

Opposition Figure Jailed in Azerbaijan

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Yadigar Sadiqov convicted of assault in a case his supporters say was manufactured.

A court in Azerbaijan has sentenced a leading member of the opposition Musavat party to six years in prison for assault.

Yadigar Sadiqov, sentenced on January 13, was arrested at his home in the southern town of Lenkoran last June and charged with hitting a man with a mobile phone two days previously. The plaintiff, Rashid Karimov, told police that Sadiqov shouted abuse and then attacked him in a Lenkoran café. (See **Opposition Leader's Aide on Assault Charges.**)

An academic by profession, Sadiqov lost his post teaching history at Lenkoran's university. Previous attempts to sack him had failed when his students mounted campaigns in his support.

Sadiqov advised Musavat's national leader Isa Gambar, and wrote articles for www.civil-forum.az and the opposition website www.minval.az. He was also administrator of the IS TE FA ("Resign") page, which had 200,000 members until Facebook shut it down for unexplained reasons.

"Yadigar was very active, both in real life and on social media," Gambar said soon after his aide's arrest. "It appears that his real-life and social media activities alarmed the government."

Other opposition politicians and human rights activists agree that Sadiqov's activities were an irritant for local officials, who manufactured a criminal case to remove him from the scene.

His lawyer Khalid Bagirov points to great holes in the prosecution case.

"During the investigation, there were individuals who gave evidence against Sadiqov. When they spoke about the supposed incident, they named a location which my client did not visit on the day in question," he said. "The [witness] interview was filmed and a record was made. But then the video and the record simply disappeared. The mobile phone with which Sadiqov allegedly hit Karimov is also missing from the material evidence."

Azerbaijan's interior ministry insists its police would never pick on an opposition figure.

"Some people say Sadiqov's arrest is connected with his political activities, but there's no legal basis to such claims," ministry spokesman Orkhan Mansurzade told IWPR. "A specific individual said he had been attacked, an investigation began, and it turned out the culprit was Sadiqov. His political activities are just not relevant."

Siyavush Novruzov, a member of parliament from President Ilham Aliyev's ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, took a similar line.

"If he beat someone up, are we then not supposed to punish him just because he is a functionary from a political party? The law applies to everyone equally," Novruzov told IWPR.

Opposition politicians and human rights defenders say the case is manifestly political.

Iqbal Arazade, head of the (Umid) Hope party, rarely speaks out against the government, but on this occasion he did.

"The government arrests opposition activists on invented charges. Yadiqar Sadiqov is one of them," he told IWPR. "These arrests are intended to scare other people and stop them being politically active."

Natig Adilov, spokesman for the opposition Popular Front party, told IWPR that Sadiqov's conviction was designed to curb criticism of the authorities.

"Sadiqov stood out not just because of his political activity, but also because he was a journalist who actively criticised the government on social media. The real reason for his arrest has to do with this."

Sadiqov is not the only opposition figure detained over the last year. (See **After Election, Azerbaijan Turns to Trials** for others.)

Musavat activist Azer Ismayil said this kind of case occurred fairly frequently, and he too had been targeted by the police last year, a day before a demonstration in support of opposition candidate Jamil Hasanli, who went on to lose to the incumbent president, Ilham Aliyev.

“I was arrested at a baker’s shop. They alleged that I’d tried to beat up a pensioner. I was detained for a day so that I couldn’t get to the demonstration,” he recalled. “It’s obvious all of this is being done for political reasons.”

Amnesty International and other human rights groups say Aliyev’s government has become increasingly repressive over recent years.

Amnesty listed 14 “prisoners of conscience” in a report released in October.

Mirvari Gahramanli, head of the Committee for the Defence of Oil Workers’ Rights, said the government needed to learn that politically motivated arrests did serious damage to Azerbaijan’s international image.

“Judges who return such unfair verdicts should throw their robes in the bin. It’s a stain on their conscience. By arresting Yadigar Sadiqov and other activists, the government wants to scare and de-activate the whole of society,” he told IWPR.

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Location: [Azerbaijan](#)

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