

## **Azerbaijan: Grim Year for Press Freedom**

**Author:** [Samira Ahmedbeyli](#)

Country ranks among world's worst for freedom of information.

After a year in which numerous leading human rights defenders, journalists and opposition figures were arrested and jailed in Azerbaijan, the country has slid two places to 162nd in a leading global index on press freedom.

The 2015 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders ranks Azerbaijan alongside the likes of Rwanda (161), Saudi Arabia (164), Uzbekistan (166), Turkmenistan (178), Cuba (169), North Korea (179) and the worst violator of press freedom, Eritrea (180).

Azerbaijan's regional neighbours Armenia and Georgia performed much better, and were ranked 78th and 69th, respectively.

The 2015 rating comes after Azerbaijan fell three places in last year's rankings. According to a report released by Reporters Without Borders to accompany its findings, the sheer number of journalists and bloggers in jail in Azerbaijan makes it "Europe's biggest prison for news providers".

"Azerbaijan suffered an unprecedented crackdown on critics and registered the biggest fall in score among the index's 25 lowest-ranking countries," the report stated. "With media freedom already limited by one-sided regulation and control of the advertising market, the few remaining independent publications were either collapsing under the impact of astronomical damages awards or were simply closed by the police."

Azerbaijan's poor score reflects a massive crackdown on free speech and human rights defenders which has seen the authorities jail several journalists on trumped-up charges in the last year.

On January 29, a court sentenced Seymur Hezi, a journalist and opposition member, to five years in prison. He was arrested last August and charged with disorderly conduct "using a weapon or weapon-like object". His lawyer Adil Ismailov, supported by witnesses who testified in court, argued that Hezi had done nothing wrong. His legal team said he was attacked by a man and hit back in self-defence with a water bottle. (See **Dubious Assault Charge Against Azeri Journalist**.)

Hezi writes for the Azadliq newspaper and presents Azerbaijan Hour, a programme carried on a Turkish TV channel.

Speaking in court, he spoke about the battle for free speech in Azerbaijan.

"My grandfathers were purged in 1937. Now we are being purged by a system created by KGB general Heydar Aliyev [late president, succeeded by his son Ilham Aliyev]," he said. "Ours is not a struggle between government and opposition, it is a struggle between good and evil."

On February 13, a lawyer for the leading investigative reporter Khadija Ismayil said prosecutors had brought fresh charges against his client, including embezzlement, illegal business activity, tax evasion, and abuse of office. These charges could bring a 12-year sentence, he said.

Ismayil has been in custody since she was arrested on December 5. At that point the charge was "pressuring someone to commit suicide". (See **Top Azerbaijani Journalist Behind Bars** for details of the allegation.)

Ismayil reports for the Prague-based radio station RFE/RL and has conducted in-depth probes into financial wrongdoing by top Azerbaijan leaders.

The authorities seem to have added extra charges because they could not make the initial one stick.

In a letter which Ismayil wrote from prison on February 10 and which was broadcast by RFE/RL, she said, "Judging by what's happened, they have realised they cannot prove these absurd charges, so now they're compiling a new fairy-tale."

It emerged this month that Emin Huseynov, a rights defender and director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) in Baku, has been hiding out at the Swiss embassy in Azerbaijan since August.

Huseynov took refuge in the embassy after the Azerbaijani authorities froze IRFS's bank accounts, searched its offices, and seized equipment and documents.

The head of IRFS's Geneva office, Florian Irminger, said Switzerland must continue to protect Huseynov on

humanitarian grounds.

"His stay at the embassy is justified by the level of repression in the country, fraudulent charges brought against human rights defenders in Azerbaijan, as well as their lack of opportunity to defend themselves in court largely due to the lack of independence of the judiciary and the pressure on their lawyers," Irminger said.

Irminger reported that Huseynov's family had come under pressure while he was in hiding. On November 10, Huseynov's brother Mehman, who also works for IRFS, was stopped and questioned at Baku airport. He was released but barred from leaving the country. The authorities also interrogated his mother.

Irminger's statement noted that if Huseynov were detained, there would be particular concerns about his health as he was still suffering the effects of police beatings in 2003 and 2008.

In a letter to Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev's wife, UNESCO goodwill ambassador Mehriban Aliyeva, and others, the international free expression network IFEX urged her to intervene.

"We believe the charges against Huseynov are politically motivated. Other international organisations including the OSCE have condemned the charges," it said. "We appeal to you as a UNESCO goodwill ambassador to support us. You have the ability to ensure the security and freedom of Emin Huseynov and other defenders of freedom of expression and human rights violations in Azerbaijan."

The Turan news agency reported that the political affairs chief in President Aliyev's office, Ali Hasanov, declined to comment on Huseynov's stay at the Swiss embassy, saying he "had no information" about it.

Huseynov faces charges similar to those brought against Ismayil and others including Rasul Jafarov, head of the Human Rights Club, and Intiqam Aliyev, who leads the Legal Education Society. The charges encompass tax evasion, illegal business activity and abuse of power. (For background on these cases, see **[Activists Arrested in Azeri Crackdown](#)** and **[Azerbaijan Tidies Away Human Rights Critics](#)**.)

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has been in touch with the Azerbaijani authorities about allegations that Intiqam Aliyev was tortured, giving them until the end of May to respond.

Human rights activist and lawyer Javad Javadov said the ECHR was treating Aliyev's case as a priority.

Similar charges of financial wrongdoing were brought last year against human rights activist Leyla Yunus, who prosecutors also accuse of helping the secret service of enemy state Armenia. (**[Top Azeri Rights Defender Held on Treason Charge](#)**.)

Other leading human rights figures received prison sentences in 2014 after criticising the government.

In May, Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Study Centre, and Bashir Suleymanli, the organisation's executive director were sentenced to five-and-a-half and three-and-a-half years, respectively.

Mammadli's lawyer said the real reason for convicting his client was that he had reported that the October 2013 election, in which President Aliyev was re-elected with more than 85 per cent of the vote, could not be considered free and democratic. (**[Five Years' Jail for Finding Fault With Azerbaijan Election](#)**.)

### **Samira Ahmedbeyli reports from Azerbaijan.**

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