

Civil Society Demands Attention to Human Rights and Climate Justice Ahead of COP29 in Azerbaijan

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, movements, groups and individuals, highlight the urgent need to address serious human rights concerns in Azerbaijan in the lead-up to its hosting this year's United Nations Climate Conference (COP29), to be held in Baku from November 11 to 22, 2024.

Azerbaijan's government has a longstanding and well-documented pattern of repressing independent civil society and silencing critical voices. Hosting an international gathering such as COP29 in this context raises grave concerns about the ability of civil society, including environmental activists, human rights defenders and journalists, to participate freely and safely before, during and after the conference.

The rare international spotlight on Azerbaijan as it prepares to host COP29 represents a critical opportunity to mark strong concern about its crackdown on independent civil society and press for an end to abuses.

Azerbaijani human rights groups estimate that hundreds of people are behind bars in the country on politically motivated charges. A new wave of detentions is currently under way, with dozens of activists and media figures arrested on baseless, serious criminal charges.

Among those targeted is Gubad Ibadoghlu, a well-known academic and anti-corruption expert who has specialized in Azerbaijan's oil and gas industry. Dr. Ibadoghlu was violently arrested on July 23, 2023 and the authorities pressed bogus charges against him involving counterfeit money and distributing extremist religious materials. During his nine-month detention, his chronic health conditions deteriorated sharply as a result of the authorities' refusal to provide him with adequate medical treatment. Dr. Ibadoghlu is currently under house arrest. If convicted, he could face up to 17 years in prison.

Another emblematic case is that of Anar Mammadli, a prominent human rights defender and a founding member of the recently formed Climate of Justice Initiative, a civil society undertaking that seeks to use COP29 to promote civic space and climate justice in Azerbaijan. Mammadli was arrested on April 29, 2024, amid Azerbaijan's escalating crackdown on independent voices, and charged with spurious currency smuggling.

At least 18 journalists and other individuals affiliated with Abzas Media, Toplum TV and Kanal 13, the last remaining independent outlets in Azerbaijan, are either behind bars or otherwise implicated in baseless criminal prosecutions. Just on August 21, authorities arrested Bahruz Samadov, a PhD candidate at Charles University in Prague and a regular contributor to

numerous international and regional publications and media, while he was visiting Baku to spend time with his grandmother. Samadov is in pre-trial detention facing treason charges, widely believed to be related to his outspoken peace activism. On July 22, the authorities arrested another researcher, Igbal Abilov, also on spurious treason charges. He, too, remains in pretrial custody.

In his opening address to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk highlighted Azerbaijan for specific concern, “urg[ing] the authorities in Azerbaijan to review, in line with international human rights law, all cases of journalists, activists, and other individuals arbitrarily deprived of their liberty” and to immediately release them.

The government of Azerbaijan has to date refused to heed this and numerous, similar calls by its international partners.

Robust and rights-respecting climate action requires the full and meaningful participation of civil society in climate negotiations, including the key outcome documents of COP29. The dire human rights situation in Azerbaijan makes it incumbent on the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat and member states to take concrete steps to ensure safe space for diverse civil society participation at COP29. They should ensure that the government of Azerbaijan does not inhibit individuals and groups critical of the government from participating in the conference and that the host government respects the rights of all participants to speak freely and to peacefully assemble inside and outside the conference venue.

This year’s climate conference is the third in a row to take place in an authoritarian country – following Egypt and United Arab Emirates as hosts of, respectively, COP27 and COP28. As highlighted by the UN and other independent experts, respect for freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and allowing critical voices and the free flow of information, are integral to effectively and meaningfully tackling the climate crisis, and should be a core requirement for hosting events such as COP.

The UNFCCC should set human rights criteria for future COP hosts, including an obligation to realize the rights to freedom of speech and assembly that are preconditions to ensure an ambitious COP outcome. In addition, for this and future climate COPs, the UNFCCC should make host country agreements – which set out arrangements between COP summit organizers and host country authorities – public and accessible in a timely manner, and ensure that they comply with international human rights law.

The UNFCCC and member states should also ensure that interests of the fossil fuel industry do not undermine the credibility and outcome of climate negotiation at COP29 and future COPs.

We urge UNFCCC and member states to press the Azerbaijani government to respect its human rights obligations, including by immediately and unconditionally releasing arbitrarily detained

activists and human rights defenders. They should also call on Azerbaijani authorities to implement concrete, measurable, structural reforms, such as amending its laws regulating nongovernmental organizations and media, to ensure that positive changes endure beyond COP29, and put into place mechanisms for follow-up monitoring, to verify that progress is upheld and to enable effective and timely intervention in the event of any backsliding, especially in any cases of retaliation or backlash traceable to engagement in or around the climate talks.

We urge the government of Azerbaijan to uphold its commitments as a member of numerous multilateral organizations and initiatives that have human rights elements, and its obligations as a party to key international human rights treaties, by taking the following steps:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society activists wrongfully held on politically motivated grounds, and drop the bogus charges against them;
- Cease the use of criminal prosecution as a tool to suppress government critics and members of civil society;
- Lift undue restrictions on civil society by amending laws related to registration and funding of nongovernmental groups and media, bringing them into compliance with international standards and recommendations issued by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

UNFCCC member states and Secretariat, and other key international actors and organizations, such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank Group, as well as companies with business interests in Azerbaijan, should all stand in firm solidarity with Azerbaijan's independent civil society. Many civic actors, at great personal risk, continue to fight for human rights and climate justice in the country and the region. Azerbaijan's international partners should put their weight behind the calls for specific steps made here, hold Azerbaijan accountable and help ensure that the government takes them as a matter of urgent priority.

Organizations:

Anar Mammadli Campaign to end repression in Azerbaijan

CEE Bankwatch Network

Center for American Progress

Climate Rights International

Committee to Protect Journalists

Crude Accountability

Endangered Scholars Worldwide

FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Freedom Now

Heinrich Böll Stiftung

Human Rights Foundation

Human Rights House Foundation

Human Rights Watch

International Partnership for Human Rights

Natural Resource Governance Institute

New University in Exile Consortium

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Open Contracting Partnership

PEN America

PEN International

People in Need

Publish What You Pay

ReCommon

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Individuals:

Corinna Gilfillan

Simon Taylor, Co-Founder & Director, Hawkmoth