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Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Harsh sentence

Five-year jail term for editor two weeks before presidential election

28 September 2013

Reporters Without Borders condemns the five-year-jail sentence that a serious crimes court in Baku passed yesterday on **Hilal Mammadov** (Хилал Маммадов), editor of the Talysh-language newspaper *Tolishi Sado*, on trumped-up charges of drug trafficking, inciting hate, and high treason.

Detained since 21 June 2012, Mammadov defends the rights of Azerbaijan's Talysh minority, who speak a language similar to Persian and live mainly in the south of the country.

"This sentence was only to be expected after the nightmare that Mammadov has endured for more than a year, with [fabricated charges that kept changing](#), [appalling conditions of detention](#), and a trial marked by procedural irregularities and no respect for defence rights," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Everything points to a political trial carried out in a spirit of vengeance against a journalist critical of the government. If justice has any meaning in Azerbaijan, this verdict will be overturned on appeal and Mammadov will be released."

Mammadov's lawyers said they would appeal but Mammadov has already announced that he will not seek a pardon. Before the court passed sentence, he thanked all those who supported him and called the trial a "shameful stain, not only on Azerbaijan's judicial system but also on the country's image."

Many international observers attended the final hearing. They included representatives of the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the US, German, French and Norwegian embassies.

Mammadov's case echoes that of *Tolishi Sado*'s previous editor, **Novruzali Mamedov** (no relation), who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2008 on charges of spying and inciting hatred, and [died in a Baku prison hospital the following year](#) because he did not get proper treatment.

As well as editing *Tolishi Sado* and running the Talysh Cultural Centre, Mammadov is also known as the creator of [a popular video song](#) entitled "Who do you think you are? Go, goodbye." It has become a favourite of protest movements in many former Soviet countries and has been used by the Russian opposition to call for Vladimir Putin's departure.

Respect for freedom of information was already minimal in Azerbaijan, ranked 156th out of 179 countries in the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, but it has declined further in the run-up to the 9 October presidential election and harassment of outspoken media has increased steadily in recent weeks.

On 11 September, the supreme court upheld a [nine-year prison sentence for Avaz Zeynalli](#), the editor of the daily *Khural*. Then, on 17 September, the journalist **Parviz Gashimli** was arrested on the absurd charge of trafficking guns from Iran, which carries a maximum sentence

of eight years in prison.

The opposition newspaper *Bizim Yol's* parliamentary correspondent, Gashimli also runs the [Moderator.az](#) news website and the Centre for the Protection of Citizens' Civil and Political Rights, and is a member of the Popular Front opposition party.

His lawyer, who has repeatedly been denied access to his client, says he fears Gashimli is being tortured.

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