

No longer running scared? Countdown to the Baku final. Update on human rights in Azerbaijan (June 2011)

Inspired by the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, since January 2011 young people in Azerbaijan have taken to calling for protests in their country. To mobilize people and coordinate events, they have relied on social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, disseminating information and posting updates.

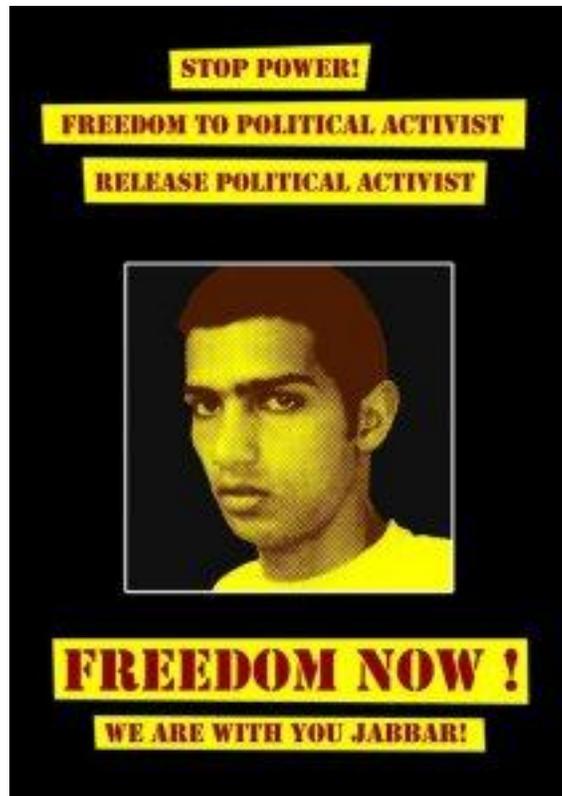
The country's weak political opposition also saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to bring the wave of popular unrest to Azerbaijan. Following the parliamentary elections of November 2010, which cemented the power of the governing YAP party, a group of opposition groups set up an umbrella organization called the "[Public Chamber](#)". In March and April 2011, the opposition organized several unsanctioned anti-government protests in Baku, defying the ban on holding rallies in the center of the city. While not negligible in size, the demonstrations – drawing crowds ranging from several hundred to slightly over a thousand – did not come close in scale to the rallies in the Middle East and North Africa. In an unusual development, Azerbaijan's pro-Iranian Islamic Party joined forces with the protesters on some occasions.

In addition to increasing authoritarianism, corruption, and violations of human rights and freedoms, the rising prices of food and basic services served as an extra catalyst for the popular unrest. While the Azerbaijani government cited the relatively low participation rates in rallies as proof of the lack of popular support for the protests, the harsh crackdown and multiple prison sentences handed out to the protesters speak to the government's nervousness about the possibility of the "Arab Spring" scenario. The government has visibly attempted to preempt unrest. On 27 January 2011, soon after protests broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, President Ilham Aliyev addressed Azerbaijan's most intractable problem, announcing [a major anti-corruption campaign](#). Dozens of public officials have since been fired.

Protest timeline

On **29 January**, over 100 political activists [gathered in Baku](#) calling on President Ilham Aliyev to agree to new parliamentary elections or prepare for a wave of civil protests similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt.

On **5 February**, 20-year-old political activist Jabbar Savalanly, a supporter of the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), [was arrested on drug possession charges](#) in his native city of Sumgayit. There was strong suspicion on the part of other activists that charges against Savalanly were politically motivated. As some Azerbaijani analysts [suggested](#), the authorities may have wanted to use Savalanly's arrest to deter other youth activists from following the example of Tunisian and Egyptian protesters. Savalanly's arrest would gain salience in the mobilization efforts for a wave of protests held across Azerbaijan in the following months. A [website](#) was set up to provide information on Jabbar Savalanly's arrest and his court case.



A protest poster calling for Savalanly's release

On **6 February**, a brief [unsanctioned protest](#) to show solidarity with Egyptian protesters was held at the Egypt-Azerbaijan Friendship Park outside Baku, in the suburb of Khirdalan. The number of protesters stood at several dozen, most of them young people. The protesters also criticized recent price hikes for basic services in Azerbaijan. Police dispersed the rally, but no arrests were made.

Starting in **late February**, social networks became a widespread mobilization tool for political protests. A group of young Azerbaijanis established a Facebook group named ['11 March – The Great National Day'](#). The group's administrators were mostly Azerbaijanis residing abroad – with the exception of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a Harvard graduate and a former parliamentary candidate. Hajiyev had posted the following message on the group's page:

“We learned from the developments in the Arab world that when people demand freedom, they achieve it. We call on you to stand on the right side of history, not to resort to force against your own citizens, to build a fair, happy, and free society in Azerbaijan together with ordinary people.”
http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan_youth_activist/2328489.html

The protests, as the organizers explained, would be held to celebrate the passing of one month since Hosni Mubarak’s resignation in Egypt and to demand the release of all Azerbaijani political prisoners, including Jabbar Savalanly. However, everyone who was dissatisfied with the current political situation in Azerbaijan was welcome to take part. The planned protest lacked a specific agenda, location or form, as the organizers called on everyone to find his or her own way to express discontent. “Are you ready to gather, in good order, and without provocation, and bring down the dictatorial regime in Azerbaijan?”, read one of the group’s posts.

In the run-up of the demonstration, several youth activists involved in promoting the event were arrested. Among them was Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu. On **4 March**, Hajiyeu was detained in his home city of Ganja on charges of evading military service. Hajiyeu was also questioned about his Facebook activity. From detention, Hajiyeu [released a statement](#) saying that he had been beaten and threatened with rape in police custody. Hajiyeu’s case attracted a great deal of international media attention. The progress of his case and domestic and international reactions are posted on a special website, <http://supportbakhtiyar.com/>. On 7 March, Amnesty International issued a [statement criticizing the government’s crackdown](#) on protest organizers. On 8 March, the US Embassy in Azerbaijan [released a statement](#) expressing concern over Hajiyeu’s arrest. The statement noted that the embassy would “continue to monitor closely this case and the cases of other recently arrested youth activists.”

Between **7 and 9 March**, [several other young activists were questioned by the police](#) about the planned protest. These included independent photographer Mehman Huseynov, a member of the youth wing of the Musavat Party, Sakhavan Soltanli, and activists Rashadat Akhundov and Etibar Salmanly.

In preparation for the March 11 rallies, police sealed off areas where protests were expected. Some underground stations were taken out of service, while the Ministry of the Interior warned that unsanctioned protests would be dispersed. The Azerbaijani authorities claimed that the protests were organized by subversive forces from abroad.

All in all, despite ‘precautions’ taken by the police four anti-government rallies took place: on 11 March (Great People’s Day), 12 March, 2 April ([Day of Rage](#)) and 17 April ([Day of Unity](#)). Estimates of participant numbers varied from a few hundred to a few thousand, depending on the source.

On **11 March**, the designated day for the rally announced on Facebook, small groups of young Azerbaijanis staged antigovernment protests. Some wore red. The number of protesters was said to be around 60. [According to Human Rights Watch](#), a total of 32

people were arrested. While most were released after a few hours, 9 individuals were sentenced to administrative detention on charges of “disobeying police orders”.

Friends of the detained used social media to track developments and provide updates on the situation.

For example, on **Twitter**: Leylanajafli: ‘released protesters Ali Akbar and Turgut Gambar waiting outside 21st police station for Zaur Gurbanli, Tebris Oner, Fuad Hajiyeu #11mart’



Protesters in Baku, 11 March 2011. Source: RFE/RL

On the following day, **12 March**, a much larger and better-organized protest took place in Baku. It was organized by the opposition Musavat Party and drew several hundred participants. [According to the numbers provided by the Baku police](#), 50 demonstrators were detained, with 20 of them facing administrative punishment for “disobeying police orders.” [Other reports](#) put the number of detentions at more than 100. (Watch a [video](#) of the protest on YouTube).

On **14 March**, the police blocked access to Baku State University following communications about a planned protest action on social media pages. However, no one

showed up for the protest, and it was speculated that the announcements had served to mislead authorities. Anonymous calls were also made mentioning a protest on March 18, yet this did not materialize either.

[According to his own claims](#), on **26 March** Seymour Haziyev, a journalist writing for the oppositional *Azadliq* newspaper, was abducted and assaulted as he was returning home from work. Haziyev linked the attack to his critical articles and ties to youth activists.

Another large demonstration in Baku took place on **2 April**, which had been designated as the “Day of Wrath” by Facebook organizers. Prior to the rally, police [detained](#) several activists. On the day of the rally, the protesters – led by the opposition parties Musavat and APFP – gathered at Fountain Square in the centre of Baku. (The protest organizers had been granted permission to hold a protest in the outskirts of the city.) The protesters, estimated to count between 350 and 1000, held signs reading “We want freedom”, “Ilham, go away”, and demanded President Aliyev’s resignation. The police, armed with batons, [used violence](#) to disperse the protest. See a [video](#) of the protest on YouTube.



Protest in Baku, 2 April 2011. Source: RFE/RL

The reaction of the authorities was again harshly criticized by international organizations. According to the OSCE, 174 people were detained prior and during the protest. As the [New York Times reported](#), four opposition leaders were charged with organizing mass unrest, a serious charge in Azerbaijan.

On **3 April**, Elnur Majidli, one of the Facebook coordinators of the protests, [tweeted that criminal proceedings were initiated against him](#) on charges of “attempting to overthrow the government.” Majidli, a journalist, lives in France. This was the first case of criminal charges being filed against an Internet activist residing outside of Azerbaijan.

On **12 April** two youth activists were [expelled from university](#), allegedly due to unexcused absences. The university authorities denied that the expulsions were politically motivated.

On **17 April**, a fourth protest, nicknamed the Day of Unity, took place at Baku’s Fountain Square in defiance of the ban on holding rallies in downtown Baku. As earlier that month, the [police used force to break up the rally](#), detaining dozens of protesters. [According to RFE/RL](#), “six [of them] were given custodial sentences of 5-15 days, 19 were fined, and 11 were given warnings.

On the same day, three Swedish journalists [were detained](#) in Azerbaijan while observing the protests. They were deported from the country the following day. Orkhan Mansurzadeh, an Interior Ministry official, [told RFE/RL](#) that the reason for the deportation was that the journalists had failed to accredit themselves with the Foreign Ministry.

On **20 April**, to commemorate the four-year anniversary of the arrest of Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatullayev, 20 journalists held a one-day hunger strike to protest what they view as Fatullayev’s unjust imprisonment. (Fatullayev had remained in prison despite an [April 2010 judgment](#) by the European Court of Human Rights, which ordered his immediate release).

On **25 April** police [raided](#) the offices of the Musavat party in Baku. Musavat Party leader Isa Gambar told RFE/RL on April 26 “that the police showed a court warrant for the search in connection with an unauthorized antigovernment rally by the opposition political bloc known as Ictimai Palata [Public Chamber] on April 2.”

On **4 May**, activist Jabbar Savalanly was [sentenced to 2.5 years imprisonment](#) on drug possession charges.

On **18 May**, despite strong opposition on the part of international organizations including the OSCE, Western governments (including the United States) and human rights groups, a court in Ganja [sentenced Bakhtiyar Hajiyev](#) to two years in prison on charges of evading military service.

On **26 May**, in what surprised many external observers, President Ilham Aliyev signed an amnesty decree pardoning 90 individuals, of whom 70 had been serving time. Among them, most significantly, was journalist Eynulla Fatullayev.¹ Despite the fact that Aliyev

¹ News.az, “Pardoned Azerbaijani prisoners walk free”, 27 May 2011. <http://news.az/articles/society/37254>

named the approaching (28 May) Republic Day, the country's national holiday, as the reason for the amnesty, many have argued that his decision had more to do with the international spotlight shined on Azerbaijan following its victory in the Eurovision song contest, held on 14 May. Fatullayev's release also came two days after the "[mass tweet campaign](#)" in his support organized by Amnesty International UK.



Amnesty International poster: Free Eynulla Fatullayev!

While the Azerbaijani opposition and independent youth activists managed to mobilize protesters and stage anti-government rallies in the center of the country's capital, society on the whole remains apathetic. The opposition parties' appeal – and their ability to rally masses – remains low. While the estimates of the number of protesters vary significantly, it is evident that the scale of the protests (several thousand people at most) was much smaller than in the aftermath of the November 2005 parliamentary elections.

Coverage and analysis of the protests in Azerbaijan:

New York Times, "Opposition in Azerbaijan Vows to Step Up Protests," 4 April 2011.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/05/world/asia/05azerbaijan.html>

Vladimir Socor, "Day of Wrath" Fails In Azerbaijan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 7 April 2011.

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37761&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=228&cHash=f289aac4eb7780560df5ae6741bafd19](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37761&tx_ttnews[backPid]=228&cHash=f289aac4eb7780560df5ae6741bafd19)

Jeff Burbank, “Azerbaijan's Autocratic President Keeps Pro-Democracy Activists at Bay”, *Huffington Post*, 13 April 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeff-burbank/azerbajans-autocratic-pr_b_848227.html

BBC, “Azerbaijan Cracks Down Hard on Protests”, 24 April 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13136598>

Arif Yunusov, “The impact of Arab revolts on Azerbaijan’s political scene”, *Eastern Partnership Community*, 27 April 2011. <http://www.easternpartnership.org/publication/politics/2011-04-27/impact-arab-revolts-azerbaijan-s-political-scene>

“So far, it is hard to judge how events in Azerbaijan will proceed. Certainly, it is too early to say there will be wide-mass protest rallies as in the Arab states; yet the fear and disappointment which were prevalent in Azerbaijan are no longer visible. Furthermore, it is clear that due to the events in the Arab world, the political life of Azerbaijan has been extended by a new power – the young, who will be essential players. And at the end of the day, the turmoil in the Arab world has influenced the traditional opposition and the Islamic movement to work together. Currently, neither party fully trusts the other, but if the government continues with its repressive policy towards both of them, the process of their assimilation will be more successful.”

Arzu Geybullayeva, “From Facebook to the Streets of Baku”, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, 3 May 2011. <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Azerbaijan/From-Facebook-to-the-streets-of-Baku-93251>

The Economist, “Blocked in Baku”, 3 May 2011. http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2011/05/demonstrations_azerbaijan