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AZERBAIJAN: Muslim human rights activist jailed in rigged trial

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Though authorities claimed that Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, a Muslim religious freedom activist, did not face criminal charges, he has been, after a rigged trial, jailed for three months before a possible trial, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. State authorities are investigating him for organising demonstrations after the rigged election, although the court was "given proof that Ibrahimoglu had not taken part in any public disorder and clashes with the police," a spokesman for religious rights group Devamm told Forum 18. "All he did was monitor the post-election situation." Ibrahimoglu is being held along with more than 100 opposition activists detained after street protests against the way the presidential poll was conducted, and he has in the past helped end the ban on female Muslim teachers and students wearing headscarves, helped several Protestant churches to gain registration, and had helped the Baptist Church to extract a shipment of books that had been held up in customs.

Despite assurances from law enforcement agencies on 20 October that he did not face any criminal charges, leading independent Muslim activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu was yesterday (3 December) ordered to remain in prison for three months ahead of a possible trial. In an evening hearing, Nasimi district court in the capital Baku ruled that there was sufficient evidence to keep him in detention while he is investigated on charges that he organised demonstrations on 16 October, the day after the rigged election that saw Ilham Aliiev become president. "The criminal investigators were given proof that Ibrahimoglu had not taken part in any public disorder and clashes with the police," Seymur Rashidov, a spokesman for Ibrahimoglu's religious rights group Devamm, told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 3 December. "All he did was monitor the post-election situation."

Rashidov complained of the court procedure. "The hearing was full of falsifications, it was over very quickly and none of the lawyers' arguments were taken into consideration." He reported that court officials declared the hearing closed, barring access for ten or so of Ibrahimoglu's colleagues who wished to attend. He also complained that six hours before the court ordered Ibrahimoglu into pre-trial detention, the procurator general Zakir Garalov appeared on pro-government television to announce that he had been detained. "He ignored the principle of presumption of innocence and proved that the verdict of the court had already been arranged in advance," Rashidov told Forum 18.

Ibrahimoglu, one of the imams of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, is a board member of the Islam-Ittihad Society, leading coordinator of Devamm (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) and Secretary General of the Azerbaijani Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). In the presidential election, Ibrahimoglu made no secret of his support for opposition candidate Isa Gambar, leader of the Musavat (Equality) party. After police raided the Juma mosque on 17 October in an apparent bid to arrest him, Ibrahimoglu took refuge for three days in the nearby Royal Norwegian Embassy (See F18News 20 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=165 and 22 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=168).

Ibrahimoglu was ordered to appear for questioning at the general procuracy in Baku on 1 December as a witness in a criminal case. After eleven hours of questioning he was himself detained (see F18News 2 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=201).

Rashidov reported that the 30-year-old Ibrahimoglu is now in Baku's Bailov investigation prison, where most of the more than 100 opposition activists detained in the wake of street protests against the way the presidential poll was conducted are being held. Ibrahimoglu is being investigated for allegedly having violated Article 220.1 of the criminal code (organising mass public disorder) and Article 315.2 (resisting representatives of the authorities).

Despite the charges that Ibrahimoglu was allegedly involved in organising street protests, Rashidov noted that during his interrogation, investigators were particularly concerned that Devamm was frequently used as a source by the United States State Department in the religious freedom section of its annual human rights report for Azerbaijan, issued in March 2003.

Devamm points out that Ibrahimoglu, in his work for the organisation and for IRLA, had helped to overturn the monopoly of a company close to the government in organising haj pilgrimages to Mecca, had helped to end the ban on female Muslim teachers and students wearing headscarves in educational institutions, had helped several Protestant churches to gain registration with the government's State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations and had helped the Baptist Church to extract a shipment of

books that had been held up in customs.

"Ibrahimoglu is quite an influential young religious leader who has opposed the repressions of the government," Azer Hasret, head of the Journalists' Trade Union, told Forum 18 from Baku on 4 December. "He defends the rights not only of believers, but of all people, that's why the government doesn't like him." He said the authorities had tried to restrict Ibrahimoglu's activity even before the election, but had been unable to do so. "Ibrahimoglu quoted the Koran as declaring that one should resist all violators of one's rights. They used this to argue that he was inspiring street protests against the election results."

The Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is closely monitoring Ibrahimoglu's case. "We know Ibrahimoglu as a participant in several OSCE events and conferences and as a human rights defender," human dimension officer Branislav Solovic told Forum 18 from Baku on 4 December. "That's why we are watching his case closely."

Rashidov noted that despite Ibrahimoglu's imprisonment, regular prayers are continuing at Juma mosque.

The Justice Ministry, which handles the registration of non-governmental organisations, has consistently refused to register Devamm and the Azerbaijani chapter of the IRLA. Earlier this year it stripped the Islam-Ittihad Society of its registration, a move the society is now challenging at the Supreme Court. Solovic said the OSCE has not specifically raised the issue of the denial of registration of Devamm and the IRLA, but has urged the authorities to change the law to make registration of NGOs much simpler. "This is a general problem we are concerned about," he told Forum 18. "There are so many NGOs that have been denied registration."

Another of the post-election prisoners, Rauf Arifoglu, deputy leader of the Musavat party and editor-in-chief of its paper Yeni Musavat, has complained that prison officials have been preventing him from praying. "He is a devout Muslim and his lawyer has reported that he has been denied the right to fast and pray," Hasret told Forum 18. Arifoglu was ordered by a court on 27 October to spend three months in pre-trial detention while the case against him is being investigated. Part of his imprisonment fell in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom

survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:

f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY