

Sadness as Media Rights Group Closes in Azerbaijan

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NGO that helped with civil rights litigation is out of the picture.

For citizens of Azerbaijan who have exhausted all opportunities for justice at home, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) can offer a last resort.

When they decide to bring a case before the Strasbourg court, they are often guided by a non-government group specialising in legal advice and human rights. But opportunities to seek such help are narrowing fast as these organisations fade from view.

One organisation that has helped with ECHR submissions, the Legal Education Society, closed down recently after its leader was arrested. On August 8, a court ordered Intiqam Aliyev to be held in custody while prosecutors built a case against him for tax evasion, abuse of office and illegal business activities. He denies all the charges. (More on his case in [Azerbaijan Tidies Away Human Rights Critics](#).)

Another blow came with the closure of the Media Rights Institute, which has also worked on ECHR cases. In an August 15 statement, its head Rashid Hajili said he had been forced to take this step because the organisation was in financial trouble.

"There have recently been problems in the relationships with donors who support the Media Rights Institute's activities, and no solution is in sight," Hajili said. "That means the Media Rights Institute may not be able to continue working on court cases."

The loss of the institute will have a severe impact on people like journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who has six cases currently before the ECHR.

"The organisation [Media Rights Institute] provided legal assistance on 150 court cases concerning journalists," he said. "It defended my interests in all these [six] cases. Now the cases revert to me, and there's no one to defend my rights. There are very few independent lawyers. Many lawyers are afraid to take on the Azerbaijani government at the ECHR."

Friends and admirers of the institute's work suspect that it has been forced to close for political rather than financial reasons, but that it is just not in a position to say so openly.

Khadija Ismayilova, a leading investigative journalist, is among those whom the Media Rights Institute has helped.

"I am grateful to them to the help they have given me to date," she said.

She told IWPR that it was obvious the Media Rights Institute had been put under severe pressure.

"Government pressure is the reason why the Media Rights Institute has stopped operating," she said. "The institute's accounts have been frozen, and its head [Hajili] emigrated a long time ago. Then he suddenly returned and announced that the institute was closing, and also that he'd never ever been involved in a case involving political prisoners.... In this difficult position, the Media Rights Institute clearly decided to give up the struggle. We have no option but to respect that decision."

Ganimat Zahid, editor-in-chief of *Azadliq*, an opposition newspaper, agrees that the Media Rights Institute was forced to close rather than choosing to do so.

"The authorities' policy of persecution is having an impact on NGOs," he told IWPR. "The Media Rights Institute took a strong stance on matters of principle, and was among those organisations that the government always had in its sights. I suspect that if it hadn't stopped operating, its head Rashid Hajili would have been arrested. The organisation clearly halted its activities to avert an impending arrest."

Five days before the Media Right Institute announced its closure, one of its staff members made a declaration of support for Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev. After NGOs and political prisoners expressed dismay, Elchin Sadigov, who is a lawyer, wrote on Facebook that he was the victim of a witch-hunt. Hajili came to his defence, also on Facebook, but did not respond to questions that were posted about why the institute had closed.

The Azerbaijani leadership continues to brush off any suggestion that it is behind the serial arrests of its critics and the closure of their organisations.

“It is regrettable that these NGOs and individuals – and some journalists – fall back on the foreign forces that fund them and regard themselves as above national law, refusing to report their grant-funded project, file accounts, pay their taxes and comply with other legal requirements set out by the government,” Ali Hasanov, political affairs chief in the presidential administration, told the AzerTas news agency. “In those circles, the appropriate actions that state institutions have taken are sadly being misrepresented as ‘pressure on civil society’ and as ‘restrictions’ on the functioning of NGOs and the media. It’s a campaign to blacken Azerbaijan’s reputation,”

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