

## **Azerbaijan Protesters Face Harsh Penalties**

**Author:** [Seymur Kazimov](#)

New legislation gives authorities financial leverage to stamp out protests.

Azerbaijan's parliament has passed legislation approving a massive increase in the penalties for holding public protests without getting permission in advance. At 1,400 US dollars, the fines are likely to deter even the most committed demonstrators.

Before the amendments to the current law were passed on November 2, the maximum fine was between seven and 13 manats, equivalent to nine to 16 US dollars. As a result of the changes, anyone attending an "unsanctioned protest" will face fines of 500 to 1,100 manats, or up to 1,400 dollars.

Organisers of such events will be fined between 1,500 and 3,000 manats, or twice that amount if they hold some formal position like the leadership of a political party.

The man who came up with the amendments, Rafael Jabrailov, said higher penalties were needed in order to make people think twice before breaking the law.

"If someone pays a small fine for an illegal protest, he's avoiding responsibility. A large sum will force him to consider his actions," he said.

Jabrailov is an independent member of parliament but tends to vote with the government.

Pro-government members of parliament backed the amendments by 105 to five votes.

"The sum of money has to get citizens to avoid breaking the law," Ali Huseynov of the governing Yeni Azerbaijan party said.

The city administration in the capital Baku routinely denies opposition groups permission to hold public gatherings in the centre of town, and instead proposes venues on the outskirts – an offer they generally decline.

As a result, the opposition usually stages the kind of unauthorised public meetings that the new legislation is designed to clamp down on. In response, police move in and break up demonstrations and detain participants.

The most recent demonstration, on November 2, was in fact in protest at the changes to the law.

The Musavat opposition party has urged President Ilham Aliyev not to sign the amendments into law, which it said were a deliberate attempt to curb freedom of assembly ahead of a presidential election in October 2013.

Natig Jafarli, executive director of REAL, an independent organisation seeking to increase public awareness of politics, was appalled by the new fines, saying they undermined any claim that Azerbaijan was a democracy.

"Imposing a fine 30 times the minimum wage... is a disgrace for a country that is part of the European legal system," he said. "The European Court [of Human Rights] has ruled that laws controlling freedom of assembly must not interfere with citizens' freedom of expression."

Lawyer Khalid Agaliyev said the scale of the fines was out of all proportion with fines imposed for other offences.

"It's totally illogical. It means everyone knows the only aim is to force people to abandon protests, to give up their rights to free speech and free expression. That is an illegal and illegitimate aim," he said.

**Seymur Kazimov is a freelance journalist.**

**Location:** [Azerbaijan](#)

**Topic:** [Protests](#)

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