



Information bulletin

of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center
on abuses the COVID-19 response actions during quarantine regime in
Azerbaijan

May 25th, 2020

Background:

Most of the quarantine-related restrictions are lifted in Azerbaijan, however partial lock-down is to end on the 31st of May. SMS permit system to leave for outdoors has been cancelled whereas borders remain closed.

As of May 25th, there have been 4122 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection with 2607 people were recovered and 49 died. The number of people infected fluctuates around 100 in recent weeks.

EMDS has been issuing regular reports on the abuse of the rules of the quarantine regime against political opponents and government critics.¹ Until now, more than 40 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 25nd of May together with previously unreported ones.

Administrative arrests

During the lock-down, both Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Main Traffic Police Department have fined more than 56000 people.² Moreover, 482 people have been warned for breaching the rules of the lock-down regime. Moreover, 16 people have faced pre-trial detentions and 252 were administratively detained according to MIA.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 April 12, journalist and blogger Ibrahim Vazirov, working for the “Kanal24” in Shirvan District was detained and sentenced to 25 days of administrative arrest for allegedly disobeying the legal command of the police officers. According to his family,

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

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/>>

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/>>

³ 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/>>

Ibrahim was under pressure from local authorities for reporting the illegal pass of some drivers through the checkpoints during the quarantine regime in Shirvan.

- On 17 April, Islam Islamzade, member of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, disappeared in the middle of the street and was later found in the detention center in Binagadi. He was accused of disobeying the legal command of the police and breaching the rules of the quarantine regime and sentenced to 30 days of administrative arrest.

Politically motivated arrests and attacks:

The government crackdown on the independent voices amid COVID-19 outbreak continued in recent weeks as well;

- PFPA leader Ali Karimli continues to suffer from the isolation measures in which his and family members' internet and mobile connections remain severely restricted since April 13th. In the meantime, Karimli could only utilize the internet for short periods, whereas the connections of the additional mobile phone brought for him has also been cut off.
- On 9 May, Jeyhun Rzayev, member of the PFPA from Mingachevir District, was detained and sentenced to 10 days of administrative arrest for raising the poster of Mammad Amin Rasulzade, the leader of the first Azerbaijani Republic in early XX century in front of the monument dedicated to the World War II. He was accused of disobeying the legal command of the police.
- Mustafa Hajibeyli, editor-in-chief of the Basta information agency is at risk of being arrested. On May 13th, he was summoned to the execution and probation department of the Binagadi District where he was reminded to pay the linguistic expertise costs in his case. He regards the case as politically motivated, rejects to pay and is threatened with arrest in case of absence of payment.
- On May 16, Said Mammadzade, member of the PFPA, was detained on his way to the hospital. It was later confirmed that a criminal case is launched against Mammadzade in which he is accused of hooliganism. The PFPA considers the case as politically motivated.
- Another PFPA member, Babak Hasanov, currently in prison number 6, has been on a hunger strike since May 17th. According to his brother, Babak protests the poor prison conditions and pressure applied by prison management to other convicts to isolate Hasanov.
- On 19 May, Elvin Irshadov, activist in Lankaran District is detained, accused of disobeying the legal command of the police. According to the Public Council of Azerbaijani Talishs, Irshadov is a famous activist in the southern region of Azerbaijan for publicising the problems of the people. The organization considers the arrest politically motivated for the activist work of Irshadov as he previously faced political pressure for criticising the governmental bodies, as well.
- On 19th May, a criminal case has been launched against PFPA member Niyamaddin Ahmadov in the last days of his previous administrative arrest for 30 days. He is accused of financing terrorism and sentenced to 4 months of pre-trial detention. According to the official press release by Prosecutors Office, Niyamaddin has been receiving funds from Gabil Mammadov, government critic in exile, to assassinate the political figures and law enforcement body representatives in Azerbaijan. He was previously detained on April 16 and was accused of breaching the rules of the quarantine regime. It was later reported by his family members that, Niyamaddin faced torture and inhumane treatment in the detention center in late April and was forced to confess receiving money from outside Azerbaijan for the PFPA. Moreover, on May

21st, the Court of Appeal did not grant the complaint of Ahmadov regarding his administrative arrest. PFPA distances itself from the activist abroad and regards the case as politically motivated and calls for his immediate release.

- On May 22, Jalal Zabitov, member of the D18 movement, the teacher in Yardimli District was arrested and faced 5 months of pre-trial detention. A criminal case launched against Zabitov who is accused of hooliganism. According to Zabitov, he has been active in exposing the irregularities in the last parliamentary elections in February 2020, using the Facebook page called “Say No to Corruption” and has been actively criticising the local executive authorities. He considers the criminal case against him as politically motivated and related to his criticism of the authorities.
- On May 22nd, young activist Fuad Ismayilov was detained again and sentenced to 60 days of administrative arrest. He is accused of illegal use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, and their manufacture, purchase, storage, transportation or shipment not for sale in the amount necessary for personal consumption. Fuad told reporters on his way to the detention center after the court trial that he denies the allegations and marijuana was put into his pockets by police officers in the police station where he also faced torture. Fuad was an active participant of the 9 February Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan and was detained and arrested for 60 days with the same accusation on March 7 as well.
- Avaz Ahmadov, previously arrested on April 22 and sentenced to 20 days of administrative arrest was taken to unknown direction by people in plain cloth after completing 20 days. He was later released from the police station after ‘prophylactic conversation’ with police officers.

According to Ramil Bayramli, Chairman of the Board of the Management Union of Medical Territorial Units, as of May 15, there were 46 confirmed cases of coronavirus infection among convicts.

- Saleh Rustamov, the member of PFPA in prison, is reported to have initial symptoms of the novel virus and complains of the absence of the relevant tests in the last two weeks. Saleh Rustamov reports that personal and medical items brought for convicts are not let in and convicts asking for diagnosis for coronavirus are punished.
- Abbas Huseynov, the member of Muslim Unity Movement in prison, is on a hunger strike according to his relatives. Abbas is protesting the poor prison conditions where the items and food brought for convicts are not let in and prisoners are automatically forced to have poor and expensive food of the prison.

COVID-19 and social-economic issues:

The Azerbaijani government has launched several social care packages to cover the worst affected citizens during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the government, 600000 people have benefited the social allowance packages for unemployed people. However, the process of obtaining the social allowance has been remarkable with unfair handling of the cases, the shortcomings in the work of the [website](#) to apply, groundless rejection cases etc. Moreover, the reports of unfair distribution of the social care packages in regions by representatives of local executive authorities have been causing public discontent.

On May 16th, residents in Barda District protested the arrest of the 3 people who were complaining of the illegal activities of local authorities. According to residents, the 40 out of the 104 hectares land, allocated by the government, has been illegally possessed by the number of people in the office. Police arrested 14 people who are accused of disobeying the legal command of the police officers. Previously, police brutally dispersed the ‘not permitted’ protest

in Bilasuvar where some people got injuries and 7 were detained. 5 people were administratively fined and arrested whereas 2 were launched criminal cases against them.