iran also put further pressure on the press, particularly in the Nakhichevan autonomous region.

Azerbaijan, ranked 152nd in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index in 2010, is led by a "Predator of press freedom" and remains hidebound by authoritarian and corrupt schemes.

The rigid framework that has society in its grip forbids pluralism and sustains an oppressive polarisation. Paradoxically, the economic boom that the country has experienced since the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was inaugurated in 2006 has bolstered this trend by vastly increasing the authorities' resources and strengthening the impression that the international community cannot touch them.

Local media are highly polarised and the independent and opposition press are the target of continual pressure. The country's main opposition daily *Azadlig* is a telling example. Its editor, **Ganimat Zahid**, who has served several years in prison, has continued to be the target of serious threats.

One of its young reporters, **Agil Khalil**, is still in exile after having been the object of a hate campaign that included several attempts on his life in 2008. Another opposition newspaper,

These gagging efforts were not confined to the country's newspapers. Several highly popular foreign radio stations have been absent from Azerbaijan's FM waveband since January 2009, including the *BBC*, *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty* and *Voice of America*.

Pro-democracy demonstrations held in Baku in March and April in the wake of the Arab spring were violently suppressed. Physical obstruction, questioning, deportation, visa

refusals – the local and international press was regularly prevented from covering the rallies.

Two *Azadlig* reporters were abducted one week apart and threatened by men in plain clothes who ordered them to stop criticizing the government.

The Internet, until recently a surprisingly free conduit for information and activism in Azerbaijan, has been a particular target. Social media networks were placed under close scrutiny, and blocked from time to time, and several online activists such as the blogger **Bakhtiyar Hajiyev** were given harsh prison sentences. Several independent news sites were hacked repeatedly.

In these circumstances, the release in November 2010 of the bloggers **Emin Milli** and **Adnan Hajizade** and of the independent journalist **Eynulla Fatullayev** in May this year appeared to be a tactic by the government to ease international pressure.

The murder of **Elmar Huseynov**, the charismatic editor of the weekly *Monitor*, in March 2005 has still not been solved due to a lack of political will. The Azeri legal system rid itself of the problem by referring it to Georgia, on the grounds that the killers were of Georgian nationality. However, there was no attempt by investigators to establish who gave the orders.

The precedent does not augur well for the investigation of the murder of **Rafiq Tagi**, editor of the newspaper *Sanat* who died on 23 November. There are many grey areas in the case, for example the journalist died suddenly of his wounds although his condition was regarded as satisfactory enough for him to be moved from the intensive care unit three days previously.

Tagi, a well-known critic of Islam and the Iranian government, had been imprisoned in 2007. A fatwa issued against him by an Iranian cleric could be a possible lead pointing to Tehran, but his family and colleagues do not exclude the involvement of the Azeri authorities.

The autonomous enclave of Nakhichevan, separated from the rest of the country by Armenia, is home to some of the president's clan and is commonly known as "the North Korea of Azerbaijan".

The handful of independent journalists working there against the odds are the target of intense pressure by local officials who enjoy complete impunity. The pressure is boosted by the climate of paranoia created by tension with Iran.

Updated in December 2011
