

## **Blasphemy Row Inflames Azerbaijan**

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Islamists say journalist who allegedly impugned Islam deserves to die.

For the past three weeks, residents of the village of Nardaran, close to Baku, have been demonstrating every Friday to demand severe punishment of Azerbaijani journalist Rafik Taghi, who is accused of having insulted the Prophet Mohammed in an article published by the little-known Azerbaijani newspaper, Senet.

The case of the journalist, who is now serving a two-month prison sentence, demonstrates that Islamic sentiment is strong in Azerbaijan and has complicated relations with Azerbaijan's southern neighbour, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Nardaran, a village with strong Islamic traditions, has been leading the protests. On November 17, Haji Ali, one of the leaders of the local religious community, summoned crowds by striking a stone against a pillar in Imam Husein square in the centre of the village. Teenagers, who had climbed on a wall, joined him, banging iron rods against a gas pipe. This noisy call to action reverberated through the village.

By three o'clock, the square was teeming with devout believers, who form an overwhelming majority in the village. "Last week we, the residents of Nardaran, condemned Rafik Taghi and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper", said Haji Ali, beginning his speech. "Our religion knows only one punishment for such people, which is execution. This is not our decision, this is what our holy book prescribes. The authorities sentenced the journalists to two weeks in custody. But that is not enough!"

Nardaran became famous after bloody clashes between its residents and police in 2002. (See Azerbaijan: Rebel Village Remains Defiant, CRS 133, June 13, 2002). Since then, the village has become a stronghold for Shia Islamists opposed to the government. All walls on its narrow streets are covered with religious inscriptions, and locals are keen to vent their anger against the authorities in Baku.

The latest row began at the beginning of this month, when Senet (Trade), a Baku-based bimonthly with a circulation of 2000 copies, published an article by Taghi entitled "Europe and us". The author criticised Azerbaijanis' lifestyle and made some remarks about the Prophet Mohammed, which many of the country's Muslims interpreted as insulting. Whether Nardaran's residents had heard about Senet before, the controversy around the article found its way into the village, causing a storm of outrage that believers from surrounding villages were quick to support.

Protesters carried banners with religious inscriptions and placards saying "Death to Israel!" All speeches were met with a loud "Allahu Akbar!" Guests from other villages spoke out to express their support for Nardaran. American and Israel flags were brought to the square just to be tramped on and burnt.

"We declare that if these people are not sentenced to life imprisonment, we will take measures to punish them by ourselves," said Haji Ali. "It's a pity that there's no death penalty in our country. We are told that their houses are being guarded, but let them hear us vow - Muslims never take vengeance on women and children. No one will touch their families. We've heard that Rafik Taghi's family members have asked Denmark for political asylum, but no matter how things turn out nothing bad is going to happen to them. Rafik Taghi is the only one we want to have punished."

As well as being a journalist and publicist, Taghi is also a professional cardiologist. He is well known for voicing ideas against the current of general public opinion. In other articles, he has made scathing

comments about Azerbaijan's national poet Samed Vurgun, chairman of the Writers Union Anar and other famous people.

Taghi and his editor Samir Sadagatoglu were arrested in mid-November and sentenced to two months in jail for kindling religious intolerance.

However, the villagers of Nardaran rejected the verdict and are continuing their protests, demanding that the two journalists be punished with a life sentence at least, burning US and Israel flags and calling for "an end to all supporters of world Zionism".

Hajiaga Nuriev, one of the village's elders and chairman of Azerbaijan's Islamic Party, suggested Taghi was part of a wider conspiracy. "Both domestic and foreign forces have an interest in this," he said. "We think that people such as Rafik Taghi are acting on behalf of international Zionism and Armenia, and they have deliberately damaged Azerbaijan's credibility with its brothers-in-faith.

"In this situation, the residents of Nardaran could not have acted otherwise...to the enemies of Islam... who discredited Azerbaijan in the eyes of the world. This blasphemy ought to be punished."

Hajiaga said through their rejection of the court's sentence, the people of Nardaran had rescued the country's reputation as chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and showed to the world that the Muslims of Azerbaijan were angered by the Senet article.

The affair has also triggered protests in Iran. APA news agency reported that around 50 people demonstrated in front of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran on November 19 to protest against the "humiliating" article. The Iranian TV-channel Seher aired calls for the overthrow of Azerbaijan's "anti-Islamic" government.

Then news reports said that the Iranian ayatollah Morteza Bani Fazl had offered his own home as a reward for the head of the Azerbaijani journalist, who had "insulted" the founder of Islam. "I will give my house as a reward to anyone, who kills this Azerbaijani author, who insulted the Prophet Mohammed," said the mullah who lives in the city of Tebriz in the northwest of Iran, which has a large Azerbaijani population.

The row is likely to strain further Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. Political analyst Boyukaga Agayev, who is director of the South Caucasus research centre, said, "The relations between Azerbaijan and Iran cannot be described as friendly." He noted that the two countries already stand on opposite sides of many disputes, from the status of the Caspian Sea to relations with the US and Israel.

Vugar Aliev, press secretary for the Azerbaijani prosecutor general's office, said, "We live in a constitutional state, and all issues should be solved in accordance with the law. What happened in Nardaran is a protest reaction to what these people did. But the law-enforcement bodies have already taken appropriate actions, and these harsh calls with regard to the two journalists are unacceptable. The police responded in a timely fashion and there remains no danger of any civilians undertaking any illegal actions against them."

Eldar Zeynalov, director of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, commented, "The situation is of the soviet-time kind - 'I have not read it, but I do condemn it!'"

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**Location:** Caucasus

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