

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

AZERBAIJAN: Investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova sentenced to 7.5 years in jail

Geneva-Paris, September 1, 2015 – The sentencing of prominent investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova to 7.5 years in prison was handed down today before the Baku Court of Grave Crimes. Arbitrarily detained since December 5, 2014, her conviction is based on trumped-up charges and aims at preventing her from carrying out her legitimate activities, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders said today.

On September 1, 2015, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes sentenced Ms. **Khadija Ismayilova** to 7,5 years imprisonment on charges of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and abuse of office. On August 21, the Prosecution had demanded for her 9 years of jail.

Internationally recognised independent reporter¹ and journalist of the Azerbaijani radio *Azadliq* ("Radio Freedom"), Ms. Ismayilova was arrested on December 5, 2014 on charges of "inciting" her ex-partner "to commit suicide". Although in April 2015 the alleged victim retreated his accusations, claiming his testimony was given under pressure, blackmail and torture, the prosecution did not take it into account and maintained the charges. In February 2015, Ms. Ismayilova was further accused of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion and abuse of office. During the hearings, no evidence of these accusations was presented.

The crackdown on civil society, going on in Azerbaijan since last year, has recently seen other prominent human rights defenders sentenced on similar trumped up charges: Mr. **Rasul Jafarov** and Mr. **Intigam Aliyev** sentenced in appeal respectively to 6.3 and 7.5 years of jail, and Ms. **Leyla Yunus** and Mr. **Arif Yunusov** sentenced by a lower court respectively to 8.5 and 7 years in prison².

"This is only the last of a series of recent politically motivated long-term convictions handed down against the most prominent Azeri human rights defenders. It is time for the international community to strongly take a stand against this systematic judicial repression and harassment of human right defenders in Azerbaijan", said OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock.

Moreover, Ms. Ismayilova's trial that opened on July 24, 2015, fell short of international human rights standards on fairness of trial. The hearings were held in a semi-closed format, denying access to journalists, observers and diplomats. She was kept in glass cage during the hearings and all the motions filed by the defence were denied. Hereby the principles of equality of arms and the presumption of innocence were violated along with the independence of the judiciary and transparent judicial proceedings. The same pattern characterized all trials against human rights defenders over the past months.

"We are extremely concerned by the outrageous sentences that are being handed down against the most prominent independent civil society representatives in the country and we call upon the Azeri authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders arbitrarily detained, and to drop all charges against"

¹ She won several international prizes, among which the Gerd Bucerius Free Press of Eastern Europe Award by Zeit-Stiftung on May 24, 2012, the Courage of Journalism Award by the Washington-based International Women's Media Foundation on October 24, 2012, and the Global Shining Light Award on October 14, 2013.

² See Observatory Press Releases of July 23, July 31 and August 13, 2015, on <http://www.omct.org> and <https://www.fidh.org>

them, since they only aim at sanctioning their legitimate human rights activities”,
added FIDH President Karim Lahidji.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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