



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Azerbaijan: Do Human Rights Matter?**

**Thursday, September 15, 2016  
11:00 AM – 12:30 PM  
HVC-210 U.S. Capitol Visitor Center**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

I especially want to thank our witnesses for joining us today, and for their commitment to human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan.

One witness, journalist Khadija Ismayilova, will be testifying via internet from Azerbaijan – if all goes well with the technology. We would have liked to have more brave people from Azerbaijan join us today, but many potential witnesses are subject to government-imposed travel restrictions. In other cases, it was not possible to expedite the processing of U.S. visas.

I want to state for the record that the Commission did invite representatives of the U.S. State Department to testify this morning, but, regretfully, we did not receive a response.

Azerbaijan is not a country that is in the news here in the U.S. on a daily basis. When it does make the news, all too often it is because of human rights problems.

Last spring, quite a lot of news was generated by the campaign around the world to gain Khadija's release from prison, in which I participated. In the end, Khadija was acquitted of some charges and freed. But convictions on other charges that many observers consider spurious were

left in place, and Khadija was faced with a lengthy term of probation, a travel ban and a ban on exercising her professional activities.

Khadija's case is not unique. In its 2015 Human Rights Report, the State Department identified a number of significant human rights problems that affect fundamental civil and political rights:

- Increased government restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, reflected in the intimidation, incarceration on questionable charges, and use of force against human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and their relatives.
- Government use of the judicial system to punish peaceful dissent.
- Government restrictions on the ability of the citizens to change their government in free and fair elections.

Other problems noted in the report include restrictions on religious freedom of both Muslim and Christian groups; detentions without warrants; continued use of torture against detainees; and allegations of systemic corruption at all levels of government. The Azerbaijani government did not take steps in 2015 to prosecute or punish most officials who committed human rights abuses, so impunity remains a problem.

I am concerned that this is the kind of situation we are seeing in too many parts of the world – where persistent repression and stalled democratic reform could contribute to increased sectarian conflict and radicalization.

Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, has held that office **since 2003** – 13 years already. The next currently scheduled election is not until 2018.

Members of the political opposition have been imprisoned and harassed. Turkel Karimli is testifying today because his father Ali Karimli, leader of the Popular Front Party, is unable to leave Azerbaijan. Ilgar Mammadov, one of the leaders of the Republican Alternative (REAL) political movement, has been wrongly imprisoned for the last 3.5 years.

A package of constitutional amendments unveiled in July of this year, about which we will hear more in a few minutes, seems designed to further consolidate the president's power and restrict rights to speech and assembly. Voters will consider the amendments in a rushed referendum to be held scarcely ten days from now, on September 26<sup>th</sup>, in conditions that do not inspire confidence. In recent days there are reliable reports that opponents of the changes are being detained.

Azerbaijan has complex regional relationships with Russia, Iran, and of course Armenia. I think the last thing we want to see is a dynamic in which authoritarian and repressive tendencies in yet another country contribute to radicalization. We don't want to see things get worse in Azerbaijan and cause a crisis.

I want to emphasize that my concerns about the human rights situation in Azerbaijan are not driven by anything having to do with the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, or any other issues involving Armenia. Each country is responsible for its own human rights practices, which are deeply intertwined with its prospects for full development. Experience shows that authoritarian strategies are generally counter-productive for managing dissent, and have many long-term negative consequences for peace and prosperity.

This morning, I look forward to learning more about the current situation of human rights in Azerbaijan. I also look forward to hearing recommendations from our witnesses about how the U.S. government and Congress can best support those standing up and demanding respect for human rights and democratic reform in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has been an important partner for the United States, and everyone here today wants to ensure a continuing strong, reliable partnership going forward. That is the spirit of this hearing.