

UN Human Rights Council: Adoption of the Outcome of the UPR of Azerbaijan

HRC 39th Session: Statement Delivered Under Item 6

Human Rights Watch welcomes the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report on Azerbaijan and notes that the government accepted numerous broad recommendations in a wide range of areas, including the Sustainable Development Goals, promoting human rights education, and equality. The government accepted recommendations regarding freedom of speech and association, particularly those that implied approval of its current measures in these areas.

It is disappointing that the government relegated for further study a series of recommendations on the need to protect LGBT people from discrimination, to reform restrictive regulations governing the registration and financing of nongovernmental organizations, and reforming criminal libel legislation.

Of the few recommendations the government rejected most relate to politically motivated prosecutions. This too is disappointing, if unsurprising.

Azerbaijan has a persistent record of using bogus charges to imprison government critics, routinely manipulating or fabricating evidence. Many cases show that authorities had motivation to retaliate against critics. When authorities detain these critics, they focused on the critics' political or journalistic work as much as the alleged infraction. In some cases, such as Afgan Mukhtarli, the journalist who was kidnapped from Georgia and brought illegally across the border to Azerbaijan in May 2017, the authorities' allegations simply do not meet even minimum threshold of credibility. Also among these cases was Ilgar Mammadov, whose prosecution the European Court of Human Rights found to be in retaliation for his political activities. It took the government more than four years after the court's first ruling to free him, and he still faces a suspended sentence, a travel ban and restrictions on his activities. But several dozen critics, like Mr. Mukhtarli, remain behind bars. The very small cohort of lawyers who represent them is shrinking because the Bar association has either disbarred them or suspended their licenses.

The Azerbaijani government should immediately free the many bloggers, political activists and other critics who are wrongfully imprisoned in retaliation for their legitimate activities. It should allow lawyers to perform their work without undue government interference. And it should reform laws and regulations on NGOs and their access to funding, in accordance with recommendations from the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

Commented [LS1]: It would be great to have a title for coding to the website – like: “Azerbaijan Crackdown on Civil Society Continues” for example

Commented [RD2]: Yes?

Commented [LS3R2]: We usually just write: “Item 6 UPR adoption”