

PERSECUTION OF THE AHMADI RELIGION OF PEACE AND LIGHT IN AZERBAIJAN

Submission of Human Rights Without Frontiers

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, 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 worshiping 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.