

# The jails of Azerbaijan

A chronology of recent repression  
14 May to 25 August 2014

## ESI Background briefing

### *Introduction*

Azerbaijan assumed the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE) on 14 May 2014. Here is what happened since then until 25 August 2014: arrests, pre-trial detentions, court sentences, and other forms of politically motivated repression, the most serious and brutal crackdown on civil society in Azerbaijan ever.

### *May 2014*

**14 May** – in May Azerbaijan took over chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE) from Austria, to lead the Committee for the next six months.

**15 May** – One day later, the Baku Grave Crimes Court sentenced journalist and human rights activist Parviz Hashimli to eight years in prison on charges of arms possession and smuggling. Hashimli is a reporter for the independent newspaper, *Bizim Yol* (“Our Way”), and director of the site “Moderator.az.” He had also been arrested eight months earlier 17 September 2013, by officers from the Ministry of National Security.

**22 May** – The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a decision in the case of Ilgar Mammadov, Chairman of the Republican Alternative Civic Movement (REAL). Mammadov was arrested and detained on 4 February 2013 (along with Tofiq Yagublu, a leader in the Musavat opposition party). The two were charged with organising and initiating a violent mass protest in Ismayilli, Azerbaijan, which occurred on 23 January 2014. The ECHR ruled that Mammadov’s three month pre-trial detention was politically motivated and orders the Azerbaijani government to pay him 20,000 EUR. The authorities did not release him.

**26 May** –Anar Mammadli, human rights activist and chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison. Mammadli had been arrested on 16 December 2013 on charges of illegal business activities, tax fraud, and abuse of authority, following a two-month investigation. Many believe his arrest and conviction were a direct result of Mammadli’s assessment of the October 2013 Azerbaijan presidential elections, which concluded that large scale voting irregularities and fraud had taken place.

**27 May** – Blogger and online activist Abdul Abilov was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison on drug possession charges. On 22 November 2013, Abilov had been arrested after police allegedly found 2,679 grams of heroin in his pocket and 4,677 gram of heroin at his home. Abilov maintains that police planted the drugs in order to punish him for creating and administering a Facebook page critical towards the government, called “Say No to Sycophants.”

### *June 2014*

**18 June** – Journalist Arshad Ibrahimov was arrested in Ganja, Azerbaijan. Leading up to his arrest, Ibrahimov had been working for the news sites [Moderator.az](http://Moderator.az) and [Avropa.info](http://Avropa.info), where he published an article about the illegal activity of Mohammed Bagirov, former head of the Education Department of Kalbajar region.

**24 June** – At the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s (PACE) session in Strasbourg, Rasul Jafarov presented a comprehensive list of political prisoners, which was compiled by a working group of human rights activists including Jafarov, Leyla Yunus, and Intiqam Aliyev.

**28 June to 2 July** – Rasul Jafarov and fellow activists organised and held a series of public hearings on political prisoners at the 23rd annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Baku.

### *July 2014*

**3 July** – Elsever Mursalli, a former member of the youth movement, NIDA, had his sentence of five years, reduced to two years. Mursalli was arrested for drug possession, intent to manufacture, and intent to distribute narcotics on 3 October 2013. Mursalli’s sentence was reduced after he declared that he quit NIDA and now supports President Ilham Aliyev.

**4 July** – Omar Mammadov, a blogger and Facebook activist, was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of drug possession and intent to distribute narcotics. He had created two satirical Facebook pages critical of the Aliyev regime, “AzTV excerpts” and “Named after Heydar Aliyev.” Mammadov is a member of the Civic Solidarity Party, the *Akhyn* (“Flow”) youth movement, and after his arrest, he joined the NIDA youth movement.

**14 July** – Hasan Huseynli, head of a civic education NGO in Azerbaijan, was sentenced six years in prison by the Nizami Court of Ganja City. He was found guilty of “hooliganism” and

“illegal possession of knives.” Human rights defenders believe Huseynli was targeted by authorities because of his influence on local youth and critical views of the government. After his conviction, the EU issued a statement condemning Huseynli’s sentence.

**23 July** – Two brothers, Farac and Sarac Karimov, were arrested a week apart from each other and charged with illegal possession and intent to distribute drugs on 23 July. Farac Karimov was the administrator of the Facebook page *Istefa* (“Resign”), which he created in the run-up to the October 2013 presidential elections. He is currently serving three months in pre-trial detention.

**29 July 2014** – Chairperson of the Institute for Peace and Democracy and prominent human rights defender, Leyla Yunus, wrote an [open letter](#) to President Ilham Aliyev, harshly criticizing him for targeting human rights activists and bloggers. In the letter she urges him not to be remembered as “a tyrant and a dictator.”

**30 July 2014** – Leyla Yunus is arrested for treason, tax evasion, fraud, conducting illegal business, and forgery. Her husband, Arif Yunus, told News.Az that Leyla was detained by strangers while on her way to a press conference that morning. Men in civilian clothing stopped Leyla Yunus’s car en route, and forced the driver to change course.

“A car stopped near her at 11:45 while she was going to an event. She was made to sit in the back seat, two of them sat next to her and one next to the driver and the car moved. Currently, her cell phone is out of service,” Arif said. He also reported that that law enforcers are now knocking on the door of their apartment.<sup>1</sup>

Leyla’s family and her lawyer did not know her whereabouts for several hours until the Office of the Prosecutor General called Arif Yunus, notifying him that she had been detained.

**31 July 2014** – Leyla Yunus was sentenced to three months in prison pending a trial. Her husband, Arif, faces similar charges but was not jailed for health reasons. However, he was banned from leaving the country.

**31 July 2014** – The Azerbaijani newspaper, *Azadliq*, was forced to suspend publication due to financial reasons, according to the Index on Censorship.<sup>2</sup> One of the few remaining independent media outlets in Azerbaijan, *Azadliq* won the Index on Censorship Guardian Journalism Award in 2014. This is not the first time that the newspaper, which reports on government corruption and cronyism, has faced such difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

### *August 2014*

**2 August 2014** – Following his interrogation at the Office of the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the human rights defender Rasul Jafarov was arrested on Saturday, 2

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<sup>1</sup> ["Human rights activist Leyla Yunus detained," News.Az, 30 July 2014](#) and ["Leyla Yunus detained," APA, 30 July 2014.](#)

<sup>2</sup> ["Azerbaijan: Azadliq forced to suspend publication," Index on Censorship, 31 July 2014.](#)

<sup>3</sup> ["Azerbaijan: Azadliq forced to suspend publication," Index on Censorship, 31 July 2014.](#)

August 2014. Prosecutors sentenced him to a three-month pre-trial detention on charges of tax evasion, “illegal business,” and abuse of authority.

**4 August 2014** – Activist and Musavat Party leader, Yadigar Sadigov, was taken from Shuvelan Detention Facility, where he was being held on charges of “hooliganism,” to an unknown location. His family and lawyers were not informed of his whereabouts. A penitentiary spokesperson told journalists that Sadigov's pre-trial detention of three months was over and authorities were transferring him to the prison where he will serve out his full sentence of six years.

**5 August 2014** – Despite concerns for his health, Arif Yunus, was sentenced to a three-month pre-trial detention, facing charges of treason, swindling, “illegal business operations,” tax evasion, and forgery.

**8 August 2014** – The Nasimi Regional Court ordered a three-month pre-trial detention of human rights lawyer, Intiqam Aliyev, on charges of tax avoidance, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power. Aliyev is a well-respected and accomplished attorney, who has brought hundreds of cases before the European Court on Human Rights, winning many of them. He denies all allegations against him and is convinced his arrest is politically motivated.

**15 August 2014** – Human Rights Watch releases a statement about the Azerbaijani government’s “anticorruption initiative,” which now includes freezing the bank accounts of NGOs, as part of a broader crackdown, escalating since the October 2013 presidential election. NDI, IREX, etc. have been affected.

**20 August 2014** – Leyla Yunus’s health is reported to be deteriorating. Alaif Hasanov, Leyla’s attorney, visits her detention cell on 19 August stating:

“Leyla Yunus said that she does not eat anything and she is not allowed to keep correspondence. She is convinced that this is done deliberately and is a punishment for her human rights activities. The goal is simple – to physically destroy her and her husband Arif.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite numerous appeals, the prison administration refuses to give medication and food that meets Leyla’s dietary restrictions due to acute diabetes. Meeting Leyla Yunus also becomes a problem for her attorney. The prison administration repeatedly informs prison management that they have to ask permission before letting the attorney in to see his client.

**20 August 2014** – The Baku Court of Appeals held a preliminary hearing on the complaint of detainee Omar Mammadov, a youth activist who was sentenced to five years on charges of drug trafficking on 4 July 2014. According to Mammadov’s lawyer, the court did not exhibit impartiality during the criminal trial. The appellate judge denies Mammadov’s complaint application, and announced another hearing for September 2014.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ["Lives of human rights defenders arrested in Azerbaijan are in danger."](#) *PanoramaAM*, 20 August 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Arzu Geybullayeva, ["Crackdown on human rights in Azerbaijan."](#) *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, 18 August 2014.

**21 August 2014** – Journalist Ilgar Nasibov was attacked by unknown assailants while at the office of the Naxcivan Resource Center, an independent human rights NGO. He is hospitalized after being found unconscious, and suffers from severe head trauma, a broken nose, fractured ribs, and serious blood loss.

**27 August 2014** – Transparency International’s Baku office tells RFL/RL that they cannot receive financial support from their main funder, USAID, because Unibank has been returning the wire transfers to USAID for the last two months, citing technical problems.<sup>6</sup>

**27 August 2014** – The U.S. Department of State releases a statement condemning the beating of journalist and rights activist, Ilgar Nasibov.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-corruption-transparency-international-baku/26553162.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/us-condemns-beating-of-azerbaijani-journalist-rights-activist/26553929.htm> 1