

AZERBAIJAN

Muslims

Shias

Sardar BABAYEV

Date of birth: 12 March 1974

Date and place of arrest: On 22nd February 2017, in the Masalli District

Charges: Leading worship after having gained theological education outside of Azerbaijan

Article of the criminal/civil/administrative code: Article 168-1.3.1 (Punishes repeat offenders who commit violations "of the procedure for religious propaganda and religious ceremonies", with a prison term of between two and five years)

First court decision: On 22nd February 2017, he was sentenced to pre-trial detention for one month and seven days by Judge Nemat Musayev of the Masalli District Court.

Last court decision: He was sentenced to three years in prison in July 2017.

Place of detention: Kurdakhani Investigation Prison, AZ-1104, Baki Shahari, Sabunchu rayonu, Zabrat-2 qasabasi, Baki Istintaq tacridxanasi

Other information: He is an imam and completed his studies at Al Mustafa University in Iran. His lawyer was unable to attend the first court hearing, for he was informed of it on extremely short notice. While in prison, he has been denied access to the Quran and to a prayer mat.

Source: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2263

Elshan Mustafaoglu MUSTAFAYEV

Age: 41 years

Date and place of arrest: In December 2014, in Baku

Charges: Treason, spying for Iran

Statement of the defendant: He rejects the accusations.

Article of the criminal/civil/administrative code: Criminal Code Article 274 (State betrayal, that is deliberate action committed by a citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic to the detriment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, state security or defensibility of the Azerbaijan Republic: changeover to the enemy side, espionage, distribution of state secrets to a foreign state, rendering assistance to a foreign state, foreign organization or their representatives in realization of hostile activity against the Azerbaijan Republic. Punishments include possibly confiscation of property and twelve years to life imprisonment)

Place of detention: Baku

Other information: He was sent by Azerbaijan's Education Ministry to study in Iran in the 1990s, and defended his dissertation in 2007. In 2001, he founded the public organization Spiritual Purity, and in 2005 a research center. He also anchored a series of religious

programs on various Azerbaijani TV channels. In 2011 Mustafayev co-founded the Initiative Group for the Support of the Human Rights of Religious Citizens, which helped to organize a petition to President Ilham Aliyev against the 2010 ban on the hijab in schools and universities. After two years studying in Norway, he returned to Baku in early 2014 and worked with the state-backed Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Caucasus.

Source: <http://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijani-theologian-faces-spy-charges/28163683.html> and http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2203

Comment

The Muslim Unity Movement in Azerbaijan

On 5th February 2016, General Prosecutor Zakir Qaralov announced that sixty-eight Shias had been arrested as part of the crackdown on the Muslim Unity Movement, fifty-seven of which were arrested in and around Baku, and another eleven in Gyanja and elsewhere.

Since the movement started in November-December 2015, authorities have repeatedly claimed that supporters of the movement have been preparing to overthrow the government and have been storing weapons and ammunition. This could not be confirmed by third parties.

A first group was sentenced to prison in 2016 and two other groups in January and early December 2017.

On 28th December 2017, the Baku City Court for Grave Crimes sentenced the last group of people arrested in what is known as the Nardaran case to prison terms ranging from 12 to 15 years. Lawyers of the convicted men called the verdicts and sentences illegal and said they will appeal the rulings.

Those convicted and sentenced include Fuad Qahramanli, deputy chairman of the opposition Popular Front Party; Taleh Bagirzade, leader of the Movement for Muslim Unity; and Bagirzade's deputy, Abbas Huseynov.

What is the Muslim Unity Movement?

Is it a religious entity, a political movement, or a civil society organisation? *Human Rights Without Frontiers* tried to answer this question before deciding whether or not to include these prisoners in its annual Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Prisoners Database, but, as of yet, has not been able to characterize the nature of this unregistered group, despite consulting scholars in Baku and experts outside Azerbaijan. Nobody could provide the charter of the movement, its objective, or its programme.

The organisation's agenda and activities have apparently not been investigated by researchers. However, U.S. expert Paul Goble said to Contact.az on 25th July 2016 that,

"[t]he Islamic Unity Movement is in favor of non-violent changes and the spread of democratic values." On 2nd December 2015, Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, researcher in a Polish think tank, said in an article entitled "Azerbaijan's government strikes at the Shiite opposition": "The Muslim Unity organisation itself is associated with imam Tale Bagirzade (who was released from jail this summer); it has not been registered, and is more a political than a religious organisation" (<http://bit.ly/2cokcJB>).

This means it is a civil society organization and not a religious entity likely to enjoy the protection of Article 18 of the ICCPR, Article 6 of the 1981 UN Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) or Article 9 of the European Convention in case an application would be filed with the European Court of Human Rights.

Consequently, HRWF does not recognize those members of the Muslim Unity Movement as FoRB prisoners but considers that they have the right to a fair trial and not to be tortured or subjected to inhumane treatment. See more details at <http://bit.ly/2ccqOgL>.