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AZERBAIJAN: Imam still imprisoned despite no investigation

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

In an apparent attempt to divert attention from the imprisonment of religious freedom activist Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the Azeri authorities have dropped their investigation into the alleged charges against him - whilst still keeping him in prison. "It's like under the Bolsheviks – they arrested people but then left them to languish in prison with no investigation of their case," one human rights activist told Forum 18. Imam Ibrahimoglu is one of 123 people held in a crackdown after the Azeri presidential elections in October 2003, which were widely condemned as fraudulent by independent election observers.

Nearly forty days after his arrest, the investigation into the alleged charges against detained imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev has ground to a halt, apparently in a bid to allow attention on his case to lapse, the imam's supporters have told Forum 18 News Service. "No investigation is underway at all," his brother Najaf Allahverdiev told Forum 18 from the capital Baku on 7 January. Human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov agreed. "It's like under the Bolsheviks – they arrested people but then left them to languish in prison with no investigation of their case." In a 6 January letter to Forum 18 from prison, Ibrahimoglu complains there is "no change" in his situation. "Here I feel like a victim of the medieval inquisition with no rights."

Ibrahimoglu is being held in cell 130, a three-man cell in the Bayil investigation prison in the block that previously held death-row prisoners. He has been allowed access to his lawyer and has also been visited by several diplomats from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and foreign embassies. "At first he was not allowed to pray in prison, but now he can and he is able to teach his fellow-prisoners about human rights," Najaf Allahverdiev reported.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the investigator at the general procuracy's department for especially serious crimes, Agakhan Akhadov, who is handling Ibrahimoglu's case, to find out what progress has been made in the investigation. His telephone went unanswered on 8 January. Nigar Mamedova, assistant to Rafik Aliiev, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, declined to comment on Ibrahimoglu's case. "I don't have any information about it," she told Forum 18 from Baku on 8 January.

Ibrahimoglu, imam of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, was detained on 1 December on charges of involvement in the street disturbances on 15 and 16 October that followed the rigged presidential election that, according to the official result, was decisively won by Ilham Aliyev. On 3 December a Baku court ordered him to remain in pre-trial detention for three months. In the first ten days after his arrest, Ibrahimoglu's colleagues were interrogated and threatened (see F18News 9 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=207), but Najaf Allahverdiev says even that has now stopped.

Ibrahimoglu, an opposition supporter, has consistently rejected any involvement in organising or participating in the disturbances, describing such allegations as "ridiculous". "Having absolutely nothing to do with masterminding the mass clashes and with resistance to the authorities, at someone's order I have been illegally arrested and through that deprived of the possibility to conduct public and human rights activities," he complained in his letter to Forum 18.

"It is quite clear that my illegal arrest is meant to 'punish' me for my human rights activities, for implementation of the ideas of tolerance, and inter-confessional and inter-religious peace and agreement," he added. "All my activities were based on the principle of the supremacy of law and my main objective was to establish a civil society and the victory of democratic ideals."

Ibrahimoglu is just one of 123 opposition activists and others held in the post-election crackdown. "The investigation into the first batch of 42 prisoners has been completed and their cases will go to court," Zeynalov, head of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 from Baku on 8 January. "But Ibrahimoglu's case is not among them." He said he had written to the general procuracy declaring that there was no reason to hold Ibrahimoglu in detention ahead of any possible trial.

Zeynalov backs up Ibrahimoglu's claim that the authorities had long been seeking an excuse to move against him. "He has formally been detained as an opposition activist, but in reality he has long been on a watch list as a human rights defender," Zeynalov told Forum 18. "His support for the opposition was just an excuse." Ibrahimoglu has also gained public support from the Baptist Church, which he had helped over registration and literature imports. (see F18News 9 December 2003

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=207)

Ibrahimoglu – whose Juma mosque functioned independently of the Caucasian Muslim Spiritual Administration led by Sheikh-ul-Islam Allashukur Pashazade – rejected government requirements that all mosques must be under the Administration's control. "Pashazade is close to the authorities and called on all Muslims to vote for Ilham Aliyev during the election," Zeynalov points out. "The action against Ibrahimoglu is part of an unannounced campaign against mosques not under the Administration's control. This is a main goal for the authorities."

He also reported that Ibrahimoglu had attracted a lot of people to the Juma mosque by preaching not just in Azeri but in Russian, and was thus able to reach the many Russian-speaking Muslims in Baku.

Zeynalov added that in late November, Ibrahimoglu had told him of a growing movement in Baku to create small neighbourhood Muslim centres where local believers could pray, discuss their faith and distribute aid. "These centres are outside anyone's control and the authorities are worried by them." Zeynalov said these centres appear to have formed spontaneously.

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>

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