

Azeri Press Feels Government Squeeze

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Opposition paper faces string of lawsuits and fugitive journalist escapes extradition, in latest clashes between media and government.

Around 200 protestors braved heavy snowfalls in central Baku on December 12 to demonstrate about what they called an escalating government campaign against the print media.

In the last two months, government officials have tried to prosecute the prominent opposition newspaper Yeni Musavat on a number of pretexts and tried unsuccessfully to extradite a prominent opposition journalist from Moscow.

Editors and journalists, fearing this is the start of a state-sponsored campaign against them ahead of next year's presidential elections, have appealed for support to international organisations.

"The goal of this long-lasting campaign is to force the media to end its criticism of the leadership and state institutions (of Azerbaijan)," Azerbaijani editors wrote in a letter addressed to Andreas Gross, the Council of Europe's rapporteur on Azerbaijan and to the OSCE's representative for media freedom, Freimut Duve on December 4. "The main principle governing the authorities is 'he who is not with us is against us'."

Ali Hasanov, head of the socio-political department in the presidential administration, accused the editors of over-reacting and called the row "a storm in a teacup".

"We are talking only about court cases here and we are ready to discuss what is happening with anyone who is concerned, including international organisations and prove that all this artificial hullabaloo is not based on any facts," Hasanov said.

So far this year, there have been thirty-one lawsuits against media organisations in Azerbaijan.

In October and November alone, 14 lawsuits were brought against the opposition media. Eight were directed at Yeni Musavat, associated with the Musavat political party. The lawsuits threaten the title with closure and ten of its employees with criminal charges, as well as a fine of around 20,000 US dollars.

On December 9, a Baku court fined Yeni Musavat about 600 US dollars for libel. It was found to have offended "the honour and dignity" of the executive head of the Saatly province of central Azerbaijan. In a forthcoming case, the deputy defence minister Mamed Beidullayev is demanding a sum one hundred times that from the newspaper for alleged slander.

Meanwhile, fugitive journalist Irada Husseinova has fought off an attempt to extradite her from Moscow to Azerbaijan.

Husseinova, who fled Azerbaijan last year, fearing prosecution for articles she had written, said that for three weeks in November she received emails from the Yasamal district court in Baku, advising her to return to Azerbaijan and promising to "solve all her problems".

On November 24, she was arrested in the office of the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, where she works, and taken for interrogation to Butyrki prison.

It transpired that the Azerbaijani authorities had put in a request for her to be arrested on a swindling charge. "The Russian investigator who arrested me learned that I was a journalist being persecuted for political reasons only in prison," Husseinova said.

In 1998, Husseinova had been sentenced to a year in prison after the president's brother sued her newspaper, Bakinsky Bulvar, for an article she had written. She was pardoned under an amnesty. She left for Moscow in September last year after her editor was arrested.

In Moscow, the case against her quickly unravelled and Husseinova was freed after one day's detention, as it transpired Azerbaijan did not have the legal right to demand the extradition of one of its citizens merely for libel.

The next battle facing the editors is a string of court cases, mainly against Yeni Musavat. A group of editors has asked the Council of Europe and the OSCE to send observers to watch the cases.

Freimut Duve of the OSCE has already sent a letter to Azerbaijan's foreign minister expressing his concern about the arrest of Husseinova and general worries about the number of journalists facing prosecution in Azerbaijan.

On another front, the private newspaper distribution company Gaya is also complaining of persecution. Over the last two years, half of its 22 kiosks in Baku have been taken down, nominally on environmental grounds.

Editors fear that the state press distribution company is seeking to acquire a monopoly for newspaper distribution and thus control what papers are or are not sold.

However, President Heidar Aliev said last month that he would take personal responsibility for press freedom in his country. Speaking at a ceremony to mark the tenth anniversary of the ruling New Azerbaijan party, he called on his government "not to take any measures against the press" and said that "from now on (he) would be the guarantor of human rights" in Azerbaijan.

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