



Information bulletin

of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center

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

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Azerbaijan is currently under extended quarantine regime until the 15th of June. Most of the restrictions are lifted, however, temporarily harsh quarantine regime covering the first weekend of June has been installed and more weekends to follow. From 6th to 8th June in Baku and other 4 big city and districts, it is not allowed to leave the home except in case of medical emergency and funeral of close relatives.

EMDS has been issuing regular reports on the abuse of the rules of the quarantine regime against political opponents and government critics.¹ In the reporting period, the crackdown on political opponents and government critics continued, citizens enjoying freedom of assembly faced hefty fines and arrests. This document covers the new cases of political opportunism and attacks in times of the COVID-19 outbreak until 8th of June together with previously unreported ones.

Latest Decisions and Strengthened Quarantine

On May 29, wearing masks in certain places has been demanded by law with the new decision of the Cabinet of Ministers, where individual not complying may get fined up to 200 AZN (national currency unit) with the respective article of the code of administrative offences.²

On June 4, The Minister of Internal Affairs, Ali Asadov, in his address to the public announced the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers No.191 on the new temporary quarantine regime covering 6-8 June 2020 and more weeks to follow.³ Citing the soaring number of infections in early June, the decision forbids movement and activities of all individuals and businesses in four big cities, including capital Baku, except in case of medical emergency and participation in the funeral of close relatives.

COVID-19 and official numbers

As of June 8th, there have been 7876 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection with 4377 people were recovered and 93 died. The record number of infected people has been observed on 6th of June with 379 people.

Ministry of Internal Affairs stopped reporting the number of people fined during the quarantine regime with last one on 17 April indicating more than 56 thousand fined individuals.⁴ Main Traffic Police Department also stopped reporting the numbers on daily basis on 20 May,

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

² Cabinet of Minister of Azerbaijan, Decision No.189, 'On demand of usage of personal tools to protect respiratory tract during the special quarantine regime', <<https://cabmin.gov.az/az/document/4468/>>

³ Cabinet of Minister of Azerbaijan, Decision No.191, 'On additional measures in respect of strengthened special quarantine regime in territories of Baku, Absheron, Ganja, Lankaran and Sumgayit District and Cities', <<https://cabmin.gov.az/az/document/4478/>>

⁴ 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/>>

whereas last numbers demonstrate more than 57 thousand traffic participant fined on administrative basis with 900 fined people during the 6-8 June weekend lock-down.⁵

Breaching the quarantine rules are regulated by the article 211 of the code of administrative offences where individual may get fined up to 5000 AZN and 60 days of administrative arrest. Social media platforms witnessed number of reports and videos indicating police officers using excessive force to detain the citizens breaching the rules during the weekend, 6-8 June.

Police violently raided residential building and arrested 11 for breaching quarantine

On June 7th, police detained one resident in the Dadash Bunyadzada street for breaching the rules of the strengthened quarantine regime installed temporarily for 6-8 June. Residents from the nearby buildings protested the detention and threw garbage over police officers. The day after, on 8 June, reportedly 200 people of quick police regiment was deployed to the residential area.

Police officers broke into the private properties of the resident, captured the suspects for the incident before with no explanation. Detentions were accompanied by ill-treatment where ordinary citizens were insulted, some people were taken out of their home while half-naked and unresisting residents were hit by police officers on their way to the police cars. Police were reported to film the scenes of the detention where videos circulated over social media platforms display detailed account of violations of human rights. In its official press-release, Ministry of Internal Affairs also confirmed the raid and arrests with a video also clearly indicating the police officers filming the incident.

Politically motivated pressure

EMDS also reports the cases where the rules of the lock-down regime have been abused against opposition members and activists with political motivation. The government crackdown on the independent voices amid COVID-19 outbreak continued in recent weeks as well;

Isolation of opposition leader continued amid attacks to PFPA

Isolation of the PFPA chairperson Ali Karimli continues since April 13. Since then, Karimli and his family members cannot use the mobile and internet connections of their phones. Number of people visiting Karimli have faced political pressure as reported in previous bulletins.⁶ Moreover, connection of two new mobile phones brought for him has also been cut off, as reported by the PFPA on May 26th.

On 25th of May, Faig Amirli, aid to chairperson of PFPA, Ali Karimli, has been arrested second time and accused of hooliganism. He was detained in Sabirabad and sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest. He was previously arrested for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime on April 8th

⁵ 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/>> Report.az, '900 people fined for breaching the rules of strict quarantine regime', <<https://report.az/hadise/dyp-sertlesdirilmis-karantin-rejimini-pozan-900-nefer-cerimelenib/>> (in Azerbaijani language)

⁶ Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, Press Releases, <<https://smdtaz.org/en/media-center/press-releases/>>

In another similar case, on May 29, Ruslan Amirov, bodyguard of PFPA chairperson, Ali Karimli, disappeared in Masalli District and found in 11th police station in Garadagh. He is also accused hooliganism and was sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest, whereas he was also previously arrested on April 9 for 30 days of administrative arrest for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime. On May 31, His lawyer was denied to meet with him in the detention center. PFPA notes that the denial of meeting with Amirov may be related to the criminal case opened against another bodyguard of Karimli, Niyamaddin Ahmadov, who is accused of financing terrorism and there is a risk that Amirov will also be forced to claim the complicity.

PFPA member in prison, Saleh Rustamli may face another criminal case, according to his brother. On June 4th, Saleh called his brother, however, could not talk in depth on the possible new case citing the calls being tapped. Saleh and other 3 PFPA members was detained in 2018 and accused of legalising dirty money. They are claimed to transfer the funds from Russia to Azerbaijan for the PFPA chairperson Ali Karimli.

PFPA member Elvin Mamadov, previously detained on May 3rd and sentenced to 30 days of administrative arrest has been fired from the job. He has been told that the reason behind is his PFPA membership, by the Human Resources Department of his workplace – Sadarak Shopping Center – where he was a guard. According to the PFPA, Elvin Mammadov was arrested for dedicating a poem to the Ali Karimli, chairperson of PFPA.

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 has been denied exit. According to his wife, his stay has been extended again for a month on June 2nd. Humbatov previously complained of the poor hospital conditions and claimed to face ill-treatment. He deems the arrest due to his criticism of government policy and the president on his social media account.

Detainees on hunger strike

On May 29, Abbas Huseynov, member of Muslim Unity Union in prison, previously on a hunger strike, has been reported to be put into solitary confinement unit in the prison. According to his family members, Abbas Huseynov spend the Ramadan holiday in the solitary confinement unit for protesting the unfair prices and poor conditions of the food in prison by starting a hunger strike

Independent journalist Ismayil Nadirli, cooperating with independent media outlets, has started a hunger strike protesting his arrest, according to his wife. He did not come back to home on May 30th and later appeared in police station and was sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest afterwards for hooliganism. His wife notes that his arrest is retaliation for his journalism work in Shirvan District and the personal bias by the District Police Chief is the main cause for the pressure.

Hefty fines for enjoying freedom of assembly during COVID-19

In number of cases, citizens attempting to hold peaceful demonstration and flashmobs have been punished with hefty fines and even with criminal cases.

On May 26, number of citizens attempted to hold a protest in front of the Parliament demanding freedom for the “Nagorno Karabagh”, disputed region between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Police dispersed the protest and participants have been dislocated from the scene. According to media, no one has been detained.

On June 1, more than 50 people gathered in central Baku to raise the awareness on the International Children's Day. Police dispersed the flashmob and detained participants. According to the law, people should not gather in public in more than 10 people. 50 participants were accused of breaching the rules of the quarantine regime and fined 100 AZN, however, Akbar Rahmanov, the organizer was launched a criminal case against with the same accusation and now may face up to 5 years of jailtime.

Students demanding educational adjustments linked to COVID-19 got arrested and fined

On June 1, "Students' Demand" movement organized a rally in front of the Ministry of Education. Students demanded the cancellation of the exams and the educational fees for the second semester since ordinary teaching standards could not be maintained due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the meeting inside the Ministry, 5 participants detained and four of them faced fines of 100-200 AZN for breaching the rules of the quarantine regime while organizer Rustam Ismayilbayli was accused of disobeying the legal demand of the police officer and sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest.

On June 2, activist Gulnara Mehdiyeva organized one-person rally in front of the Ministry of Education protesting the arrest of members of "Student's Demand" in a rally day before. Police interfered with the rally and detained Mehdiyeva alongside two other activist and journalist, Rabiyya Mammadova and Nargiz Absalamova. They were later released from the police station.

Social-Economic difficulties during COVID-19 pandemic

New weekend lockdowns are expected to affect the economic gains of people; however, no additional explanation has been made on the extension of social care packages into June linked to COVID-19 pandemic.

Approximately 600-700 people are reported to got stuck in the border between Russia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis living in Russia are trapped in the border and not let in by Azerbaijan. Though, about 300 hundred people have been let in Azerbaijan in last 20 days, there are still a lot of people in the camp in Dagestan. Azerbaijan citizens are on hunger strike for 4th consecutive day and protest their poor living standards in the camp alongside with financial and hygienic difficulties.