

Azerbaijan Tidies Away Human Rights Critics

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While Baku presides over European rights institution, senior politician says human rights defenders deserve punishment.

As leading Azerbaijani lawyer Intiqam Aliyev awaits trial, his supporters say his arrest reflects official unease about his role in bringing cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

A senior government ally, meanwhile says human rights activists and others caught up in the latest wave of detentions deserve everything they get because they are really working for foreign interests.

On August 8, a court in the capital Baku ordered Aliyev, head of the Legal Education Society, to be detained for three months while prosecutors built a case for tax evasion, abuse of office and illegal entrepreneurship. Aliyev denies all charges.

"Intiqam Aliyev thinks the real reason for his arrest is his human rights activity, the appeals he sends to the ECHR, and his investigation of corruption," his lawyer Anar Qasimli said, Aliyev's lawyer.

One of the ECHR cases brought by Aliyev is that of Leyla Mustafayeva, who is claiming that the 2010 parliamentary election results were fixed in to ensure she lost.

"Intiqam Aliyev is my lawyer. He represents dozens of people who have not found justice in our own judicial system," she said.

Amnesty International has recognised Aliyev as a prisoner of conscience, and says he was detained "solely for his work as a human rights defender".

The group noted that his arrest formed part of a concerted campaign against human rights and civil society activists in Azerbaijan.

Three senior United Nations human rights experts issued a statement on August 19 expressing concern at the arrests of Aliyev, Leyla and Arif Yunus, and Rasul Jafarov. (See **Activists Arrested in Azeri Crackdown** and **Top Azeri Rights Defender Held on Treason Charge** on these recent cases.)

"We are alarmed at the wave of politically-motivated repression of activists in reprisal for their legitimate work in documenting and reporting human rights violations," said a joint statement by Michel Forst, Maina Kiai and David Kaye, the UN rapporteurs for human rights defenders, the right to peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression, respectively. "The state's primary responsibility should be to protect its civil society activists from intimidation, harassment, threats or attacks."

Ali Huseynli chairs the Azerbaijani parliament's legal policy committee and is a member of President Ilham Aliyev's Yeni Azerbaijan party, has little time for the country's human rights activists.

"Some of them are traitors, some are weak - they will all answer before the law. What kind of human rights defenders are they anyway, if they can't even defend themselves?" he asked.

Huseynli went on to claim that the international organisations complaining about the activists' arrests had often funded their activities, and suggested that these groups were proxies for Western intelligence.

"International foundations and NGOs controlled by Western groups and probably by their special [secret] services are conducting illegal activities not only in Azerbaijan but also in other countries," he said.

Azerbaijan currently chairs a Council of Europe institution that calls itself "the continent's leading human rights organisation". A week before his country took up the six-month rotating chairmanship of the CoE's Committee of Ministers, Foreign Minister Eldar Mammadyarov pledged that it would pay particular attention to the grouping's "three key pillars - human rights, rule of law and democracy".

Arastun Orujlu, head of the East-West think tank in Baku, believes that the government is calculating that it is currently in a position to step up attacks on human rights and ignore expressions of concern because Western states are too busy with the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

"The government is sure that at the moment the United States and Europe will react to political arrests more cautiously since they don't want to alienate Azerbaijan," he said.

Maria Dahle of the Human Rights House Foundation is among those calling for a stronger international

response.

“The authorities want to silence those holding the country to its international obligations and commitments, especially within the Council of Europe,” she said.

Meanwhile, the arrests continue. Natiq Adilov, spokesman for the opposition Popular Front party, said armed police raided his father’s home in Sabirabad on August 11, arrested his brother Murad, and claimed to have discovered a package containing drugs.

On August 6, a court approved a prosecution request to freeze the bank accounts of the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety (IRFS), and two days later, police searched the group’s offices and seized documents, computer hard drives and other materials.

Prosecutors issued a summons against IRFS head Emin Huseynov, but he failed to appear.

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