

Arrest of Opposition Editor Sparks Outrage in Baku

Yeni Musavat's Rauf Arifoglu declares a hunger strike after the authorities charge him with taking part in a plane hijack

The arrest of a leading Azerbaijani newspaper editor on terrorism charges has sparked widespread media outcry at what is seen to be an official attempt to smear the opposition in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

Rauf Arifoglu, editor of the influential daily Yeni Musavat, has been charged with illegal possession of a firearm, taking part in a plane hijack and terrorism, according to the Turan news agency.

Arifoglu is reported to have gone on hunger strike at the National Security Ministry detention centre in Baku, even refusing to drink water.

His arrest prompted a three-day closure by 33 Azerbaijani newspapers and news agencies. The Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan accused President Heidar Aliev's government of launching a "dirty-tricks campaign" against the opposition in the run-up to parliamentary elections on November 5.

"The leaders of the mass media see the pressuring and arrest of Yeni Musavat editor Rauf Arifoglu as the latest measure aimed at limiting press freedom in Azerbaijan," newspaper editors said in a statement.

They threatened to appeal to the Council of Europe, to which Azerbaijan is seeking admission, to evaluate the situation developing in the country.

Arifoglu's arrest on August 22 followed the attempted hijack four days earlier of a domestic flight from Nakhichevan to Baku by a member of the Musavat party, Mekhti Guseinli.

Guseinli doused himself with kerosene, threatening to ignite it, and called Arifoglu on a mobile telephone, saying he wanted to speak to the editor of the most widely read newspaper in Azerbaijan. He then made a series of political demands, including a change in the date of the elections, and ordered the pilot to fly to Ankara.

Arifoglu tried to convince the hijacker to give himself up and informed the Minister of National Security of the incident.

Guseinli was overpowered without harming any of the passengers and the aircraft landed safely.

Four days later, officials from the public prosecutor's office appeared at Yeni Musavat's offices to demand a recording of the conversation between Arifoglu and the hijacker -- a tape which the editor had already offered, in a signed article, to hand over to the security services.

Arifoglu was arrested and questioned for four hours about his alleged role in the hijack attempt. A warrant was then issued to search his apartment.

Arifoglu's arrest came as public attention, and that of the media, was focussed on the death in Ankara of the ex-President of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey. Most of his reporters were at the airport covering the return of the ex-President's body when the editor's apartment was searched.

According to witnesses, Arifoglu promptly ran out on to the balcony and shouted: "Everyone, this is because of the elections. They've planted a pistol on me! See you in two or three months."

As police cordoned off the apartment, officials from the public prosecutor's office, dressed in civilian clothing, wrestled a camera and videocassette off a crew from the independent ANS television company who had filmed the episode.

Despite official assurances to ANS vice president Mir-Shahin Agaev that the equipment would be returned, it was still in police hands a day later.

Police at the scene announced that a Makarov pistol had been found in Arifoglu's apartment and that he would be charged under article 220 of the Criminal Code, which covers the illegal possession of firearms. The editor was put in a police car and taken away.

As the search of Arifoglu's apartment and his arrest unfolded in Baku, one of his reporters, sent to Nakhichevan to investigate the attempted hijack, was arrested there and held for almost a day.

Musavat chairman Isa Gambar told ANS that Arifoglu's arrest had been staged to exclude his party from the parliamentary elections and to brand it as a "party of terrorists".

"Even if he had a pistol, would he hide it at home, knowing that at any moment a search could be carried out in connection with the seizure of the airplane?" he asked.

Musavat has already been refused premises to hold a pre-election congress. Its newspaper, Yeni Musavat, was attacked in February by rioters from the Nakhichevan Republic. The party has been condemned in the official press for its alleged role in the attempted hijack.

Shahin Rzaev is editor of the Impulse newspaper

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