

Statement by Human Rights House Foundation on the Crackdown by Azerbaijani authorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Azerbaijani authorities must not continue to use COVID-19 pandemic to continue crackdown on civil society

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Human Rights House Foundation (HRRF) remains very concerned with a number of recent actions taken by the Azerbaijani authorities in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency legislation and other measures taken to protect the public should be temporary, contain adequate safeguards to prevent abuse, be strictly proportionate and necessary, and remain subject to legislative and judicial oversight. Actions by the Azerbaijani authorities run counter to these requirements under international human rights law and violate Azerbaijan's commitments before international bodies of which it is a member.

On 17 March, the Azerbaijani Parliament approved amendments to the country's Information Law. While passed ostensibly to fight against misinformation during the COVID-19 crisis, the media has already reported dubious application of the law and experts have highlighted the lack of judicial review. Azerbaijani authorities have a long history of attacking journalists and a free media. Misinformation during public health crises should be countered; however, the Azerbaijan authorities must ensure that legislation to protect public health is not arbitrarily used to further curtail media freedom.

Already on 8 March the police ordered opposition group D18 to vacate their offices under the pretext of fight against COVID-19. On 23 March, police arrested opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu on questionable charges of hooliganism. Two other political activists administratively detained in relation to quarantine measures during 21-23 March are considered to be targeted. On 30 March, human rights defenders reported the detention of human rights defender and journalist Elchin Mammad based on an equally trumped up charge of theft. Open access to information and freedom of expression are paramount in part to addressing this public emergency.

These actions came days after President Aliyev's Nowruz holiday speech in which he foreshadowed the authorities' exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis to "isolate" the Azerbaijani opposition whom he referred to as a "fifth column" of traitors. This language is distressingly similar to language employed by the Azerbaijani authorities prior to their 2014 large-scale crackdown against critical voices. Any efforts by the government to address public health concerns should not be used as a tool of further repression.

"In times of public health crises, state authorities have a responsibility to act in an open and transparent manner and provide timely access to information. We will continue to closely monitor these blatant attempts by the Azerbaijani authorities to use the COVID-19 pandemic to crackdown on human rights defenders and human rights organizations," said Dave Elseroad, Head of Advocacy at Human Rights House Foundation. "Azerbaijani authorities have an obligation to protect their citizens during times of crisis – including human rights defenders."