

Outcry at Azerbaijani Editor Arrest

Observers say hooliganism charge against opposition editor is politically motivated. The arrest of a leading opposition newspaper editor, Ganimat Zahidov, on charges of “hooliganism” a week ago is another blow to freedom of speech in Azerbaijan, say international observers.

Zahidov, the editor of *Azadlyq*, Azerbaijan’s first independent newspaper in the modern era, which is closely allied to the opposition Popular Front party, had recently published a series of articles critical of the governing administration of President Ilham Aliiev.

The police department of Baku’s Yasamal district said that Zahidov had been taken into custody on November 10 following complaints filed by two citizens named Vusal Hasanov and Sevgilade Gulieva.

“On November 7, an incident happened between the complainants and Zahidov outside the Azerbaijan publishing house,” said an official letter. “Hasanov is accusing Zahidov of attacking him and insulting his female acquaintance. Criminal proceedings have been opened against Zahidov under articles 127 (deliberate infliction of minor damage to health) and 221 (hooliganism).”

Human rights activists say the incident was a staged provocation.

“This is an unprecedented and ludicrous accusation,” said Emin Husseinli, who is director of the Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety, IRFS. “Imagine a senior editor of a leading opposition newspaper harassing an unknown woman outside the office of his newspaper, and a young man coming to her rescue, and then the journalist beating up both of them. After that, the young man and woman go to the police, and at 11 pm the journalist is arrested as a dangerous criminal as a result of a special operation. Isn’t this the ideal way of suppressing a critical journalist?”

The detention has been widely condemned, along with a series of high-profile detentions of journalists this year. Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE’s representative on freedom of the media, announced he was “concerned with the grave situation of the independent media in Azerbaijan”, saying that the arrest of Zahidov meant that nine Azerbaijani journalists were now in prison on dubious charges.

“Despite protests by international organisations, these journalists are not being freed,” said Husseinli. “On the contrary, new ones are being arrested. This shows that the arrests of the journalists are politically motivated.”

But Ali Hasanov, who heads the public department of the presidential administration, insisted Zahidov’s arrest had nothing to do with his professional activity.

“Like all citizens, journalists should understand their responsibility before the law because Azerbaijan is a law-based country,” said Hasanov. “There’s no link between freedom of speech and insulting behaviour towards certain people.”

Zahidov was sentenced to two months’ pre-trial detention. His lawyer, Osman Kazymov, said that if found

guilty he could face five years in prison.

“I am not crazy nor some teenager who would harass a woman in broad daylight,” Zahidov told his interrogators. “I had just visited my brother Sakit in prison and was going to work. I paid no attention to the woman standing in front of the office. Suddenly she started cursing me and alleging that I had said something to her. And then an athletically-built young man popped up out of nowhere and began beating me. I defended myself as best as I could.”

Zahidov’s brother Sakit, a satirical poet also working for Azadlyq, was sentenced to three years in prison in June 2006 for allegedly possessing drugs. His case also led to international condemnation of Azerbaijan.

Zahidov’s close friend Azer Rashidoglu, who is director of the Tolerance research centre, said Zahidov had regularly gone to see his brother in jail, bringing him homemade food and medicines to treat his stomach ulcer. He said that the editor was not only supporting his own family - a wife, who doesn’t work, and four children - but also his brother’s wife and five children.

“I don’t think that a man with such heavy responsibilities on his shoulders would care to make advances to a strange woman,” said Rashidoglu. “Besides, Ganimat Zahidov performs namaz [Islamic prayers] five times a day. According to Islam, harassing someone else’s wife is a great sin, and Ganimat is well aware of that.”

Rashidoglu said he knew the complainant Hasanov well and that he had been responsible for “provocations” against opposition activists during the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Azer Ahmedov, the director of Azadlyq newspaper, believes that Zahidov was arrested for his critical coverage of the behaviour of members of the government.

The newspaper had recently published a photograph of a cortege of cars of the president’s aunt Shafiga Alieva in which number plates were covered up and windows darkened. They contrasted this with an official campaign against this practice.

They had also recently printed a series of accusatory articles about leading members of the government, such as powerful emergencies minister Kemaleddin Heidarov and the head of the presidential administration Ramiz Mekhtiev.

Rashid Hajily, head of the Media Rights Institute, said the practice of incriminating journalists on false charges was likely to continue.

“For two years, the OSCE and EU have been demanding that [Azerbaijan] pass a law on defamation,” he said. “However, the authorities have responded by saying society is not ready for it as yet. So, we can expect that journalists will continue to be arrested on similar grounds.”

Leila Yunus, director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy, said Zahidov and Einulla Fatullayev of Realny Azerbaijan newspaper were viewed by the authorities as two of their most troublesome critics. Earlier this year, Fatullayev was given an eight-and-a-half jail sentence for “terrorist threats”.

“Einualla had already been given a prison term, but his newspapers continued coming out,” said Yunus. “And then they made a new accusation against him - terror. All the computers were confiscated, making further publication of the newspaper impossible. Under the original charges, he could expect to be freed fairly quickly but the new accusation allows them to keep him under lock and key for much longer.”

Recent events have made critical journalists nervous.

“Coming in the office and leaving for home, I am always on guard,” said veteran journalist Rauf Mirkadyrov, who is a political commentator with the newspaper Zerkalo. “I must confess that an internal censor has been born in each of us. None of us is protected against what happened to Ganimat. Maybe, there’s a special plan to neutralise each of us. Only time will tell.”

Idrak Abbasov is a correspondent with Ayna newspaper in Baku.

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