

Azerbaijan's U-Turn on Censorship

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Increasing attacks on the independent media raise concerns of a official effort by the authorities in Baku to silence their critics.

The offices of Azerbaijan's biggest selling opposition newspaper were stormed this week by government supporters and one of its journalists arrested in the latest crackdown on the country's independent media.

The raid on Eni Musavet and the detention of Elbai Gasanly, who was later released, comes four months after the independent broadcaster, Sara, was forced off the air. [See "The Silencing of Sara TV," by Shahin Rzayev, *Caucasus Reporting Service* No. 5, 4-Nov-99]

The episode suggests that the authorities are seeking roll back press freedoms, despite the repeal of a presidential decree on censorship two years ago. Local analysts believe the government is being encouraged by muted international reaction to Sara's closure.

In the latest incident, around 100 people from the town of Nekhram of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic demonstrated on February 7 in front of the Eni Musavat's offices.

The protest was sparked by series of articles by one of the paper's reporters, Albai Gasanly, which had been highly critical of Nakhichevan's leading official, Vasif Talybov, and suggested that the residents of Nekhram - the home town of President Geidar Aliev - enjoyed a privileged life.

The protesters attempted to storm the newspaper office, brushing past police, but were held back by barricades assembled by the journalists. "We'd never seen our police behaving so meekly before," said one journalist inside the building.

Eni Musavat sells almost three times as many copies as its largest rival and generally reflects the views of the opposition Musavat Party, which is headed by Isa Gambar, the former speaker of the Azerbaijan parliament.

Several hours before the attack on Eni Musavat's offices, Gasanly was arrested and flown to Nakhichevan, where he was sentenced to 15 days in prison. Other people interviewed in his controversial articles were also arrested.

Independent newspapers subsequently published prominent photographs of Gasanly and demanded his release. He was freed a day after their appeal.

The chairman of the Musavat Party, Isa Gambar said that he considered Gasanly's arrest an act of revenge against the journalist and an attempt to scare the free press.

Ex-president Abulfaz Elchibei described the raid on the newspaper as "government terror" and alleged that "Geidar Aliev knew about the action, and that supporters of his brother, Dzhalal Aliev, took a direct part in it."

The leader of the Azerbaijani Social Democrat Party, Zardusht Alizade, said the president's family is a taboo subject. Indeed, last summer, a journalist with the Bakinsky Boulevard newspaper, Irada Guseinova, was sentenced to a year in prison for calling Dzhahal "King of the Petrol Pumps". Talybov, the subject of Gasanly's investigation, is married to Aliev's niece.

Aliev has yet to respond to the incidents but his adviser Ali Gasanov said, "The inhabitants of Nekhram were upset by the publications in the Eni Musavat newspaper and expressed their unhappiness. That is their constitutional right, though the method of protest was poorly chosen."

The view was echoed by Dzhahal Aliev who condemned the Musavat Party as a fascist organisation and described the attacks on the newspaper as an "appropriate reaction" by Azeri citizens.

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