



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Azerbaijan: 11 Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light Persecuted for Sharing their Faith**

We are deeply concerned about the arrest of 11 members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Azerbaijan on 20 July 2024 and the sentencing of two of them to 30 days in prison for sharing their faith in the public space.

On 20 July 2024, eleven members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, a Shia-derivative religious movement established in 1999, were arrested in Baku, Azerbaijan, for publicly expressing their faith at Fountain Square. Two members were sentenced to at least 30 days in prison on charges of “hooliganism.”

When detained, the members were holding images of their religious leaders and sharing beliefs that diverge from state-regulated Shia Islam. The arrested individuals, all Azerbaijani citizens:

Jalal Hajiyev

Ramil Ahmadov

Tural Veliyev

Ali Yasar Jafarov

Nijat Gahramanov

Rustam Gasimli

Fegan Rahimov

Kamil Qafarli

Taleh İmanov Ali Oglu

Elnur Mammadov

Neriman Shabanzade.

Within ten minutes, about a dozen police and military personnel surrounded the group, disrupted their peaceful assembly, and forcibly took them to Sabayil District Police Department No. 9, where they were detained. A bystander recorded the incident, and the video is now circulating on social media.

The detained members were charged with “resisting police” (Article 315 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code) and “disturbing public order” (Article 233 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code), charges often used against dissidents or those with unconventional beliefs in Azerbaijan.

Expressing religious beliefs is a fundamental right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet members of this movement face repression and are forced to conceal their faith or risk imprisonment.

Released on 22 July 2024, the detained members remain under investigation by the State Committee on Religious Associations. They were summoned for further questioning, during which interrogators threatened them with rape if they continued speaking about their religion. Authorities seemed particularly troubled by the media coverage and focused their investigation on those who filmed and posted the event online.

Following their release, two members, Rustam Gasimli and Neriman Shabanzade, returned to Fountain Square to peacefully distribute flyers about their faith. They were immediately arrested again after police confiscated their phones. Their activities and arrest were broadcast live on TikTok, but they became unreachable after their detention.

After 24 hours of enforced disappearance, Gasimli and Shabanzade reappeared at the Sabail District Court on 24 July, where they were sentenced to at least 30 days in prison for “hooliganism” (Article 510) and “disobedience to a police officer” (Article 535.1).

The lawyer’s group reported that both were severely beaten while in detention and described the court’s decision as an intimidation tactic. The “hooliganism” charges are seen as baseless, given the peaceful nature of their flyer distribution.

On 25 July, the remaining community members were summoned to the police station again. During questioning, they were threatened with the same fate as Gasimli and Shabanzade if they continued their missionary work. They were asked about their faith, its history in Azerbaijan, and the number of adherents. They were warned they could be prosecuted under Article 515 (Violation of the rules for the establishment and operation of religious organizations) if they did not cease their activities.

The investigation has now broadened to include all active members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light in Azerbaijan. Authorities have reportedly contacted the relatives of several members, including Anar Alakbarov, Afsana Ahmadova, Azmammadov Radiq and Ashur Badalov, asking about the whereabouts and activities of their family members, who were reported to be abroad. Officials stated that the inquiries were police requests but provided no further details.

Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, whose beliefs differ from mainstream Islam, have faced discrimination, violence, and oppression in Azerbaijan. Despite the country's constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, they are marginalized and persecuted for practicing their faith.

Since 2021, reports of persecution have escalated, coinciding with amendments to Azerbaijan's religion law, granting exclusive authority to government-approved religious centers to confer titles and mandating the suspension of activities for religious communities without a government-approved leader.

### **Azerbaijan's Constitutional Provisions Protecting Religious Freedom**

The constitution of Azerbaijan stipulates in

Article 47

- I. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought and speech.
- II. No one shall be forced to proclaim or to repudiate his/her thoughts and beliefs.

Article 48

Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience.

- II. Everyone has the right to freely determine his own approach to religion, to profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion, and to express and disseminate his beliefs concerning his approach to religion.

Article 18

I. Religion in the Republic of Azerbaijan is separate from the state. All religions are equal before the law.

Article 25

- III. (...) Restrictions of rights and freedoms on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, origin, beliefs, or political or social affiliation are prohibited.

### **Azerbaijan's Commitments to International Law**

Azerbaijan is a party to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which protects freedom of religion or belief.

The country joined the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2001. As a member of the CoE, Azerbaijan has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights which guarantees freedom of religion or belief and is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. Despite this commitment, Azerbaijan has repeatedly failed to respect the individual and collective rights to religious freedom.

In 2023, twelve cases related to religious freedom issues were lodged with the European Court of Human Rights while over 20 cases are still awaiting EctHR decisions. Since 2002, the ECtHR has already completed 63 cases from Azerbaijan submitted since 2004 related to violations of freedom of religion or belief and inter-related rights.

### **Recommendations**

We urge the Azerbaijani authorities

- To stop arresting and sentencing members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light for sharing their faith in the public space
- To abide by the provisions of Articles 18, 25, 47 and 48 of its Constitution
- To abide by its commitments to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights

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Human Rights Without Frontiers NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.