

AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE AND OPPOSITION DYNAMICS IN AZERBAIJAN DURING THE 2020S

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Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been governed through an authoritarian framework predominantly shaped by the enduring dominance of the Aliyev family. Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB general and senior Communist Party official, consolidated his hold on power in the early post-Soviet years. Following his death in 2003, his son Ilham Aliyev assumed the presidency and has since maintained an extensive and centralized system of political control over the country's institutions, media landscape, and security apparatus.

Azerbaijan's political structure is characterized by a concentration of executive authority, systematic constraints on dissent, and the strategic use of state resources to suppress opposition and civil activism. Although the country formally holds elections, these processes are routinely criticized by international observers for failing to adhere to democratic principles, with widespread reports of electoral manipulation, intimidation, and the absence of genuine political pluralism. Opposition figures, independent journalists, and members of civil society frequently encounter harassment, arbitrary detention, and prolonged imprisonment on charges that are widely regarded as politically motivated, contributing to an entrenched climate of fear and self-censorship.

Under Ilham Aliyev's leadership, Azerbaijan has achieved consistent economic growth, primarily driven by its significant oil and gas reserves. However, this economic development has not translated into substantive political liberalization or meaningful democratic reform. The ruling elite has continued to leverage energy revenues to reinforce loyalty, expand patronage networks, and cultivate an image of modernization for international audiences, all while imposing tight restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly within the country. Leading human rights organizations regularly document Azerbaijan's persistent failures in upholding civil liberties and its ongoing efforts to silence dissenting voices, both domestically and, in certain cases, abroad.

The 2020s have continued to demonstrate the Azerbaijani regime's firm hold over the country's political landscape. In its report of April 29, 2020, Amnesty International concluded that the Azerbaijani government had intensified its suppression of dissent, using the COVID-19

pandemic as justification for heightened restrictions. According to the report, President Ilham Aliyev publicly introduced so-called “new rules” to be enforced during the pandemic period, which included measures to “isolate” and “clear out” the country’s already weakened political opposition. This rhetoric was followed by a series of high-profile arrests of political and civil rights activists on questionable charges, with over twenty opposition figures reportedly detained in this context.

Azerbaijani authorities also detained numerous opposition leaders and activists on politically motivated criminal charges following an unsanctioned public rally on July 14, 2020, in Baku. The demonstration, attended by thousands, expressed support for Azerbaijan’s armed forces amid renewed military tensions with neighboring Armenia. In the aftermath, the authorities pursued charges ranging from alleged violations of pandemic-related lockdown restrictions to accusations of property destruction and an attempted coup d’état. During the late hours of July 14, a small faction of protestors briefly entered the parliament building and caused limited property damage before security forces removed them. The government immediately framed this incident as a deliberate attempt by the political opposition to violently overthrow the state. In the days that followed, dozens of opposition activists were detained and interrogated under this pretext.

This wave of arrests mirrored Azerbaijan’s established pattern of politically motivated detentions and prosecutions, warning that such actions threatened to severely weaken one of the country’s most longstanding opposition movements. The arrests coincided with a televised address by President Aliyev, who directly accused the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) of orchestrating the unrest. In his speech, Aliyev labeled the party and its members as “traitors,” “enemies,” and a “fifth column,” and pledged to eliminate this perceived threat. Following minor clashes between some protest participants and the police outside the parliament building, security forces responded with significant force, employing tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets to disperse the demonstrators. Official reports indicated that at least seven police officers were injured, and sixteen vehicles were damaged, including two that were completely destroyed.

Subsequently, the authorities launched an investigation under the pretext of “violating public order” and “resisting or using force against a government representative.” Human rights observers have noted that at least eighty individuals were detained under administrative and

criminal charges, although the precise number remains unclear. Among those detained were seventeen members of the APFP, including individuals who, according to their legal representatives, neither entered the parliament nor participated in the rally. Sixteen of these detainees face charges related to violence against officials, public disorder, and property damage, while one individual was accused of spreading an infectious disease. Five high-ranking members of the APFP presidium — Asif Yusifli, Mammad Ibrahim, Fuad Gahramanli, Bakhtiyar Imanov, and Ayaz Maharramli — were among those arrested. Notably, Gahramanli and Ibrahim were also charged with attempting to overthrow the government, an offense punishable by up to twenty years' imprisonment or life in custody under Azerbaijani law.

Four members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) presidium have stated that they did not participate in the July 14 rally. Nevertheless, courts ordered pretrial detention for all but one of the detained party members, setting custodial terms of up to four months. One individual, Elvin Mammadov, was released on his own recognizance. Among those held in custody is Mahammad Imanli, who faces criminal charges for allegedly violating anti-epidemic, sanitary, and lockdown measures, with the authorities accusing him of intentionally spreading the COVID-19 virus. According to Imanli's legal counsel, he was apprehended at his residence by a district police officer on July 16 under the pretext of meeting with the local police chief and was subsequently arrested at the station. Despite Azerbaijani legal requirements stipulating that detainees must appear before a judge within forty-eight hours, Imanli's hearing did not occur until six days later, on July 22. To obscure this procedural violation, the police record and the court's pretrial detention ruling—reviewed by Human Rights Watch—claim that Imanli was detained on July 20 on a Baku street for not wearing a face covering. Authorities further allege that he tested positive for COVID-19 while in custody and therefore endangered public health. Imanli's attorney has maintained that his client displayed no symptoms while in detention and that Imanli categorically denies the accusations.

Similarly, Mehdi Ibrahimov, the son of APFP deputy chairman Mammad Ibrahim, has been charged with violating sanitary and hygiene regulations and remains in pretrial detention on the basis of police assertions that he tested positive for COVID-19. Unlike Imanli, Mehdi Ibrahimov did participate in the demonstration and was detained alongside more than one hundred other participants the following day. While the majority of detainees were released within twenty-four hours, Mehdi Ibrahimov was held after authorities learned of his family

affiliation with a prominent opposition figure. On July 22, a district court ordered his pretrial detention for three months, and he was subsequently transferred to Specialized Medical Facility No. 3 of the Penitentiary Service, a former tuberculosis ward now used to isolate inmates suspected of carrying the virus. On July 31, a physician at the facility informed Ibrahimov's lawyer that his client remained in good health, exhibited no COVID-19 symptoms, and had tested negative while in custody, which led Ibrahimov and his legal team to question the validity of the charges. The authorities declined to share the test results with legal representatives for both Ibrahimov and Imanli. Family members of Mehdi Ibrahimov further reported that he had declared a hunger strike in protest against what he considered his unlawful detention.

On July 26, police arrested Mammad Ibrahim while he was delivering food to his detained son. Two days later, a court ordered his pretrial detention for four months on charges including public disorder, destruction of property, resisting law enforcement, and attempting to violently overthrow the state, despite the fact that Ibrahim did not attend the July 14 demonstration.

Significant procedural violations accompanied the detentions of APFP members. Many of those detained were assigned state-appointed counsel, even when they requested and were prepared to retain independent legal representation. At least three private attorneys sought immediate access to their clients and presented the necessary authorization; however, investigators refused to accept the documents in person and insisted they be submitted via registered mail. Consequently, initial interrogations and detention hearings proceeded with state-appointed lawyers, who in Azerbaijan are widely perceived as lacking independence. In addition, the police often failed to allow detainees to notify their families about their detention or whereabouts.

These due process breaches raise serious concerns regarding the risk of torture and mistreatment in custody. Human Rights Watch documented at least two credible allegations of ill-treatment. Seymour Ahmadov, a senior APFP official detained on July 16, filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office in which he described being severely beaten while in detention. In a letter released by the Voice of America's Azerbaijani service, Ahmadov detailed that he was repeatedly struck in a pretrial detention facility and threatened with further violence unless he recorded a coerced apology. Ahmadov recounted, "When the plainclothes officer produced the truncheon, he beat me continuously for an hour... the plainclothes man shouted that if I did not

apologize on camera, I would face worse violence and be beaten to death.” Another lawyer has also reported a separate case of credible mistreatment in custody but requested anonymity due to fears of retaliation against the detainee.

These incidents reflect persistent patterns of repression and procedural abuse in Azerbaijan’s treatment of political opponents, highlighting broader systemic failures to uphold fundamental legal safeguards and protect individuals from arbitrary detention and abuse. The Azerbaijani government employs a wide array of tools to suppress dissent and intimidate critics, both within the country and abroad. One method involves exerting pressure on lawyers who represent individuals facing politically motivated charges. For example, during the reporting period, lawyer Elchin Sadigli was repeatedly obstructed from meeting with the abducted and imprisoned journalist Afgan Mukhtarli. In addition to targeting domestic critics, the authorities frequently attempt to silence political opponents in exile by intimidating and harassing their family members who remain in Azerbaijan. According to the opposition group Choose a Democratic Azerbaijan, the families of at least forty-seven exiled dissidents were targeted by Azerbaijani police in 2018 alone. In one illustrative case, Tural Sadigli, a blogger who fled the country fearing reprisals and whose family had been subjected to harassment multiple times, reported in May 2019 that authorities informed his family that he was the subject of an Interpol warrant and a criminal case. His father and brother had previously been detained on questionable grounds. Similarly, in April 2019, Vugar Niftiyev, an activist based in Germany, disclosed that his father and brother were interrogated by Azerbaijani police, while the families of other Germany-based dissidents such as Parviz Abdullayev and Ali Mammadov were summoned for questioning in connection with protests abroad, including a demonstration held in Berlin in May 2019. In December 2018, Ordukhon Teymurkhan, a blogger and activist based in the Netherlands, learned that Azerbaijani officials had initiated a criminal case against him and requested an Interpol warrant for his arrest, despite the fact that he had never held Azerbaijani citizenship. This pattern demonstrates that the authorities routinely resort to collective punishment by targeting the relatives of individuals whom they consider to be opponents of the regime. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government expanded its legislative arsenal with additional regulations ostensibly aimed at containing the spread of the virus but often applied selectively to curtail the activities of opposition figures.

The overall state of human rights in Azerbaijan remained deeply concerning through 2022. Although the authorities released over twenty individuals who had been imprisoned on politically motivated or unfounded charges, at least thirty others continued to be wrongfully detained. The state continued to rely on restrictive laws that severely hinder the independent operation of nongovernmental organizations. Persistent abuses also included systematic torture and mistreatment in detention facilities, alongside harsh curbs on freedom of the press. The authorities continued to misuse narcotics-related charges to detain political opponents. Many detainees alleged mistreatment in custody, yet such allegations were routinely disregarded by officials.

The practice of fabricating narcotics charges remained a prominent tool for silencing dissent in 2022. In May, the authorities arrested Rashad Ramazanov, a blogger and former political prisoner, on questionable drug charges and placed him in pretrial detention. Ramazanov's lawyer reported that police had severely beaten him to force a confession, but no credible investigation into the alleged abuse followed. Ramazanov had previously served six years in prison on similar charges before being pardoned and released in 2019; prior to his arrest, he had been outspoken on social media about police misconduct and corruption. That same month, APFP member Razi Alishov was also arrested on dubious drug charges and sent to pretrial detention, with credible allegations of torture during custody that were left unaddressed. In March, a court sentenced APFP activist Shahin Hajiyeu to six years in prison for alleged drug trafficking, despite his persistent criticism of the government on social media. Hajiyeu reported police abuse and stated that officers coerced him to claim that his injuries were the result of an accidental fall, rather than a beating, yet prosecutors refused to investigate these claims. Several individuals deported to Azerbaijan after unsuccessful asylum bids in Germany also faced politically motivated charges upon return. Among them were Punhan Karimli and Jafar Mirzayev, who were deported in November 2021 and arrested two months later. Malik Rzayev and Mutallim Orujov faced similar circumstances in 2021. The authorities alleged that narcotics were found in their possession at the time of arrest. In April, police detained Samir Ashurov on accusations of assault with a knife shortly after his forced return to Azerbaijan; according to his lawyer, interrogators questioned him extensively about his activities while abroad. In September, Avaz Zeynalli, chief editor of the online channel Xural TV, and lawyer Elchin Sadigov, known for defending prominent government critics, were placed in pretrial detention for four months on

bribery charges they both denied. These allegations arose after pro-government media accused Zeynalli of accepting a bribe from an imprisoned businessman in exchange for halting critical reporting, with Sadigov allegedly acting as an intermediary. Sadigov was later released to house arrest following an appeal.

Azerbaijani authorities continued to detain critics under spurious misdemeanor charges such as hooliganism or disobedience following perfunctory court hearings. In March 2022, for instance, APFP member Elkhon Aliyev was detained, and in July, Musavat Party member Alikram Khurshidov was similarly arrested. Both men had been vocal critics of the government on social media. These practices collectively illustrate the Azerbaijani government's systematic use of arbitrary detention, fabricated charges, and intimidation tactics to suppress dissent and undermine the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

On December 9, 2022, shortly before International Human Rights Day, an Azerbaijani court ordered the arrest of Bakhtiyar Gadzhiev, a prominent political figure and civic activist, placing him under administrative detention for fifty days. Gadzhiev was formally charged with hooliganism and contempt of court, offenses that could result in a prison term of up to three years. In response to his detention, local political activists, together with representatives from various civil society and human rights organizations, established a committee dedicated to advocating for his release. Rufat Safarov, who heads the committee, asserted that Gadzhiev's arrest reflected the state's persistent unwillingness to abandon its entrenched practice of targeting civil society organizations and their representatives. Safarov further emphasized that the committee regards the accusations against Gadzhiev as unfounded. Similarly, Ali Karimli, the leader of the opposition Popular Front Party, described the arrest as a clear instance of politically motivated repression, characterizing the court's decision as the execution of a political directive rather than a legitimate legal ruling. Gadzhiev's lawyer, Shahla Gumbatova, publicly affirmed her view that Gadzhiev was being targeted explicitly for his outspoken criticism of the authorities. Earlier in the same year, an activist who had voiced criticism of local officials was abducted and beaten; the perpetrators were never identified or prosecuted despite official assurances. Gadzhiev's case therefore exemplifies the Azerbaijani government's recurrent strategy of leveling fabricated charges against political opponents as a means of silencing dissent.

Overall, President Ilham Aliyev has consolidated Azerbaijan's transformation into a consolidated autocracy characterized by centralized rule and the dominance of a single ruling party that ensures the passage of government-sponsored legislation without meaningful opposition. Political opposition movements are subject to severe constraints, with leaders and activists frequently facing detention and intimidation. Independent journalists encounter routine harassment and threats, further narrowing the already limited space for free expression and investigative reporting. The general human rights situation in the country has markedly deteriorated, with the regime's military victory over Armenia further emboldening the authorities to deal with dissent even more harshly, often resulting in systematic harassment, intimidation, and abuse of perceived opponents. The government's grip on power has only deepened in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, as emergency measures and tightened social controls have been repurposed to restrict civic space further.

As Freedom House observes, "Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is pervasive, and the formal political opposition has been undermined by years of repression. The authorities have implemented a sweeping crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, leaving little room for independent expression or meaningful civic engagement." This deeply entrenched system has proven largely resistant to external diplomatic or normative pressure, owing in part to Azerbaijan's substantial oil and gas revenues. The country's resource wealth has enabled the regime to cultivate extensive lobbying and influence networks abroad, commonly described as "caviar diplomacy," which critics argue has turned the practice of international election monitoring into a superficial exercise devoid of real accountability or consequence.

Azerbaijani authorities sharply escalated their restrictions on media freedom throughout 2024 and into 2025. In March 2024, security forces raided the offices of Toplum TV, and by December, six journalists from Meydan TV were arrested on smuggling charges. On June 20, 2025, seven journalists from Abzas Media and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, including Farid Mehralizada, were sentenced to prison terms ranging from seven and a half to nine years on charges widely seen as fabricated, such as money laundering and currency violations. This wave of arrests has brought the total number of jailed media workers since late 2023 to at least twenty-five, demonstrating a clear effort to silence investigative reporting.

At the same time, the government has expanded its pressure on civil society and political critics. In August 2024, political scientist Bahruz Samadov was detained and charged with high treason for his involvement in peace-focused dialogue, a case that drew widespread criticism as politically motivated. Earlier in 2024, at least nine civil society activists were imprisoned for speaking out against government actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. The authorities have intensified their clampdown on dissent since late 2022, targeting NGO workers and researchers with questionable charges.

Repression has often coincided with high-profile political events. Around the snap presidential election in February 2024 and the UN COP29 climate summit in Baku later that year, the government increased its arrests and intimidation efforts. The presidential election returned Ilham Aliyev to power with more than ninety-two percent of the vote, amid credible reports of widespread vote manipulation and restricted political competition. Human rights groups documented at least twenty journalists, activists, union leaders, and lawyers detained, with more than thirty public figures facing prosecution.

Foreign journalists have also come under growing pressure. In February 2025, Azerbaijani authorities suspended BBC's Azerbaijani service, claiming reciprocity measures. At the same time, Reporters Without Borders has noted that at least twenty-one international journalists remain detained. In May 2025, Voice of America reporter Ulviyya Ali was arrested on smuggling charges widely viewed as retaliation for her reporting and was reportedly tortured in custody. Other foreign outlets, including Bloomberg and VOA, have faced closures and revoked press credentials, underscoring the state's increasing hostility to foreign media presence. The government has also tightened legal restrictions targeting independent organizations, media outlets, and civil society groups. Recent legislation further limits NGO operations and the right to associate freely, severely weakening the independent civic space. Many activists and journalists now face prosecution under broad and vague charges such as currency violations, treason, or tax evasion, as seen in the cases of Abzas Media staff, Meydan TV employees, and Bahruz Samadov.

The overall climate in Azerbaijan in 2024 and 2025 remains shaped by fear and a sense of impunity for those who commit abuses. Torture and ill-treatment in detention continue, despite occasional acknowledgment of high-profile cases. The number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan has climbed from approximately 331 in late 2024 to 357 by early 2025. Local and

international observers note that this repression extends beyond Azerbaijan's borders, affecting exiled critics and foreign journalists alike and reinforcing an environment where independent expression is treated as a threat.

Azerbaijan's current political system shows few signs of real reform or any opening toward genuine democracy in the foreseeable future. Power remains firmly concentrated under President Ilham Aliyev and his close circle, while opposition voices, independent media, and civil society groups face constant restrictions and pressure. Although the government occasionally makes promises of modernization and development, it continues to rely on intimidation, restrictive legislation, and the strategic use of state resources to suppress criticism and maintain its grip on authority. This ongoing approach means that political diversity and fundamental freedoms will likely stay heavily constrained as long as the leadership sees independent voices as a challenge to its rule.

Looking forward, the regime's continued stability will largely depend on its ability to uphold tight internal control, manage its heavy dependence on oil and gas revenues, and respond to growing international concern about human rights abuses. While officials try to project an image of progress and order to the outside world, domestic pressures are building, especially as younger generations demand more freedom, fairness, and accountability. Without sincere reforms, Azerbaijan risks moving further away from democratic standards and creating even deeper divides within its own society. As long as open discussion and real political competition are restricted, the chance for peaceful transition or genuine democratic change will remain slim.

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