

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

AZERBAIJAN: "If you can't beat them, jail them": the case of human rights defender Rasul Jafarov

Publication of a trial observation report

Paris-Geneva, June 11, 2105 – The judicial case against prominent Azerbaijani human rights defender and “Sports for Rights” campaign founder Rasul Jafarov demonstrates the Azeri authorities' shameless manipulation of the legal and justice system to silence dissent and paralyse civil society ahead of the European Games, says a new report released today by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT).

<https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/azerbaijanobsang2015print.pdf>

<http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/reports-and-publications/azerbaijan/2015/06/d23196/>

Mr. **Rasul Jafarov** was sentenced on April 16, 2015 to six and a half years in prison on spurious charges of “illegal entrepreneurship,” “tax evasion,” “abuse of office,” “embezzlement” and “forgery.” His trial in appeal was initially scheduled to open on June 12, 2015, on the same day as the opening of the Baku Games, before it was postponed to a later date.

“Human rights defender Rasul Jafarov was the founder of the “Sports for Rights” campaign. He is today a prisoner of the Games”, the Observatory said today.

No evidence of guilt

From January to April 2015, the Observatory closely monitored the trial against Mr. Jafarov, with two experienced observers attending seven of the hearings. The proceedings confirmed the farce that is the Azerbaijani justice system, a system in which the prosecution unilaterally designates so-called “victims” who cannot provide evidence of a crime, in which the right to equality of arms and the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty are denied, and in which the basic international principles of fair trial and due process are flagrantly disregarded.

The Observatory trial observers stated that ***“the trial was clearly based on trumped-up charges. There was absolutely no evidence presented of Mr. Jafarov’s guilt.”***

The report on Mr. Jafarov's case complements a recent fact-finding mission report published by the Observatory (see [FIDH](#) and [OMCT](#) websites), examining the use of NGO and Grants legislation to criminalise human rights defenders. The earlier report highlighted how determined the Azerbaijani regime is to stifle civil society actors, and human rights defenders in particular, ahead of the opening of the Baku Games. Today's report sadly confirms this phenomenon.

President Aliyev cannot stand to have his government's image tarnished, especially when in the spotlight as the host of the first ever European Games, and has no qualms about quashing critical voices. Despite the geostrategic importance of Azerbaijan, the international community cannot allow Aliyev to throw international human rights norms by the wayside. The opening ceremony of the Baku Games is the right time for world leaders to make a stand. This is why our organisations reiterate their call for European

governments to make their participation in the opening ceremony contingent on the release of all human rights defenders.

More information on Mr. Rasul Jafarov's work, and on the repression faced since 2012

Over the last few years, Mr. Rasul Jafarov organised campaigns such as “Sing for Democracy”, calling attention to human rights violations in his country ahead of the Eurovision song contest held in Baku in 2012, and “Art for Democracy”, which mobilised young people to fight for justice through art. He also worked closely with human rights defenders **Leyla Yunus**, member of OMCT General Assembly, and **Intigam Aliyev** to update a list of political prisoners being held in Azerbaijan. Before his arrest, he was planning to launch another campaign, entitled “Sport for Rights,” to alert the public of the dire human rights situation in Azerbaijan ahead of the European Games.

Throughout his work, Mr. Jafarov strove to keep in line with the increasingly repressive NGO laws in order to continue his human rights activities. He attempted multiple times, unsuccessfully, to register his organisation, the “Human Rights Club”. In the face of this refusal, the grants awarded to Mr. Jafarov's organisation were wired to his personal bank accounts, which was permitted by national legislation at the time. In February 2014, amendments to the laws on NGOs and Grants entered into force, rendering this practice illegal by requiring individual recipients of grants, not just organisations, to register them with the Ministry of Justice.

From then on, Mr. Jafarov was forced to suspend the implementation of projects under the “Human Rights Club”, and joined the Legal Protection and Awareness Society (LPAS), a registered NGO. Despite all his efforts to conform with the law, his assets were frozen in July 2014 amid a wave of repression against civil society. Mr. Rasul Jafarov has been arbitrarily detained since August 2, 2014.

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