

Dubious Assault Charge Against Azeri Journalist

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Colleagues of Seymur Hezi say the accusation doesn't hold water, and he is just one more on the list of independent voices put out of circulation.

Seymur Hezi, a journalist and opposition member in Azerbaijan, has been charged with aggravated disorderly conduct, in a case his lawyer says is fabricated.

Hezi, who writes for the Azadliq newspaper and presents Azerbaijan Hour, a programme carried on a Turkish TV channel, was detained by police on August 29 and the following day a court ordered him to be held in custody for two months pending trial.

Police and prosecutors in the Absheron district said he had insulted and punched a man called Magerram Hasanov, and hit him over the head with a bottle, causing serious bodily harm. The charge comes under the criminal offence of "hooliganism [disorderly conduct] using a weapon or weapon-like object". The offence carries a prison sentence of three to seven years.

Hezi's lawyer Elton Guliyev says that what really happened was that his client was confronted by a man who ostensibly wanted to know why he had not replied to a Facebook message, and then launched an attack on him. While defending himself against the blows, Hezi hit his assailant with a water bottle.

"This looks like an act of provocation," the lawyer said. "He was defending himself. The charge against Seymur Hezi is illegal and without foundation. Even his arrest was planned in advance."

Other dissidents in Azerbaijan have been charged and convicted of assaults which they deny, while the authorities simply say they are common criminals who deserve punishment. Recent cases of this kind include those of opposition party figure **Yadigar Sadiqov**, given a six-year term in January, and civil society activist **Hasan Huseynli**, sent to jail for six years in July. On August 21, journalist **Ilgar Nasibov** was badly injured in an assault – in that case, too, the police are blaming him.

The opposition Popular Front party, of which Hezi is a leading office-holder, issued a statement condemning his arrest.

It described him as an "educator who possesses sound judgement", noted that he had been fined and arrested because of his political activities on previous occasions, and that in 2011, he was abducted and beaten up. Police have never solved that case.

The Azadliq newspaper was set up by the Popular Front, while Azerbaijan Hour TV programme was created in 2012 by the paper's chief editor, Ganimat Zahid, now in emigration.

Azadliq editor Rahim Hajiyev says the authorities are squeezing independent media outlets, and the journalists who work for them, out of existence.

"For several years now, the Azerbaijani government has taken a very hard line against independent media. Journalists have been beaten, abducted, detained and fined astronomical sums. The authorities are using every means possible to eliminate the free press," he said. As a result, he said, "The number of independent media outlets is catastrophically small. I would say the government has achieved 90 per cent of its objective."

The Ayna/Zerkalo newspaper was forced to close in May. Its editor-in-chief, Elchin Shikhli, said Hezi's arrest was another blow to freedom of speech.

"They are jailing anyone who's got something to say," he said. "There's absolutely no logic to it.... There's no free press at all. These arrests don't encourage journalists to practice self-censorship since they internalised it a long time ago."

NGOs and lawyers in Azerbaijan have compiled a list of 13 journalists and bloggers currently in detention. For recent overviews of the broader pattern of arrests of journalists and human rights defenders, see **[Azerbaijan Tidies Away Human Rights Critics](#)** and **[Activists Arrested in Azeri Crackdown](#)**.

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