



Press Statement

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Global Civil Society Alliance condemns growing authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

Johannesburg, 25 March 2013. Global civil society alliance, [CIVICUS](#) and the Azerbaijan-based Center for National and International Studies ([CNIS](#)) are concerned about the increasingly hostile climate for civic activists in Azerbaijan as the October 2013 presidential elections approach. Since Azerbaijan is due to undergo its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council on 30 April 2013, the two organisations urge democratic governments to focus attention on the continuing government crackdown on the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

The following are some recent restrictions on civil society space and democratic freedoms in Azerbaijan.

- On 8 March 2013, three members of the non-violent pro-democracy movement NIDA were arrested by the police on charges of possession of illegal narcotics and explosives and inciting violence and civil disobedience. The arrests were carried out in advance of an upcoming protest on 10 March 2013 where the law enforcement agencies used excessive violence against protestors. The three activists, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Shahin Novruzlu, and Mahamad Azizov have been ordered to serve three months pre-trial detention. In their joint UPR [submission](#) CIVICUS and CNIS have highlighted that a routine tactic used by law enforcement agencies against government critics is to charge them with drug related and security offences. On 29 September 2012, Zaur Gurbanli, a NIDA member active in the 'Sing for Democracy Campaign,' launched in the run up Azerbaijan's hosting of the Eurovision 2012 contest was also detained and charged with "possession of illegal documents."
- On 15 February 2013, Azeri Parliament approved sweeping amendments to the existing legal framework governing national and international CSOs. Amendments to the *Law on Non-Governmental Organizations*, the *Law on Grants*, and the *Code on Administrative Offences* severely undermine the independence of CSOs by requiring them to disclose the identity of their benefactors. Of principal concern are amendments stipulating that CSOs produce a formal agreement with donors for all contributions over 200 AZN (roughly 250 USD), essentially precluding the possibility of cash contributions by donors who wish to be anonymous due to the volatile political situation in the country. CSOs which fail to provide the Ministry of Justice with a copy of grants agreement with donors are subject to increased fines up to 7,000 AZN (about 9,000 USD) or the confiscation of property.

- Additionally, civil society groups continue to face unwarranted obstacles under regulations passed by the Azeri Cabinet in 2011 and a series of legal amendments introduced in 2009 which endow the government with outsized discretion to impede the establishment of CSOs and to deregister groups critical of government policies. Several CSOs, including the Human Rights Club (HRC) on 19 February 2013, have been denied registration for minor infractions. CSOs also continue to face severe obstacles in convening meetings in public spaces. Private hotels have reportedly given unofficial instructions by the government to deny independent CSOs permission to hold conferences and events.
- Furthermore, freedom of peaceful assembly remains imperiled in Azerbaijan. New amendments to the Law on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly approved in November 2012 drastically increase fines for organizers and participants of 'illegal' demonstrations. On 26 January 2013 more than fifty demonstrators were arrested in the capital, Baku when they protested against excessive force employed by security officials during a previous demonstration in Ismayili on 23-24 January 2013. Twenty of the demonstrators were slapped with heavy fines of up to 2,500 AZN (about 3,200 USD) under the new law. Five prominent activists, including Emin Milli, Abulfaz Gurbanli, Rufat Abdullayev, Turkel Alisoy and Turkel Azerturk were handed prison sentences ranging from 13-15 days for their role in the protests.

CIVICUS and CNIS urge the international community to call on the government of Azerbaijan to: (i) abandon restrictive amendments to the country's legal framework for CSOs and create an enabling environment for civil society to operate in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), (ii) immediately and unconditionally release detained activists and political dissidents, and (iii) uphold the right to peaceful protest in practice and ensure that law enforcement officials using excessive force against protestors are subjected to the full force of the law.

Leila Alieva, Director of the Center for National and International Studies said: "The government's crackdown ahead of the upcoming presidential elections later this year is not only radicalizing the political opposition but also sowing the seeds for sustained instability in the country."

Tor Hodenfield, Policy and Advocacy Officer at CIVICUS said: "The recent wave of legal restrictions on civil society groups is symptomatic of the Azeri government's intolerance of legitimate political dissent. 2012 was a bad year for independent civil society in Azerbaijan and 2013 is proving no better."

Notes to editors:

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global alliance of civil society. Founded in 1993 and headquartered in Johannesburg, CIVICUS is dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are challenged. For more information, go to www.civicus.org

CNIS is an independent non-profit research institution based in Baku, Azerbaijan. CNIS conducts non-partisan research, covering a variety of issues such as regional conflicts and security, oil and

politics, state and democracy building, foreign and domestic policies. As a “think tank” CNIS advocates for democratic Azerbaijan and its integration in Europe. For more information, go to www.cnis-baku.org .

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