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Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Free Expression Accelerates With Conviction of Prominent Blogger

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The undersigned organisations condemn in the strongest possible terms today's sentencing of Mehman Huseynov, Azerbaijani journalist and chairman of the country's leading freedom of expression group, Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, to two years in jail on defamation charges. He was taken into custody from the court room, without being allowed to speak in his defence.

The 24 organisations are deeply concerned by the continued targeting of Mehman Huseynov and call on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release him and all other political prisoners, and to reverse the continuous clampdown on freedom of expression occurring in the country.

"Today's sentencing and jailing of Mehman Huseynov is outrageous - another example of Azerbaijan's best and brightest being targeted for expressing opinions critical of the ruling Aliyev regime. It also shows that nothing has changed since the release of a number of high-profile political prisoners last year. The revolving-door policy of politically motivated arrests is still very much in place. Huseynov is now one of at least 13 journalists, bloggers, and media workers jailed in Azerbaijan. They must all be immediately and unconditionally released, in accordance with Azerbaijan's international obligations", said Rebecca Vincent, UK Bureau Director for Reporters Without Borders.

Huseynov's conviction stems from criminal defamation charges in a private case brought by the chief of the police department, related to a report he published in which he wrote about his experience of torture, after he was detained overnight by police in January, Mehman Huseynov was detained in Baku on 9 January by plain clothed police officers and held incommunicado overnight. Huseynov has reported that while in police custody, police placed a sack over his head and used force against him. He was convicted of disobeying police orders; and although the Court released him on 10 January, he was fined, and continued to face police harassment. The court has imposed a formal travel ban on Huseynov who already has been deprived of his travel documents for the past five years.

Notably, Mehman Huseynov has been critical of the appointment of first lady Mehriban Aliyeva to the post of the Vice President on 21 February 2017.

Detentions of Political Opposition

Ahead of the Vice-Presidential appointment, since the amendment was passed in September, authorities have arrested several representatives of the political opposition on false, politically-motivated charges, including ten members of Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, one member of the Republican Alternative Movement (REAL) and one member of the D18 movement.

There are credible allegations of torture and other cruel and degrading treatment of the detainees. For example, Rahim Shaliyev, a REAL Movement member detained on 20 February and subsequently sentenced to 30 days administrative detention on charges of resisting police, reported to his lawyer that he was subject to beatings and humiliation, resulting in an injury to his skull.

Crackdown on media

Journalists have also been subject to arbitrary detention and harassment. On 17 February 2017 Elchin Ismayilli, founder and editor of Kend.info, an on-line news portal known for its reporting on corruption and human rights violations in the Ismayilli region of Azerbaijan, was detained by police. He is accused of threatening a local government employee and has been charged with extortion and abuse of a position of influence. Ismayilli denies all the charges. On 18 February, the Nasimi District Court sentenced Ismayilli to pre-trial detention for an initial period of 24 days. Ismayilli is currently being held in the Kurdakhani pretrial detention centre.

On 22 February, cable TV channels stopped all the authorities officially suspended all broadcasts by the Turkish affiliate of FOX TV, after the channel aired a satirical discussion on the appointment of the new Vice President. A spokesperson for the National Television and Radio Council (NTRC) of Azerbaijan stated that this decision was made at the sole discretion of cable providers; however, anonymous sources within the cable providers have reported that they faced pressure from the NTRC to drop the channel.

At the same time, the authorities have continued their harassment of opposition newspaper Azadliq, which was forced to cease abandon print publication in September 2016, following ongoing financial pressures from state-owned or affiliated companies. In the second half of February 2017, over ten staff members were summoned and interrogated by the Serious Crimes Investigation Department. The publication's Financial Director, Faiq Amirov, and prominent journalist, Symur Hezi, have been incarcerated on trumped up charges since August 2016 and August 2014, respectively.

Activists expressing critical views on the internet and social media, the last bastion of freedom of expression, have also been subject to police pressure, aimed at forcing them to delete dissenting posts. For example, on 21 February Nisakhanim Valiyeva, the Chair of the Classical Popular Front Party was held in police custody for four hours, the same day that Merhiban Aliyeva was appointed Vice President, and released only after deleting her critical Facebook posts about the appointment.

This has been accompanied by calls for increased regulation of the internet and online content. The chair of the Press Council Aflatun Amashov, whose official mandate is to safeguard independent media and rights of journalists, has submitted a proposal to the Milli Majlis (Parliament), calling for mandatory registration of bloggers and activists, aimed at ensuring greater control over those expressing themselves online.

Harassment of critics in exile

The government of Azerbaijan is also pursuing government critics living in exile abroad. Shortly after giving a speech at the European Parliament on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan on 6

February, Emin Milli, head of Meydan TV, a critical TV channel operating in exile from Berlin, reported to German Police receiving threats of physical violence from the Azerbaijani authorities.

Where the authorities are unable to reach their critics, they have sought to harass family members remaining in Azerbaijan. Most recently, on the 22nd of February, the brother Dadashov Khanlar and nephew Sabuhi Zanalov of Netherlands-based blogger Ordukhan Teymurkhan, known for his criticism of the Aliyevs, were sentenced to 30 days detention on entirely bogus charges of disobeying police orders.

We, the undersigned organisations, call on the government of Azerbaijan to cease its harassment and detention of government critics. Allegations of torture must be investigated, and all political prisoners must be immediately and unconditionally released.

The relentless campaign waged by the authorities against media workers, bloggers, political activists, civil society and others that are deemed to threaten the power of the ruling regime must stop immediately.

We also call on the international community to exert political pressure and take all the necessary measures until Azerbaijan fully honours its human rights commitments.

ARTICLE 19

CEE Bankwatch Network

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Crude Accountability

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights

Freedom House

Freedom Now

Front Line Defenders

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Human Rights First

Human Rights House Foundation

IFEX

Index on Censorship

International Media Support

International Partnership for Human Rights

Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety

Netherlands Helsinki Committee

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

PEN International

People in Need

Polish Green Network

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

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