

Azerbaijan Convictions Don't Convince

Author: [Afgan Mukhtarli](#)

“Arrests can take away our freedom, but not our desire to be free” - human rights defender Intiqam Aliyev

If anyone was hoping the Azerbaijani authorities would show a bit of leniency ahead of the European Games this June, they must be fast losing hope as guilty verdicts and jail sentences against human rights defenders continue.

The government has spent large sums of money on the first ever European Games in the hope they will improve its reputation and shift the focus away from its human rights record, only to take great offence when the international spotlight uncovers some awkward facts.

Presidential adviser Ali Hasanov has repeatedly claimed that Azerbaijan is the victim of a “campaign to blacken its name”. He recently told the APA news agency that the state of human rights, democracy and freedom of expression was “as good as any country in the world”.

On April 22, human rights defender Intiqam Aliyev was given a seven-and-a-half year prison sentence after being convicted of embezzlement, fraud and tax evasion.

Addressing the court before he was sentenced, Aliyev said the charges had been entirely fabricated for political reasons. His defence team will be appealing.

He has been in custody since last August. (See **[Azerbaijan Tidies Away Human Rights Critics.](#)**)

A lawyer, Aliyev heads the Legal Education Society, and has defended numerous people detained after they criticised the Azerbaijani government. He has caused the authorities particular embarrassment by bringing cases before the European Court of Human Rights.

In court, he argued that the government was angry with him for providing information on Azerbaijan’s human rights record to the Council of Europe in summer 2014, at a time when the country held the chair of the organisation’s Committee of Ministers.

“It was this that played a large part in my arrest. Beforehand, I was given to understand more than once that this was going to have consequences for me,” he said, concluding, “Arrests can take away our freedom, but not our desire to be free.”

“I’m speechless,” Hikmat Hajizade of the pro-democracy FAR-Centre said. “Intiqam Aliyev isn’t the first victim of this judicial system as it seeks to establish a graveyard silence over our society, and he probably won’t be the last.”

Six days earlier, on April 16, another leading human rights defender, Rasul Jafarov was given a jail sentence, in his case six-and-a-half years. He was convicted of similar offences – illegal business activities, tax evasion and abuse of office.

Jafarov was arrested in early August after prosecutors claimed he had failed to register grants given to the Human Rights Club by Western donors. (See **[Activists Arrested in Azeri Crackdown](#)** .)

After the verdict was read out, Jafarov said it had been concocted because of his work highlighting the plight of political prisoners, including calls for a boycott of the European Games and a protest he staged in Strasbourg while President Ilham Aliyev was in town.

The US State Department said it was “deeply troubled” by Jafarov’s conviction on charges “widely considered to be politically motivated”.

“His conviction is a further setback to Azerbaijan’s democratic development. We urge the Government of Azerbaijan to abide by its international commitments and respect the rights of its citizens. As a first step, we urge the authorities to release Mr Jafarov and others incarcerated in connection with exercising their fundamental freedoms. Doing so would strengthen the country’s long-term stability and our bilateral relationship,” spokesperson Marie Harf said.

Amnesty International has declared Jafarov and Intiqam Aliyev prisoners of conscience.

Many other human rights defenders, opposition members, independent journalists have trodden the same path over the last year – arrest on charges wholly unrelated to the individual’s dissenting views or activity, and an inevitable guilty verdict and a hefty sentence. (See for example **[Grim Year for Press Freedom](#)** .)

Among them is Yadigar Sadiqov from the opposition party Musavat, jailed for six year in January 2014 after being accused of a minor assault, which he denied. (**Opposition Figure Jailed in Azerbaijan**.)

On April 21, Sadiqov's second application for early release under the standard parole system was reviewed and turned down. The judge accepted the prison governor's statement that Sadiqov had not shown remorse and that he spent too much time reading.

Afgan Mukhtarli is an Azerbaijani journalist living abroad.

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