

Two Opposition Leaders Arrested in Azerbaijan

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Allies say they are being framed for spontaneous protest by exasperated residents of provincial town.

Two opposition leaders in Azerbaijan, one of whom plans to run for president this year, have been charged with staging riots in the town of Ismayilli. Supporters of Ilgar Mammadov and Tofiq Yaqublu say they had nothing to do with a protest sparked by local concerns, and are being framed by the authorities.

Mammadov, chairman of the REAL (Republican Alternative) movement, and Yaqublu, deputy chairman of the Musavat Party, were arrested and charged on February 4. If found guilty, both could face up to three years in jail.

The unrest in Ismayilli protests erupted late on January 23 after a fight between a hotel owner and a taxi driver. Crowds massed around the hotel and set fire to a vehicle belonging to the owner, and the flames then engulfed the building. Then the angry residents surrounded a house belonging to the son of district government chief Nizami Alakbarov, who they believed was a relation of the hotel owner.

Some of the protesters told IWPR that their anger was really about the way their town was run. (See **Local Grievances Spark Protests in Azerbaijan**.)

Yaqubli and Mammadov visited Ismayilli to see what was going on, the former several hours after the riot and the latter the following afternoon. Each man spent under an hour in the town.

Eldar Sultanov, a spokesman for Azerbaijan's chief prosecutor, said that on January 24, the day after the riot began, the two men incited local people to block traffic and resist police.

"Because the investigation has showed that they caused tensions in Ismayilli and incited people to violence, they should be charged," he said.

Khalid Bagirov, a lawyer for Mammadov, said the accusations against him were absurd.

"He talked to journalists and a few residents in the streets. That's it. The riot was over, and the hotel and cars were burnt long before they arrived," he said. "These are trumped-up charges. There was a plan to arrest him, and they've done so."

While in Ismayilli, both men described their impressions on Facebook, but neither endorsed the riot. In one post, Mammadov said the root of the trouble was corruption and abuse of power.

"Talking to locals. People are fed up," he wrote.

Yaqublu's lawyer Akif Alizade said his client believed he had been targeted because of his position as deputy chairman of Musavat.

"His arrest is illegal and politically motivated. We will appeal against it shortly," Alizade said.

Tural Abbasli, chairman of Musavat's youth wing, agreed that Yaqublu's arrest was all about politics.

"The government wants to convince both Azerbaijanis and the international community... that the Ismayilli riot was not actually initiated by local people, but instigated by Musavat. Besides, Yaqublu is an important figure in the party," he said. "A second reason is that they want to keep us occupied with Yaqublu and pay less attention to the election campaign."

While Musavat is a longstanding party, REAL is a newer movement that has functioned since 2009, and is popular among younger people.

Last summer, it said it would be nominating a candidate to stand against incumbent president Ilham Aliiev in an election scheduled for October 2013. It had been planning to name Mammadov as its candidate on February 9, but it brought the announcement forward when he was arrested.

Erkin Gadirli, a member of REAL's governing council, said that although Mammadov was under arrest, that would not stop him running for election.

"Unfortunately, the ruling party has drawn the wrong conclusions from the Ismayilli riot. It had nothing to do with Mammadov or with REAL. It happened because people are unhappy and angry. The government should blame itself for that," he said. "As chairman of a political movement, Ilgar Mammadov had every right to visit Ismayilli and look at the situation." he said.

Gadirli said the government was trying to intimidate the opposition.

“They want to discourage our supporters. But fear no longer works in Azerbaijani society,” he said.

Musavat has already announced that its leader Isa Gambar will be standing in the presidential poll.

Musavat and REAL have often found themselves competing for opposition votes, but they now plan to hold joint protests against the arrests of their leaders. Other opposition groups have pledged to join them.

“These arrests concern society as a whole. The government has not analysed the situation. It does not realise it has made a mistake,” said Gadirli.

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