

After Election, Azerbaijan Turns to Trials

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Three separate courts host trials of government opponents.

Three major political trials started in Azerbaijan this month, with supporters of the defendants saying they being persecuted for their criticism of the government.

The town of Sheki is hosting the trial of ten people accused of organising trouble that erupted in the town of Ismayili in January.

When the trial began on November 5, police kept a tight guard around the courtroom and refused to admit journalists and civil society activists.

Eight of the defendants are residents of Ismayili, where anger at local officials boiled over after the son of the then labour minister assaulted a taxi driver. Prosecutors say they were among a crowd that assaulted a hotel, cars and a house belonging to the minister, who has since lost his job.

The other two are Ilgar Mammadov, head of the REAL opposition movement, and Tofiq Yaqublu, deputy head of the Musavat opposition party. They say they went to the town to investigate only after the riot was over, but prosecutors accuse them of inciting the violence. (See [Two Opposition Leaders Arrested in Azerbaijan](#) on their case.)

The same day, another trial began at a central court in the capital Baku, this one involving seven members of the youth movement NIDA. Prosecutors say Rashadat Akhundov, Mamed Azizov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Shahin Novruzlu, Uzeyir Mammadli, Rashad Hasanov and Zaur Qurbanli, as well as Ilkin Rustamzade, a member of Free Youth, another group were attempted to stage a revolution.

The charges date back to a protest on March 10 against the deaths of conscript soldiers in the army.

On November 6, Yadigar Sadiqov, a journalist and adviser to Musavat's national head, went on trial in the southern town of Lenkaran. Sadiqov was arrested in June and charged with "hooliganism" (disorderly behaviour), after allegedly hitting someone with his mobile phone. (See [Opposition Leader's Aide on Assault Charges](#) for more on this case.)

Musavat leader Isa Gambar told IWPR that all the arrests were designed to prevent anyone disrupting last month's election, won by President Ilham Aliyev.

OSCE election monitors were **highly critical** of the poll, saying it was marred by widespread fraud, and Gambar said officials were desperate to prevent protests.

"By employing repressive methods against active members of the dissatisfied electorate on the eve of a presidential election, the government laid the ground for electoral fraud," he said. "The government wanted to use this [repression] to scare people and make sure no one would dare protest against fraud in the electoral process."

That view was not shared by Fazail Agamali, a member of parliament from the pro-government Motherland party, who was puzzled why IWPR was writing about the trials at all.

"There is no political motive to these arrests," he said. "These people were arrested on specific charges because of their wrongdoing, and now they will answer for it in court. The courts in turn will impose fair punishments according to the law."

Agamali said it was wrong to make any connection between these trials and the election.

"The election was free, fair and democratic. And those groups which for their own personal reasons are now saying the vote was marred by fraud will one day accept that they were wrong," he said.

Mirali Huseynov, head of a non-governmental organisation called the Study of Democracy, said pursuing politically-motivated arrests and trials held behind closed doors was likely to feed unhappiness at home as well as harm Azerbaijan's international image.

"There is a widely held opinion in society that all these court cases are fabricated. The activists and political figures who have been arrested and are appearing in court haven't been given a chance to prove their innocence. That's because the courts are not independent of government," he told IWPR. "What is happening now is going to cause serious tensions in society."

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