

ALI KARIMLI



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Ali Karimli (DOB: 28.04.1965) is an Azerbaijani citizen, lawyer, former State Secretary of Azerbaijan, former member of parliament, and long-standing opposition politician who has chaired Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası/Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (hereafter AXCP/PFPA) since the 2000s. He is one of the country's well-known opposition leaders and has remained politically active for decades through party leadership, public statements, interviews, protest activity, and social media criticism of the authorities.
2. Karimli was detained on 29 November 2025 in Baku after a raid and search of his home. He was charged under Article 278.1 of the Criminal Code with actions aimed at the violent seizure of state power and the forcible change of the constitutional order, and on 1 December 2025, the Sabail District Court ordered his pre-trial detention until 13 February 2026.¹
3. Karimli's case is politically motivated and the allegations against him lack credibility and are widely regarded as politically driven and part of a wider crackdown on civil society and independent media launched by the Azerbaijani authorities starting from 2022.²

Date of detention:

4. On 29.11.2025, Ali Karimli was detained by the State Security Service (SSS) after a raid and search of his apartment in Baku, and on 01.12.2025, pursuant to a decision of the Sabail District Court, a pre-trial detention measure was imposed on him until 13.02.2026

Legal accusations:

5. On 1 December 2025, following his detention on 29 November 2025, the investigating authorities, namely the SSS's Main Investigation Department, formally charged Ali Karimli with the following bogus accusation:
 - actions aimed at the violent seizure of state power and the forcible change of the constitutional order under Article 278.1 of the Criminal Code.
6. His case has been publicly discussed as part of the broader crackdown on AXCP/PFPA and formal opposition politics in Azerbaijan. The authorities have tried to insert Ali Karimli into the expanding case built around Ramiz Mehdiyev, the former head of the Presidential Administration, but that supposed connection is fabricated. The alleged link was promoted through pro-government media claims that Karimli had been drawn into the Mehdiyev investigation and that materials allegedly connecting Karimli to Mehdiyev were found during the search of his home.³ Karimli, however, rejected that narrative outright as nonsense and stressed that his political position had always been the direct opposite of Mehdiyev's.⁴

Legal status of prisoner:

7. Ali Karimli is a pre-trial detainee. On 1 December 2025, the Sabail District Court ordered his pre-trial detention until 13 February 2026. On 9 February 2026, his detention was extended by four months, and on 16 February 2026, the Baku Court of Appeal rejected his appeal against that extension.

Legal proceedings:

8. On 29 November 2025, Ali Karimli was detained by the SSS after a raid and search of his apartment in Baku. On 1 December 2025, the Sabail District Court imposed a pre-trial detention measure until 13 February 2026, with the detention period calculated from 29 November 2025. He has remained in custody since then.
9. The remand proceedings were conducted within the framework of a broader criminal investigation opened on 13 October 2025 against Ramiz Mehdiyev and others. According to the court order, Karimli was formally charged on 1 December 2025 under Article 278.1 of the Criminal Code. During the remand hearing, he denied guilt, stated that the accusations were baseless and politically motivated, and refused to comment further; his lawyers likewise argued that the charges were fabricated and political. The court nevertheless granted the investigator's motion and ordered his detention.

10. Crucially, the court never demonstrated that Ali Karimli could seriously alter, influence, or obstruct the investigation. No concrete evidence was identified at the hearing to show attempted witness contact, pressure, destruction of documents, tampering with materials, or any other specific obstructive conduct. Instead, the court treated those risks as self-evident and simply adopted the prosecution's formula that, because of Karimli's position and the nature of the accusation, he might influence others or impede the investigation. The result was a detention order grounded in speculation and institutional deference to the state's version, rather than in specific and substantiated facts.
11. After the initial remand, Karimli remained in pre-trial detention. On 9 February 2026, the detention measure was extended by four months. On 16 February 2026, the Baku Court of Appeal upheld that extension and dismissed the defence appeal. As of 7 April 2026, the case remains at the investigation stage and Karimli continues to be held in custody as a pre-trial detainee.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Ali Karimli should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether A. Karimli should be regarded as a political prisoner is based on the Resolution 1900 (2012) 'The Definition of Political Prisoner' of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the criteria established in the Resolution (paragraph 3).⁵ The legal proceedings against and the conviction of A. Karimli satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph. 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Ali's detention and imprisonment violate his fundamental rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association; as well as the right to a fair trial and to liberty and security.

(e) The political motives (ulterior motives) were sole and predominant in pursuing and conducting unfair criminal proceedings against him, which caused preliminary detention and imprisonment.

13. The European Court of Human Rights' jurisprudence on Article 18 of the ECHR, which prohibits restrictions on rights for improper purposes, reinforces this analysis. The following considerations based on the quadripartite test should be emphasised in this totality assessment in the general contextual evaluation of a distinct state of affairs (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, 2020, §§ 113-131):

- 1) The prisoner's public profile;
- 2) The sequence of the events;
- 3) The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out;
- 4) The authorities' conduct.

Ali Karimli's public profile:

14. The circumstances indicate that Ali Karimli is one of Azerbaijan's most prominent opposition politicians. He is a lawyer by training, served as State Secretary of Azerbaijan in 1993, was later elected to parliament, and has chaired AXCP/PFPA since the 2000s. Public reporting consistently describes him as the leader of the country's main opposition party. His political activity has remained continuous and highly visible through party leadership, public statements, interviews, rallies, and sustained criticism of the authorities. His detention, therefore, concerned a long-standing, nationally recognisable opposition figure whose role in Azerbaijani political life is both public and well established.
15. Karimli's prosecution is also consistent with a longer pattern of individualised and political pressure directed specifically at him and the party he leads. He has been subject to a travel ban since 2005, with a prolonged and apparently targeted internet disruption affecting him and his family since 2020⁶. Human rights reporting further shows that, in 2025, the authorities sharply escalated their campaign against AXCPPFPA, arbitrarily arresting and detaining dozens of party members, pursuing spurious administrative and criminal charges, and increasingly targeting the party's leadership.⁷ In that context, Karimli's arrest cannot plausibly be understood as politically neutral law enforcement. It is better understood as the latest step in a sustained effort to isolate one of Azerbaijan's most visible opposition leaders, weaken AXCP/PFPA as an organised political force, and deter open opposition activity more broadly.

The sequence of events:

16. Ali Karimli's arrest is part of a larger, coordinated pattern of repression in Azerbaijan, in which opposition-aligned individuals and government critics have been detained on a strikingly repetitive set of allegations, most commonly serious narcotics-related accusations framed as large quantities and/or intent to sell, as well as finance/tax-related crimes and crimes against the state and national security. This uniformity and the way charges and detention measures have been applied across multiple similar cases strongly suggest a state-driven strategy to criminalise dissenting political affiliation and criticism rather than a legitimate process aimed at individual wrongdoing. The relevant sequence of events should therefore be assessed synthetically, as a single wave of repression with a clear policy logic and continuity.
17. Already in 2022, a discernible pattern of repression was emerging through a series of arrests that disproportionately affected persons deported/returned from abroad (notably Germany), individuals perceived as affiliated with the PFPA/AXCP, Musavat and certain minority figures. This early hunt functioned as a clear precursor to, and warning sign of, the wider crackdown that would later expand across independent media, NGOs, and other segments of civil society.

18. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.⁸ In June 2023, protests against the gold mine in the village of Soyudlu, Gadabay, and their coverage by informally networked NGOs and critical media (including Toplum TV) accelerated the process of repression. After suppressing these protests, the government imposed a blockade on the village and blamed NGOs and the media for inciting the events.⁹
19. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained.¹⁰ In August 2023, pro-government media organised a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹¹ In September 2023, four activists were administratively detained for one month. Around the same time, arrests were carried out against Labor Desk (İşçi Masası) activists, who sought to establish the country's only alternative trade union organisation.¹²
20. The main follow-up campaign began in November 2023. First, the pro-government media published smear articles targeting almost all NGOs and media outlets. Later, at the end of November 2023, the AbzasMedia arrests began¹³. These arrests continued in early March 2024 with a police raid against the detainee's affiliated organisation and the arrest of several individuals represented in those institutions.
21. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained.¹⁴ In May 2024, Anar Mammadli, the head of Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies (EMDS), was arrested (he had also been arrested in the previous round of repression)¹⁵. These arrests demonstrate that a new wave of repression had already begun. The objective of this wave was to paralyse the activities of post-2014 informally networked NGOs and critical media. But it also expanded beyond NGOs and media into academia and peace advocacy: Iqbal Abilov¹⁶, a Talysh historian/ethnographer, was detained in July 2024 and later sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment in May 2025 on treason-related accusations and political scientist Bahruz Samadov¹⁷ was detained in August 2024 on treason charges similarly and later sentenced to a 15-year prison term. Both of their arrests are widely condemned as politically motivated.
22. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case¹⁸: Human Rights Watch reported that the investigation targeted the outlet and that its newsroom staff were held in pre-trial detention from December 2024, with subsequent arrests feeding into a consolidated trial that began in December 2025. Finally, repression widened to formal opposition politics in late 2025, when Ali Karimli¹⁹, the long-standing leader of the Popular Front Party, was detained (29 November 2025) and remanded into pre-trial custody, amid a broader escalation against the party documented by human rights monitors.
23. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)²⁰ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)²¹. Both laws were criticised by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for being restrictive. Nevertheless, they remain valid and enforceable. A similar process took place during the repression of 2013–2014: restrictive laws were first adopted, and arrests followed.

24. In this regard, the persons arrested in this process, including the detainee, are victims of the political repression of 2023–2025. The main objective of this campaign of political arrests is to dismantle the informal, networked NGOs and critical media that revived and assumed a new format in the post-2014 era. Political arrests in this context serve an instrumental purpose.

The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out:

25. The investigation and remand proceedings against Ali Karimli were conducted in a manner that indicates bad faith from the outset. He was detained after a raid on his home by the State Security Service, held incommunicado for two days, and then brought before the Sabail District Court in a closed hearing. From the beginning, the process was dominated by the state security apparatus rather than structured as a genuinely adversarial inquiry in which the defence could effectively test the allegations.

26. The prosecution narrative accepted by the court was broad, retrospective, and weakly substantiated. Instead of pointing to a concrete, recent, and independently verifiable act by Karimli that could plausibly justify a charge under Article 278.1, the authorities relied on a sweeping account linking him to the separate Ramiz Mehdiyev case, alleged foreign-linked financing, and political events dating back many years. Karimli’s lawyers argued that this construction was artificial, politically motivated, and internally incoherent, but the court did not seriously test those objections. It treated the state’s account as sufficiently credible for detention without demanding a more rigorous evidentiary basis.

27. The central defect in the remand decision is that the court did not demonstrate that Karimli posed any real, evidenced risk to the investigation. The order repeated standard assertions that he might influence participants in the proceedings, conceal or falsify evidence, evade the investigation, or endanger society. But it did not identify any concrete act, attempt, contact, threat, or other specific circumstance showing that Karimli had actually tried, or was realistically able, to obstruct the investigation. In other words, the court did not establish those risks through serious evidence presented at the hearing; it simply inferred them from the gravity of the accusation and from Karimli’s political position.

28. Taken together, the closed hearing, the two days of incommunicado detention, the court’s reliance on state-controlled materials, and its purely formulaic risk analysis show that the proceedings were used primarily to justify and maintain incarceration rather than to assess necessity on the basis of specific, substantiated facts. The remand decision, therefore, reflects judicial deference to the prosecution’s narrative, not an independent and critical examination of whether detention was truly warranted.

The authorities' conduct:

29. The relevant authorities failed to ensure even basic procedural safeguards and instead created a coercive environment around the case. Karimli was held incommunicado immediately after the raid on his home; the authorities did not provide prompt, transparent public information about his detention; and pro-government media circulated the prosecution narrative and the alleged Mehdiyev connection before any meaningful judicial examination had taken place. At the same time, the case unfolded in the context of a wider campaign against AXCP/PFPA, which human rights organisations described as an intensified crackdown on political opposition. In that wider context, the authorities' conduct in Karimli's case appears not neutral or safeguard-oriented, but openly repressive and politically instrumental.

Additional considerations:

30. Finally, international human rights observers such as Amnesty International²² and Human Rights Watch²³ have denounced the charges against A. Karimli as politically motivated.

CONCLUSION

31. The personal factors (Ali Karimli's public profile, absence of convincing evidence, and constant violation of procedural rights) and contextual factors (new wave of political repression) cumulatively indicate reasonable grounds to believe that Ali Karimli should be considered a remand political prisoner in light of Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

RECOMMENDATION

32. Based on this conclusion, Ali Karimli should be released unconditionally and immediately. Furthermore, he should be compensated restitutio in integrum.

- ¹ RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service, 'Azerbaijan Opposition Leader Ali Karimli Detained Amid Political Crackdown' (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 December 2025) <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-opposition-leader-karimli-detained-political-crackdown/33610071.html> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ² European Parliament, 'Resolution on the crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan, notably the case of Abzas Media' (2024) P9_TA(2024)0074 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0074_EN.html accessed 29 May 2025.
- ³ AzadliqRadiosu, 'Əli Kərimlinin saxlanması: Rusiyanın təsir dairəsini daraltmaq, yoxsa total təmizləmə?' (AzadliqRadiosu, 30 November 2025) <https://www.azadliq.org/a/eli-kerimli-ramiz-mehdiyev/33609289.html> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ⁴ AzadliqRadiosu, 'AŞPA məruzəçisi Əli Kərimlinin həbsindən dərin narahatlıq bildirir' (AzadliqRadiosu, 4 December 2025) <https://www.azadliq.org/a/eli-kerimlinin-hebsine-beynelxalq-reaksiyalar/33610148.html> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ⁵ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 'Resolution 1900 (2012): The definition of political prisoner' (3 October 2012) <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19150> accessed 29 May 2025.
- ⁶ Freedom House, 'Azerbaijan: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report' (Freedom House, 2024) <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2024> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ⁷ Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan Intensifies Crackdown on Political Opposition' (Human Rights Watch, 22 December 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/22/azerbaijan-intensifies-crackdown-on-political-opposition> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ⁸ Eurasianet, 'Prominent activist detained following U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijani official' <https://eurasianet.org/prominent-activist-detained-following-us-sanctions-on-azerbaijani-official> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁹ Reporters Without Borders, 'Police prevent coverage of protests about environmental scandal in Azerbaijan' <https://rsf.org/en/police-prevent-coverage-protests-about-environmental-scandal-azerbaijan> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan: Free Academic Facing Bogus Charges' <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/23/azerbaijan-free-academic-facing-bogus-charges> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹¹ Musavat, "No-Warçılarının dosyesi: onlar harada və necə yetişiblər" https://musavat.com/news/no-war-cilarin-dosyesi-onlar-harada-ve-nece-yetisibler_1001622.html accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹² Eurasianet, 'Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers' <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹³ Amnesty International, 'Azerbaijan: Seven journalists sentenced in latest shocking crackdown on free speech' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/azerbaijan-seven-journalists-sentenced-in-latest-shocking-crackdown-on-free-speech/> accessed 28 August 2025

- ¹⁴ Council of Europe, Safety Of Journalists — FOM Alert <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107640886> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁵ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Azerbaijan: authorities should release imprisoned human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/azerbaijan-authorities-should-release-imprisoned-human-rights-defenders-journalists-and-civil-society-activists> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁶ Scholars at Risk, ‘Release academic Igbal Abilov, wrongfully imprisoned for one year’ (22 July 2025) <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2025/07/release-academic-igbal-abilov-wrongfully-imprisoned-for-one-year/> accessed 7 January 2026
- ¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘Azerbaijan: Escalating Crackdown on Critics’ (30 August 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/30/azerbaijan-escalating-crackdown-critics> accessed 7 January 2026.
- ¹⁸ Arzu Geybullayeva, ‘Another Courageous Journalist Jailed in Azerbaijan’ (Human Rights Watch, 16 May 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/16/another-courageous-journalist-jailed-azerbaijan> accessed 7 January 2026.
- ¹⁹ Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Arrest of opposition leader is further evidence of consolidation of authoritarian practices’ (1 December 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/azerbaijan-arrest-of-opposition-leader-is-further-evidence-of-consolidation-of-authoritarian-practices/> accessed 7 January 2026.
- ²⁰ Venice Commission. ‘Opinion on On The Law On Media in Azerbaijan.’ Council of Europe, Opinion No. 1078/2022, 2022, available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2022\)009-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2022)009-e)
- ²¹ Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR. Joint Opinion On The Law On Political Parties, 2023 available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/4/543922.pdf>
- ²² Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Arrest of Opposition Leader Is Further Evidence of Consolidation of Authoritarian Practices’ (1 December 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/azerbaijan-arrest-of-opposition-leader-is-further-evidence-of-consolidation-of-authoritarian-practices/> accessed 7 April 2026.
- ²³ Human Rights Watch, ‘Azerbaijan Intensifies Crackdown on Political Opposition’ (22 December 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/22/azerbaijan-intensifies-crackdown-on-political-opposition> accessed 7 April 2026.

