



Statement by Malahat Nasibova, the 2009 Rafto Prize Laureate

AZERBAIJAN: MEDIA FREEDOM UNDER DANGER

Malahat Nasibova - Director of the Democracy and NGOs Development Resource Centre.

I express my deep concern with respect to the unfair verdict against the two bloggers and youth activists, Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade, which was declared on 11 November by a court in Baku.

Adnan Hadjizadeh (26) and Emin Milli (30) were accused of hooliganism after a brawl in a cafe in July and were respectively sentenced to two years and to two-and-a-half years in prison on 11 November. Both activists were extensively using social media, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs, where they had posted political and satirical video sketches that criticized government policies, corruption and social issues. A satirical video the bloggers produced and posted on YouTube in late June is believed to be the main reason for their arrest.

The non-transparent initial investigation process and the unfair verdict will have a chilling effect on the freedom of expression in Azerbaijan, where the situation with the media freedom is already getting from bad to worse.

Freedom of expression has become a pressing concern particularly in the last five years. The ruling regime effectively uses defamation provisions to obstruct investigative journalism, prevent public debate and stifle open criticism of the government. Elmar Huseynov, the editor-in-chief of the opposition "Monitor" was killed in front of his house in March 2005. Novruzali Mammadov, editor-in-chief for the newspaper "Talishi sedo", died mysteriously in the prison in August 2009.

With the bloggers arrested, the number of the journalists in jail became five. Several journalists arrested in the past two years under the charges which were exactly related with their journalistic activity. Eynulla Fatullayev, the founder of the largest circulated opposition dailies "Realniy Azerbaijan" and "Gundelik Azerbaijan", was imprisoned in April 2007 in direct denial of his right to freedom of expression. Ganimat Zahid, the chief editor of opposition "Azadliq" remains in jail for alleged hooliganism charge.

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The repressive measures are part of the continuing trend of the authorities clamping down of the free media and silence the dissent. This trend effectively undermines the freedom of expression in the country and leads to the grave violation of human rights. Incarceration of A.Hajizade and E.Milli are intended to frighten the youth of democratic thoughts in the society and further suppress the dissent.

In early 2009, the authorities banned the Azerbaijani service of the Radio Liberty, Voice of America and BBC radios' transmission in local frequencies in Azerbaijan. Alternative information and critic views were only available in those media outlets.

Azerbaijan is a State party to numerous international Conventions and member of several international bodies. Taking into account that human rights are not domestic issue of any country, international bodies should take a keen interest to prevent the further deterioration of the media situation in Azerbaijan and should urgently remind the Azerbaijani authorities to protect the democratic values and especially the right to freedom of expression, as a member of the Council of Europe, OSCE and a party of the European Convention on Human Rights.

If the repressive measures against the journalists and government critics are not stopped, the state of freedom of expression and human rights will become even worse.

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