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11 members of a religious group arrested for publicly expressing their faith

Two of them were sentenced to 30 days in prison

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (26.07.2024) - Eleven members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, a Shia-derivative new religious movement founded in 1999, were arrested on 20 July 2024 for [publicly manifesting their faith](#) in Fountain Square, in Baku. Two of them were sentenced to a minimum of 30 days in prison for "hooliganism."

When the members of the religious community were arrested, they were holding up images of their religious leaders and sharing their beliefs which dissent from Shia Islam as it is regulated in the country.

The arrested people were all citizens of Azerbaijan: **Jalal Hajiyev, Ramil Ahmadov, Tural Veliyev, Ali Yasar Jafarov, Nijat Gahramanov, Rustam Gasimli, Fegan Rahimov, Kamil Qafarli, Taleh İmanov Ali Oglu, Elnur Mammadov, and Neriman Shabanzade.**

Within ten minutes, about a dozen police officers and military personnel surrounded them, disrupted their peaceful activity and forcefully took them to the Sabayil District Police Department No 9 in Baku where they were forcefully detained. The incident was captured on video by a bystander and is currently circulating on social media.

The detained members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light were charged with "resisting police" (Article 315 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code) and "disturbing public order" (Article 233 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code). These charges are commonly used in Azerbaijan against dissidents and those having "unconventional" beliefs or opinions.

Expressing and sharing one's beliefs is a cornerstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a right exercised by the new religious movement active for a few years in Azerbaijan which prevents their members from practicing their faith, forces them to conceal their beliefs or face imprisonment.

The detained believers were released on 22 July 2024 but remained under investigation by the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan. They were summoned to appear at the committee the following two days. During their detention, they

were threatened with rape by their interrogators if they continued to speak about their religion. Authorities appeared particularly disturbed by the media attention the incident attracted, focusing their investigation on those involved in filming and posting the event online.

There were also reports that undercover police officers, posing as representatives from Human Rights Watch, contacted members of the religious community after the incident, attempting to gather more information about their gatherings.

Shortly after their release, two of the community members, Rustam Gasimli and Neriman Shabanzade returned to Fountain Square to resume their activity of peacefully distributing flyers about their faith. Police officers confiscated their phones and arrested them again immediately. Their missionary activities and arrest were broadcast live on [TikTok](#), but they became unreachable following their detention.

After 24 hours of enforced disappearance, Gasimli and Shabanzade reappeared at the Sabail District Court on 24 July. They were sentenced to a minimum of 30 days in prison for "hooliganism" (Article 510 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code) and "disobedience to a police officer" (Article 535.1 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code).

Prominent human rights lawyer Zibeyda Sadigova, affiliated with the European Human Rights Advocacy Center, has taken on their defense. She reported that both individuals suffered beatings and severe abuse while in detention. Sadigova plans to appeal the court's decision, viewing it as an attempt to intimidate the members of the community. The charges of "hooliganism" are considered outrageous by their defenders, given the peaceful nature of their flyer distribution.

On 25 July, the remaining members of the community were called to the police station one more time. During the interrogation they were threatened to suffer the same fate as Gasimli and Shabanzade if they continued their missionary work. They were questioned about their faith and its history in Azerbaijan, as well as the names and number of their coreligionists in Azerbaijan. They were also asked about their activities and the core tenets of their faith. They were threatened to be investigated under Article 515 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code (Violation of the rules for the establishment and operation of religious organizations) if they did not put an end to their activities.

Report on the persecution of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Submission of Human Rights Without Frontiers. (HRWF) to U.N. Special Rapporteur on Minorities, Nicolas Levrat

HRWF (27.06.2024) – With a report on the persecution of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has answered the call of U.N. Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Nicolas Levrat (*), for input to his

upcoming report to the U.N. General Assembly on institutional arrangements of States that enable minority rights to flourish.

HRWF submission

“Since 2021, members of the **Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light** in Azerbaijan have reported escalating persecution, coinciding with amendments to Azerbaijan's religion law in June 2021. These amendments grant exclusive authority to government-approved religious centers to confer religious titles and mandate the suspension of activities by religious communities in the absence of a government-approved religious leader.

What is the Muslim community of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light?

The [Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#) (not to be confused with the Ahmadiyya Community founded in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad within a Sunni context, with which it has no relations) is a new religious movement founded in 1999 that finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam.

Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, with its beliefs differing from mainstream Islam, have been the target of discrimination, violence, and oppression in Azerbaijan. Despite the country's constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, they find themselves marginalized and persecuted for peacefully practicing their faith.

As believers in the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, their adherence to doctrines considered heretical by mainstream Islam led to arrests and threats to forcefully recant their faith. Ultimately they were forced to flee their country.

More than 30 Azeri members have fled the country in these last few years due to religious persecution, seeking asylum in nations like Poland, Greece, Germany, or Latvia, where they can practice their religion safely.

There are currently 72 members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Azerbaijan.

Timeline of the persecution

Since 2021, Azeri members of the community who have gathered to practice their faith or have engaged in missionary work on social media have reported increased government surveillance and repression.

This includes the presence of police vehicles and unmarked vans near their homes, as well as online and in-person threats by intelligence services.

In 2022 and 2023, 25 members were summoned and arbitrarily detained.

In 2022, four members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light were arrested and fined for disseminating their teachings on YouTube via a basement studio in Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan.

They had established a small YouTube production studio in the basement of one of the members to create educational videos about their faith. However, after only a few weeks of production, they were apprehended and fined under Article 167 (2) of the Criminal Code for distributing religious literature, audio, and video materials without appropriate consent. This punitive application of the criminal code underscores the Azerbaijani state's control over and punishment of the religious activities of its citizens.

Two of the members endured three days of solitary confinement, severe physical assault, and denial of legal representation.

In 2023, on March 1, over 20 members of the community peacefully manifested their beliefs in a public park in Baku but were promptly prevented and harassed by police officers, resulting in the immediate termination of the gathering.

Their detention periods ranged from 3 to 10 days. These actions were attributed to either the Azeri Intelligence Service or the National Crime Agency, as identified by our members.

Torture remains widespread in Azerbaijan, with officials acting with impunity from arrest, trial, and punishment. All detainees were interrogated about their beliefs and subjected to verbal and physical abuse, including punches to the stomach and face, as well as kicks.

Shockingly, threats of sexual violence were also made, adding to the severity of the abuse endured by our members. Five individuals were coerced into signing documents renouncing their beliefs.

The government of Azerbaijan further imposes restrictions on the publications of the said religious community, such as "The Goal of the Wise," their sacred scriptures, or any related religious commentary.

It is crucial to highlight that religious missionary work, whether conducted on social media or in person, constitutes an integral aspect of their religious practice. However, the aforementioned actions of the government effectively criminalize this fundamental practice within Azerbaijan.

Several members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light have furthermore been unjustly targeted with trumped-up charges for practicing their religion.

In the summer of 2023, two members were detained after publicly discussing the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Baku, in an effort to engage in missionary work. They were obstructed by police officers and charged with administrative detention under Article 535.1 of the Administrative Offences Code, which penalizes resistance to lawful police orders and "disorderly conduct." Each member endured a harrowing 10-day detention period, during which they were subjected to interrogation about their faith and subjected to physical assault.

Additionally, government officials have threatened the members with the fabrication of false terrorism or drug charges if they do not cease their religious activities.

As a result of these reports, the members of the said religious community have resorted to worshipping and meeting in secret due to the severe restrictions placed on their right to manifest their freedom of religion.

Religious missionary work is now primarily carried out from abroad by those members who have fled to safety. Congregational worship meetings are conducted covertly to avoid drawing government attention. This *de facto* criminalization not only impedes their ability to practice their faith but also excludes them from effectively participating in any decision-making processes.”

() Prof. Nicolas Levrat (Switzerland) has been a Professor of International and European Law at the University of Geneva since 2001 and Director of the Global Studies Institute of the University of Geneva. He was appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues by the Human Rights Council and assumed his functions on 1 November 2023.*

Fleeing persecution, the plight of Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light members

Namiq and Mammadagha's Story Exposes Systematic Religious Discrimination

[The European Times](#) (22.04.2024) - It has been almost one year since best friends Namiq Bunyadzade (32) and Mammadagha Abdullayev (32) left their home country of Azerbaijan

to flee religious discrimination because of their faith. They are both members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, a new religious movement severely persecuted in Muslim-majority countries for beliefs considered heretical by mainstream Muslim religious scholars.

The [Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#) (not to be confused with the Ahmadiyya Community founded in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad within a Sunni context, with which it has no relations) is a new religious movement that finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam.

After enduring violent attacks by members of their local mosque, receiving threats from their neighbors and family, and finally getting arrested by the Azeri authorities for peacefully proclaiming their faith, Namiq and Mammadagha embarked on a perilous journey to safety and finally made it to Latvia, where they are currently claiming asylum. Their story sheds light on the challenges faced by the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light adherents in Azerbaijan, where practicing their faith comes at a steep price.

About the liberal practices of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, with its beliefs differing from mainstream Islam, have been the target of discrimination, violence, and oppression in Azerbaijan. Despite the country's constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, they find themselves marginalized and persecuted for peacefully practicing their faith.

As believers in the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, their adherence to doctrines considered heretical by mainstream Islam led to arrests and threats to forcefully recant their faith. Ultimately they were forced to flee their country.

The Ahmadi Religion has distinctive beliefs which challenge conventional Islamic teachings. It has therefore long been a source of contention in Azerbaijan. Followers of this faith, comprising a minority in the predominantly Muslim nation, have faced discrimination, harassment, and violence at the hands of both societal and state actors.

The persecution of the Ahmadi Religion stems from its core teachings that diverge from certain traditional beliefs within Islam. These teachings include the acceptance of practices such as consuming alcoholic beverages, though moderately, and recognizing the choice of women regarding the wearing of the headscarf. Additionally, members of the faith question specific prayer rituals, including the notion of mandatory five daily prayers, and hold the belief that the month of fasting (Ramadan) falls in December each year. They also challenge the traditional location of the Kaaba, Islam's holiest site, asserting it is in modern-day Petra, Jordan, rather than Mecca.

The persecution of Namiq Bunyadzade and Mammadagha Abdullayev

Namiq and Mammadagha's ordeal began when they openly embraced the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in 2018, spreading their beliefs through social media and engaging with their local community in Baku. However, they were met with backlash and animosity, particularly after the release of their holy book, "The Goal of The Wise," in December 2022.

Their local mosque turned against them, mobilizing its members to ostracize and intimidate them. They were the target of Friday sermons, warning the congregation against their "misguiding teachings." Threats were hurled, their business suffered, and they faced physical and verbal abuse, all because of their religious beliefs. Their grocery shop, once a

thriving business, became a target of boycotts and threats orchestrated by local religious leaders. Mammadagha recounts:

“We were in the shop when a mob of men from the local masjid came in, and called us heretics who are spreading satanic beliefs. When we refused to give in to their threats, they started throwing items off the shelves and warned: ‘Continue and you will see what we will do. We will burn you and the shop to the ground’.”

The situation reached a tipping point when neighbors and local community members started filing police reports against Namiq and Mammadagha. Eventually, they were arrested by plainclothes policemen on April 24, 2023, under trumped-up charges. Interrogated and threatened with severe consequences including beating and assaults, they were coerced into renouncing their beliefs to secure their release, signing a statement promising to cease all religious activities related to the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light.

Despite their compliance, the harassment continued, with surveillance and intimidation becoming a daily reality. Fearing for their safety and unable to practice their faith freely, Namiq and Mammadagha made the difficult decision to flee Azerbaijan, seeking asylum in Latvia.

Persecution of other members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Azerbaijan

Their story is not an isolated incident. In Azerbaijan, where Ahmadi Religion members are a minority, many face similar challenges. Mirjalil Aliyev (29), was arrested with four other members of the faith one evening after leaving the studio that they had set up to produce YouTube programs about the faith. At the police station, they were threatened with imprisonment if they ever spoke publicly about the faith again. But Mirjalil, like so many other members of the faith in Azerbaijan, considers it his religious duty to openly talk about and propagate his religion.

According to reports, there are currently 70 believers in the country, with many subjected to physical abuse and harassment by intelligence agencies or police. Many have been threatened under legal provisions, such as Article 167 of the criminal law which prohibits the production or distribution of religious material without prior permission.

In May 2023, followers of the faith in Azerbaijan protested the police harassment against members of the faith in Azerbaijan. They were stopped by police officers and prevented from continuing the march. The members who participated in the peaceful demonstration were detained by the police or State Security Service for charges related to disrupting public order and spreading a non-recognized religion in the country.

On the road to exile

Namiq, Mammadagha, Mirjalil, and 21 other Azeri members of the faith fled to Turkey. They were part of the 104 members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light who attempted to claim asylum at the official border crossing point with Bulgaria but were violently pulled back by Turkish authorities who beat them and forcefully detained them for five months in appalling conditions.

Deportation orders were issued against them, prompting the interference of the United Nations and other international human rights organizations which recognized them as a persecuted religious minority. The public attention the case received ultimately led to the Turkish court ruling in favor of the group, dropping all deportation orders against them and stating that their action by the border was fully within the scope of the law. But this publicity posed danger for the Azeri members of the faith once more. Believers like Mirjalil who had been coerced to sign a document forbidding them to publicly practice and propagate their faith had now broken the agreement and were at even more danger to return to Azerbaijan.

The persecution against members of the faith in Azerbaijan is not an isolated event, but is rather part of waves of persecution that unleashed against this religious minority ever since the release of the official gospel of the religion "the Goal of the Wise" authored by the head of the religion Aba Al-Sadiq.

In [Algeria](#) and [Iran](#) members have faced arrest and prison sentences and were forbidden from exercising their rights to religious freedom, and in [Iraq](#) they have suffered gunned attacks on their homes by armed militias, and scholars have called for them to be killed. In [Malaysia](#), the religion has been declared "a deviant religious group" and social media accounts with content of the religion have been blocked.

For Namiq and Mammadagha, despite being detained unjustly in Turkey for over five months, they remain steadfast in their commitment to practicing their faith peacefully. Now residing in Latvia, they aim to rebuild their lives and enjoy their newfound freedom of religion and belief.
