



Information bulletin

of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center

on abuses the COVID-19 response actions during quarantine regime in Azerbaijan

May 11, 2020

Background:

Azerbaijan remains under lockdown regime due to COVID-19 which is to end on May 31st. Most of the restrictions are lifted, however, SMS-permit system for leaving the home is still in force in 4 big cities, including capital Baku. Some service industry fields are open all over the country whereas café and restaurant are closed in Baku and other 3 big cities.

As of May 11th, there have been 2519 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection whereas 1650 people were recovered and 32 died. According to officials, Azerbaijan is witnessing the second wave of the infection.

In previous bulletins, EMDS reported the abuse of the rules of the quarantine regime against political opponents and government critics.¹ Currently, at least 37 political activists, human rights defenders and journalists have been accused of bogus charges, such as breaching the rules of the quarantine regime and disobeying the police and faced fines, administrative arrests, online smearing campaigns, cyberattacks, criminal cases against them etc. This document covers the new cases of political opportunism and attacks in times of the COVID-19 outbreak until the 11th of May with previously unreported cases.

New administrative arrests:

Quarantine period in Azerbaijan has been remarkable for restrictive amendments to the law in Azerbaijan, which restrict the freedom of movement, assembly and expression among others. EMDS reports that, so far, at least 127 people have been warned for their social media posts and 28 people have faced administrative fine and arrests under the new amendments to the law on “information, informatisation and protection of information”.

Moreover, during the lockdown, thousands of people have been fined or arrested for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in one month since the 17 March, more than 56000 have been fined and 482 people have been warned for breaching the rules of the lock-down regime. Under the same accusations, 16 people have

¹ EMDS, previous bulletins can be accessed here, <<https://smdtaz.org/en/media-center/press-releases/>>

faced pre-trial detentions and 252 were administratively detained.² Additionally, the Main Traffic Police Department has fined 50174 traffic participants have been subject to administrative responsibility for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime, since the first installation of the lockdown regime.³

EMDS also reports the cases where the rules of the lock-down regime have been abused against opposition activists with political motivation. During the reported period the following people faced the same treatment:

- On 28th April, Irada Nariman and Saadat Jahangir, members of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA hereinafter), were detained in front of the building where the party leader resides, by plain cloth police officers and brought to the police station. They were both fined 100 AZN for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime despite the SMS permit of the Irada Nariman and journalist card of Saadat Jahangir which should have exempted her from the permit-dependent regime.
- On 28 April, another PFPA member Elshan Babayev was arrested and sentenced to 30 days of administrative arrest for violating the rules of the quarantine regime, according to the PFPA
- PFPA members Elxan Aliyev and Ali Imamhanli have been detained on 9 May and sentenced 30 days of administrative arrest for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime and disobeying the legal command of the police.

Political pressures and arrests:

The isolation of the PFPA leader Ali Karimli remains in place since the 13 of April. The internet and mobile connections of Ali Karimli and his family members were cut off minutes after the announcement of his participation in a live interview with US-based journalist Sevinc Osmangizi. Since then, Ali Karimli can only sporadically access the internet and mobile connection and is planning to sue the telecommunication company he is using the services of.

Moreover, on April 20, Ali Karimli received SMS messages stating the password for the registration of the Whatsapp and Telegram accounts in an attempt to hack the accounts of the party leader. While Ali Karimli has not requested for the codes, this method is familiar to the activists in Azerbaijan where the codes in the SMS messages are intercepted by the authorities which leads to the hack of the personal social media accounts of politically active people.

The attacks on the Karimli includes the pressure to the visitors of him and party members as well.

- On April 20, journalist Teymur Karimli was detained by plain cloth police officers after he interviewed the Ali Karimli in his home. He was detained in the outskirts of the city by plain cloth people, his notebook and camera were confiscated and the memory card of the camera containing the interview was broken by them. The journalist is planning to sue.
- On April 22, another PFPA member Arif Babayev was arrested and accused of disseminating the forbidden materials on the information sources and faced 30 days of administrative detention. According to his brother, Arif has faced torture and was

² Ministry of Internal Affairs, 'press release on the number of people violating the quarantine rules', in Azerbaijani language only, <<https://mia.gov.az/?az/news/view/1449>>

³ Main Traffic Police Department under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 'Information about the works done by STP officers during the special quarantine regime', <<https://dyp.gov.az/?az/news/view/758/>>

beaten both in the police station for expressing his support for the Ali Karimli on his Facebook account and in the special detention centre where he was forced to be filmed in a video where he is expressing his sorrow for disseminating political calls.

- On April 28, Niyamaddin Ahmadov, member of the PFPA and bodyguard of the Ali Karimli, was taken to an unknown place from the detention center and was subjected to torture for 12 hours. He was forced to confess receiving money from Ali Karimli and other sources. Niyamaddin was arrested on April 16 and his case is considered as politically motivated one. The National Council of Democratic Forces issued a statement condemning the abusing the COVID-19 measures against political rivals and ongoing practice of torturing the detainees for a coerced confession
- On 1st of May, Saadat Jahangir was taken to the Department for Investigation of Grave Crimes. She was denied lawyer, questioned until 9 pm and was released afterwards. However, her notebook, phone and money were confiscated and not returned. According to her she was questioned as a witness and was asked questions about the financial help to the families of the political prisoners. Saadat Jahangir was previously detained on her way to the home of the Ali Karimli on his birthday.
- Elvin Mammadov, the member of PFPA, could not be heard of since the May 2nd and finally called his family members on 4th May to tell them that he is sentenced to 30 days of administrative arrest. He has been followed since he dedicated a poem to the birthday of PFPA leader Ali Karimli on 28 April.

The journalists and civil society activists issued a joint statement where they condemned the isolation of the PFPA leader Ali Karimli and called the government to cease the attacks.

Moreover, the political attacks on the independent voices during the COVID-19 outbreak included the following cases as well:

- Avaz Ahmadov, member of the PFPA was arrested on 22th of April and accused of petty hooliganism and faced 20 days of administrative arrest.
- On April 25, Shamsi Kasamanli, another PFPA member was arrested and sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest. He informed his family members of his arrest and told that the detention is related to his social media posts. The accusation could not be confirmed yet.
- Agil Humbatov, member of PFPA, who was detained on 2 April and forcibly put into Psychiatric Hospital №1 with the decision of the Baku Court of Appeal was denied to meet with his lawyer Nemat Karimli on April 11. According to her wife, the hospital prolonged his stay until the end of May. According to his lawyer, he is unable to lodge a complaint to the Supreme Court since the latest in closed during the lock-down regime. Humbatov deems the arrest due to his criticism of government policy and the president on his social media account.
- On May 4th, the Baku Appeal Court upheld the decision of the lower court and dismissed the complaint of Tofiq Yagublu who arrested on 22nd March on the accusation of hooliganism. International human rights organizations, human rights lawyers from Azerbaijan and European Council officials condemned the Yagublu's arrest and deemed it as politically motivated one and called for his release. According to the daughter of Yagublu, Tofiq is denied the medical tools brought for him in the detention center.
- Himat Aghayev, the member of the Muslim Solidarity Movement, arrested on 11 April, has faced torture in the police station. According to his letter to the family members, he was asked questions about the source of the money for the coronavirus help he was doing for the wort-off families and was forced to give the password of his phone.

Hikmat was severely beaten and threatened with pressure on his family members. On 5th May, he restated the allegations of torture and ill-treatment in the police station in his appeal trial as well. However, the judge dismissed the petitions of his lawyer and upheld the decision of the lower court on his arrest.

- Ramid Nagiyev, the member of PFPA, has been arrested on 7th of May. However, the official accusation is yet to be found out.
- Ruslan Izzatli, the head of the D18 Movement, is at risk of serving in the army as a result of the falsification of official documents. According to him, in early March, outside the regular checking schedule, he has been invited to medical checks by citing the missing old documents. On the first check, his medical condition was reconfirmed on an official document. However, he was later given another final act, different than what has been the result of the first check. Ruslan Izzatli got his medical conditions reconfirmed in a private hospital in early May, as well and deems the actions of the State Service for Mobilization and Conscription as politically motivated and as retaliation for his active participation in the 9 February 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan. He was previously forced to leave his office on March 8th allegedly for the risk of coronavirus infection.
- Additionally, the reported period was accompanied by hacker attacks to the activists and websites as well. Activists Bakhtijar Hajiyevev and Ilkin Rustamzade have reported that their social media accounts are being attempted to be hacked. Ilkin Rustamzade also receives threatening messages over WhatsApp messenger app as well. Moreover, ‘basta’ information portal has been the target of hacker attacks.

Social care package and shortcomings:

The lock-down regime has been extended until the end of May with the relaxation of some restrictive measures allowing most of the businesses to reopen. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 600000 people have benefited the Government’s social allowance packages for unemployed people. However, the [website](#) for unemployed people to get registered to be able to benefit the social allowances of the government remains as the cause of the discontent.

Moreover, there have been several cases where locals of districts raised concerns over the unjust distribution of help packages due to coronavirus by authorities. In a very stark example, hundreds of Bilasuvar residents gathered in front of the building of the local executive authority. Police brutally dispersed the ‘not permitted’ protest where some people got injuries and 7 were detained. 5 people were administratively fined and arrested whereas 2 were launched criminal cases against them.

Economic experts regard the government’s social care packages to lack the component of comprehensiveness. Moreover, the fairness in handling the applications has been a hot topic on social media, recently. There have been many cases where people were denied the allocated allowance on false grounds such as rejection due to the property of the late spouse, sometimes even in cases of unmarried people, due to the inactive ‘taxpayer identification number’, due to the land or car that people do not possess etc. In some cases, citizens have not received any response from the Ministry despite the request or denied the help on the false claim that they are not in the country. Moreover, citizens reported the denial of getting allowance since they were receiving another much lesser allowance beforehand.