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Amnesty International Report 2009 - Azerbaijan

Head of state: Ilham Aliyev
Head of government: Artur Rasizade
Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes
Population: 8.5 million
Life expectancy: 67.1 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f): 89/81 per 1,000
Adult literacy: 98.8 per cent

Freedom of expression continued to be heavily restricted. Independent and opposition journalists were routinely harassed and some were imprisoned on disputed charges in trials failing to comply with international standards. Some religious groups faced continued harassment.

Freedom of expression – journalists

Opposition and independent journalists continued to face harassment, physical assault and intimidation on account of their journalistic activity. Although defamation and libel continued to be criminal offences, several journalists were imprisoned on other criminal charges ostensibly unrelated to their journalistic activity, such as "hooliganism" or "bribery". The trials of journalists facing such charges did not meet international fair trial standards, and they effectively silenced reporting critical of the government.

No significant progress was reported by the authorities in the investigations of numerous cases of assault against journalists. In the case of newspaper editor Elmar Hüseynov, shot dead in 2005, the authorities reported that they were engaged in "all possible measures" to extradite two ethnic Azeris of Georgian citizenship in connection with the crime; the Georgian government reportedly refused to extradite them on the grounds of their Georgian citizenship.

- Faramaz Novruzoglu and Sardar Alibeyli of the Nota Bene newspaper were sentenced to two years' imprisonment and 18 months' corrective labour respectively, after reporting on alleged corruption in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

- In March Qenimet Zahid, editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper Azadliq (Freedom), was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on charges of hooliganism and assault. His lawyer said that his trial was not conducted in accordance with international fair trial standards.
- Azadliq correspondent Aqil Xalil was physically assaulted in February, allegedly by local officials engaged in illegal tree felling, and then stabbed in an assault by unknown men in March. Aqil Xalil believed he was stabbed because of his investigation of alleged illegal land transactions. In April the Prosecutor General's Office claimed that he had been stabbed by a homosexual lover; these claims were refuted by Azerbaijani human rights NGOs.
- In June Emin Hüseynov, director of the media watchdog the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and a prominent activist, was detained and allegedly beaten by police. He was hospitalized with severe head and neck pains.
- In late August three journalists were allegedly beaten in Naxçıvan, an autonomous exclave situated between Iran and Armenia. Radio Liberty correspondents Malahet Nasibova and Ilgar Nasibov, and IRFS correspondent Elman Abbasov, were reportedly beaten up by members of the Nehram village local administration. The incident took place while the journalists were reporting on a confrontation between the Nehram village residents and local police, and their equipment was also taken and destroyed.

Freedom of religion

Representatives of religious groups or confessions outside officially endorsed structures continued to be harassed. In August the Abu Bekr mosque in Baku was bombed, resulting in three deaths. Following this incident, Muslims were banned from praying in public outside mosques. There were continued reports of the forcible shaving of beards by police.

- In March Zaur Balaev, a Baptist pastor sentenced in August 2007 to two years' imprisonment on charges of resisting arrest and assault, was pardoned and released. In June another Baptist pastor, Hamid Sabanov, was arrested in Aliabad on charges of possessing a firearm. His family and Baptist community members said that the weapon was planted. His trial began in July and was still pending at the end of the year; he was transferred from prison to house arrest in November.
- In August a Baku-based Protestant community had its place of worship confiscated without compensation, despite state-certified legal ownership of the site.
- In September the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Said Dadasbeyli, sentenced in December 2007 to 14 years' imprisonment on charges relating to terrorism. Said Dadasbeyli had headed a religious organization called NIMA, accused by the authorities of co-operating with Iranian secret services but which his family and lawyer said was involved only in charitable activities.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In July the Baku Court of Appeals upheld the prison sentences of Dmitri Pavlov, Maksim Genashilkin and Ruslan Bessonov, aged between 15 and 16 at the time of detention and convicted in June 2007 on charges of the murder of another teenager. There was no investigation of the boys' allegations that they had confessed under torture.

Amnesty International reports

- Azerbaijan: Five journalists released (3 January 2008)
- Azerbaijan: Mixed messages on freedom of expression (28 February 2008)
- Azerbaijan: Persecution of opposition newspaper continues unabated (20 March 2008)
- Azerbaijan: Amnesty International condemns beating of media watchdog Emin Hüseynov (20 June 2008)

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