

Baku Protestors Undaunted

Opposition parties have pledged to keep up pressure on the authorities in a bid to ensure fair parliamentary elections this November.

Azerbaijani opposition leaders are threatening to stage fresh protest rallies across Baku in the wake of last week's bloody clashes between demonstrators and riot police.

Of the 200 protestors arrested during the street battles, 46 were jailed for public order offences. Up to 100 people were injured as police units beat back crowds with night-sticks.

Isa Gambar, chairman of the Musavat Party, said the government could expect further clashes this week unless the demonstrators were released from jail immediately. The opposition, he added, was still determined to keep up pressure on the authorities in a bid to ensure that November's parliamentary elections would be fair.

Thousands of protestors converged on Baku's Fizuli Square on April 29 demanding a review of a new electoral bill currently being discussed by the Azerbaijani parliament. The rally was organised by the republic's Popular Front in defiance of a ban by the city authorities.

The mayor's office had previously designated the Motodrom sports track, seven miles outside Baku, as the only acceptable venue for the demonstration. But organisers feared police would set up checkpoints along the road and turn back would-be supporters.

Around 1,000 police officers surrounded Fizuli Square and attempted to disperse the crowds but the demonstrators set off towards the Palace of the Republic. It was here that the most violent clashes took place with police in riot gear using shields and batons to beat back opposition supporters.

Rukh, a local organisation which defends journalists' rights, said that 17 reporters covering the event complained of heavy-handed interference from riot police. Rukh has sent a formal protest to the Azerbaijani prosecutor's office.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that 34 police officers were taken to hospital during the violence and 21 of these were seriously injured.

Most of the 200 protestors arrested were released later in the day but 46 were formally charged with public order offences and resisting police arrest. They were handed down prison sentences of between 10 and 13 days.

Among those detained were Panakh Guseinov, who was prime minister of Azerbaijan during the Popular Front regime, Arif Gadzhiev, secretary of the Musavat party, Ekhrar chairman Vagif Gadzhibeili, who is also editor of the *Intibakh* (Revival) newspaper, and Ulvi Khakimov, chairman of the National Democratic Foundation.

A special session of the Milli Medzhlia, Azerbaijan's parliament, was called to discuss the events and leading politicians slammed the demonstration as an outright attack on state and national interests.

Deputy Zakhid Garalov accused the opposition of using substantial donations from abroad to fund the rally while Rza Ibadov, chairman of the parliamentary commission on international relations, said the police had been too lenient.

Meanwhile, Musavat leader Isa Gambar hailed the rally as a political triumph and said that opposition factions would continue to hold public meetings until the government agreed to reconsider the terms of the electoral bill.

Gambar believes the bill represents a direct attack on democracy. It proposes an increase in the number of signatures required from a party candidate from 50,000 to 80,000. Candidates from single-mandate constituencies would need 4,000 signatures - double the existing figure.

Under the terms of the bill, any party entering the elections has to make a deposit of \$24,720 while private candidates would be asked to pay \$620. The opposition says the new measures would preclude anyone "without an illegal source of income" from entering the electoral race.

The bill also proposes sweeping changes to the Central Electoral Commission, reducing its membership from 24 to 18. A third of the members would come from the ruling Eni Azerbaijan party, a third from other government factions and a third from independent candidates.

Opposition leaders say the reforms would allow the existing regime to control the commission's activities and are demanding that membership be divided equally between the government and the opposition.

The opposition is relying heavily on the support of the Council of Europe, which discussed Azerbaijan's membership bid on May 3. Matters of electoral procedure are central to the council's demands on the former Soviet republic.

Shadman Guseinov, of the National Independence Party, said that he considers the existing bill to be unacceptable and will be stating his case in front of PACE members in Paris.

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