

ANAR ABDULLA



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Anar Abdulla (Abdullayev) (DOB: 28 October 1989) is an Azerbaijani citizen and a freelance journalist and civil society activist. His activism dates to 2012 through the NIDA civic movement, and from 2018 he was associated with the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS), contributing to “gozetcı.az” and other media outlets.
2. A. Abdulla had already faced pressure before the present proceedings. He was detained while covering the July 2020 (pro-army rally) events in Baku, and in October 2021 he received 15 days’ administrative detention after a case linked, according to him, to social media comments critical of the authorities. An independent legal analysis of that 2021 case further described him as a NIDA member and reporter and noted earlier administrative arrest and repeated detentions while filming rallies.¹
3. In the present case, Abdulla was brought into the criminal proceedings against Anar Mammadli on 8 April 2025 and placed under police supervision. By the time of the Baku Assize Court proceedings, he was being tried under Criminal Code Articles 192.3.2, 193-1.3.1, 193-1.3.2, 206.4, 213.2.1, 320.1 and 320.2. The case materials also show that on 11 July 2025 he was sentenced to administrative detention under Articles 510 and 535.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, and that on 4 August 2025 the court replaced police supervision with custodial detention.

4. His case has been widely presented in independent Azerbaijani and international reporting as politically motivated and as part of the broader crackdown on independent journalists, election-monitoring actors and civil society in Azerbaijan. His July 2025 detention is part of a pattern of politically motivated arrests, and the allegations against A. Abdulla 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.

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Date of detention:

5. In the criminal case against him, Anar Abdulla was not initially detained: first, he was summoned by the investigative authorities, brought into the case against Anar Mammadli, and placed under police supervision as a preventive measure. The first custodial step came later: on 11 July 2025 he was detained in separate administrative proceedings and sentenced the same day to 30 days' administrative detention under Articles 510 and 535.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. His current detention in the criminal case dates from 4 August 2025, when the Baku Assize Court replaced police supervision with pre-trial detention and he was taken into custody in the courtroom.

Legal accusations:

6. On 8 April 2025, after being summoned to the investigative authorities, Anar Abdulla was formally charged in the criminal case linked to Anar Mammadli. According to the case materials, he is being prosecuted under Articles 192.3.2, 193-1.3.1, 193-1.3.2, 206.4, 213.2.1, 320.1 and 320.2 of the Criminal Code:

- illegal entrepreneurship, allegedly committed with the purpose of obtaining a particularly large amount of income, under Article 192.3.2 of the Criminal Code;
- legalization (laundering) of funds or other property obtained through crime, allegedly committed by an organized group or criminal association and in a significant amount, under Articles 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 of the Criminal Code;
- smuggling, allegedly committed by an organized group, under Article 206.4 of the Criminal Code;
- evasion of taxes, unemployment insurance, compulsory health insurance and compulsory state social insurance contributions, allegedly committed by an organized group, under Article 213.2.1 of the Criminal Code;
- forgery or illegal preparation of certificates or other official documents granting rights or releasing from obligations, as well as forged state awards, seals, stamps and letterheads, for the purpose of use or sale, under Article 320.1 of the Criminal Code;
- use of knowingly forged official documents of the kind covered by Article 320.1, under Article 320.2 of the Criminal Code.

Legal status of the remand prisoner:

7. Anar Abdulla is a remand prisoner or detainee. He is an unconvicted pre-trial detainee (remand prisoner) currently being tried before the Baku Assize Court together with Anar Mammadli. On 22 September 2025, the court refused to replace his detention with house arrest. The trial is still ongoing, with further hearings continuing, so his present status remains that of an accused person in custody pending judgment.

Legal proceedings:

8. On 8 April 2025, Anar Abdulla was summoned to the Baku Main Police Department, formally charged in the criminal case brought against Anar Mammadli, and placed under police supervision as a preventive measure requiring him to report regularly to the police. The trial before the Baku Assize Court began on 26 May 2025: the court clarified the defendants' personal details, heard defense motions including Abdulla's request that the case be dismissed, refused those motions, and adjourned the preparatory hearing until 2 June 2025.

9. The proceedings then moved into the trial phase. On 7 July 2025 the Baku Assize Court read part of the indictment in the case against Mammadli and Abdulla, and that the next hearing, initially fixed for 28 July 2025, was pushed to 4 August 2025 because Abdulla was not brought from the detention facility. In parallel, on 11 July 2025 the Binagadi District Court found him guilty under Articles 510 and 535.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences and imposed 30 days' administrative detention beginning from that date; on 22 July 2025 the Baku Court of Appeal rejected the defense appeal and upheld the administrative liability finding.

10. During the hearing of 28 July 2025, the prosecutor applied to replace the earlier preventive measure of police supervision with custodial detention. In its decision of 4 August 2025, the Baku Assize Court granted that request. The court relied on three central elements: the seriousness of the charges; the fact that Abdulla had meanwhile been subjected to administrative detention under Articles 510 and 535.1; and police letters asserting that he had breached the conditions of police supervision by failing to report and register his attendance with the police. On that basis, the court held that the existing measure should be replaced and ordered that he be arrested immediately in the courtroom.

11. The defense consistently disputed both the factual basis and the necessity of custody. In the 4 August 2025 proceedings, counsel argued that Abdulla had not breached police supervision, that there was no proof of any proper summons or deliberate evasion, that he had not absconded from the court process, and that he was caring for his first-degree disabled mother, which had already been taken into account when the non-custodial preventive measure was initially chosen. Later, on 22 September 2025, the defense asked the court to replace detention with house arrest, stressing that Abdulla had in fact reported to the Narimanov District Police Department, had no previous convictions, had significant family and health-related grounds, and that even the investigation had not shown that he had committed any crime. The court rejected that request, holding that the grounds for detention had not disappeared, that the witnesses had not yet been examined, and that release to house arrest would create risks of unlawful influence on participants and obstruction of the normal course of the trial.

12. The proceedings have not resulted in any conviction or final judgment yet. His legal status is therefore that of an accused person in ongoing criminal proceedings, held in pre-trial detention.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Anar Abdulla should be regarded as a political prisoner:

13. Assessment of whether A. Abdulla 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)³. The legal proceedings against and conviction of A. Abdulla satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph. 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Anar’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.

14. 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 quadripartite test should be emphasized 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.

Anar Abdulla’s public profile:

15. Anar Abdulla is a journalist and civic activist with a visible opposition-leaning/government-critical public profile, rather than an ordinary criminal defendant with no prior public footprint. The case file itself records the defense position that he is a well-known journalist and that the July 2025 administrative proceedings against him were connected with his activities, not genuine public-order misconduct. He is a freelance journalist and civil society activist whose activism dates back to 2012, when he joined the NIDA civic movement, and states that from 2018 he worked with the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS) and contributed to gozetcı.az and other outlets. He had already come to the attention of the authorities before the present prosecution: he was detained while covering the July 2020 (pro-army rally) Baku events, later sentenced to 15 days’ administrative detention in October 2021 after a Facebook post critical of the authorities, and in September 2024 was summoned for questioning in connection with the Anar Mammadli case.

16. Read in context, Abdulla's present prosecution appears consistent with the broader pattern in Azerbaijan whereby independent journalists, NIDA-linked activists, election-monitoring actors and other civil-society figures are recast as ordinary offenders through public-order or financial-crime allegations. His profile is significant here: he was publicly identified as a NIDA activist as early as 2016; by 2021 his arrest was already being publicly treated as punishment for online criticism; and by 2025 he was charged in the same case as Anar Mammadli, the head of EMDS, amid what multiple public sources describe as a wider crackdown on civil society organizations. The progression is therefore notable: a journalist/activist previously detained while reporting and criticized for social-media speech was first questioned in the Mammadli investigation and then converted into a criminal defendant under a cluster of serious economic and document-related charges. Even though Abdulla is not presented in the materials as a major party leader, the record supports the inference that visible civic engagement, election-monitoring links, oppositional youth activism and prior critical expression were sufficient to place him within a vulnerable category of persons exposed to retaliatory prosecution, with an evident chilling effect on similarly situated journalists and activists.

The sequence of events:

17. Anar Abdulla'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 quantity 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 suggests a state-driven strategy to criminalize 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.
18. 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 PFFA/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.
19. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.⁴ 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.⁵

20. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained.⁶ In August 2023, pro-government media organized a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh⁷. 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 organization.⁸
21. 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 began⁹. These arrests continued in early March 2024 with a police raid against the detainee's affiliated organization and the arrest of several individuals represented in those institutions.
22. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained.¹⁰ 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)¹¹. These arrests demonstrate that a new wave of repression had already begun. The objective of this wave was to paralyze the activities of post-2014 informally networked NGOs and critical media. But it also expanded beyond NGOs and media into academia and peace advocacy: Igbal Abilov¹², 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 Samadov¹³ was detained in August 2024 on treason charges similarly and later sentenced to a 15 years' prison term. Both of their arrests are widely condemned as politically motivated.
23. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case:¹⁴ 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 Karimli¹⁵, 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.
24. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)¹⁶ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)¹⁷. Both laws were criticized 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.
25. 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:

26. The handling of Anar Abdulla's case discloses a coercive and prosecution-oriented sequence. The uploaded materials do not contain the full investigative dossier or any final merits judgment on the principal criminal charges; however, they do show how the authorities moved from police supervision in April 2025, to administrative detention in July 2025, and then to pre-trial detention in August 2025, with each stage resting heavily on police-generated allegations and official correspondence. Rather than reflecting progressively tested evidence, the process appears to have been built through mutually reinforcing state documents that were then judicially endorsed with limited adversarial scrutiny.
27. The 11 July 2025 administrative proceedings were the critical hinge in that progression. The first-instance court relied on the statement of the police officer who drew up the protocol, the officer's report, and the administrative-offence protocol itself. Abdulla, by contrast, stated that three masked police officers seized him near a bus stop, handcuffed him, and forced him into a black vehicle, and that the officer testifying in court was not among the officers who had detained him. Defense lawyer argued that the protocol was baseless and that the case could not properly be determined on the word of a single police officer. Even so, the court treated the protocol as well-founded and the accusation as fully proven; on appeal, the court not only upheld that outcome, but characterized Abdulla's denial as an attempt to evade liability. The police body that had drafted the protocol did not attend the appellate hearing, yet the court proceeded without it. These features point to a narrow, police-centered evidentiary approach rather than a genuinely searching judicial assessment.
28. That administrative file was then used as a platform for criminal-case detention. On 28 July 2025, the prosecutor asked the Baku Assize Court to replace police supervision with detention, relying on the seriousness of the charges, the alleged breach of supervision rules, and the July administrative offences. In its 4 August 2025 decision, the court accepted that request on the basis of the Binagadi administrative judgment and internal police correspondence stating that Abdulla had failed to report to the Narimanov District Police Department and register his attendance. The defense answered that there had been no proper formal summons, no proof of deliberate evasion, no flight from the proceedings, and that Abdulla was caring for his first-degree disabled mother, precisely the circumstance that had earlier justified a non-custodial measure. The court nevertheless accepted the police letters at face value, ordered his immediate arrest in the courtroom, and recorded that no appeal lay against that decision. This use of internal police communications as decisive detention material, without meaningful adversarial testing, raises serious fairness concerns.

29. The later handling of detention confirms the same pattern of abstract, state-centered reasoning. When the defense sought house arrest on 22 September 2025, it argued that Abdulla had in fact gone to the Narimanov police department and registered his attendance, that he had no prior convictions, that his mother had first-degree disability, that he himself had documented cardiac-health problems, and even as the defense submission was recorded by the court, that the investigative body had stated he had not committed any crime. The court nevertheless refused to replace detention, relying on the alleged earlier breach of police supervision, the gravity of the accusations, the fact that witnesses had not yet been examined, and generic risks of unlawful influence and obstruction. This was formulaic reasoning: the court did not seriously engage with whether house arrest could manage those risks, nor did it meaningfully test the defense account that the supposed breach had not occurred.
30. Taken together, the available materials support the conclusion that the proceedings were not conducted in a genuinely balanced or safeguard-driven manner. The decisive steps were all driven by official records: a police-authored administrative report and protocol, a police-authored narrative of breach of supervision, and court decisions that repeatedly accepted those official assertions while discounting defense objections as unsupported. Abdulla's July administrative arrest was politically motivated, and his August courtroom arrest was part of a wider politically motivated case against legitimate civic activity. More broadly, there is a recurring pattern in which administrative charges such as hooliganism and disobeying police are used against critics, and the legal system is employed as a tool of political retaliation. That wider context does not, by itself, prove fabrication in Abdulla's individual case; but it materially strengthens the inference that the investigation and trial were structured to secure control and incarceration in a politically sensitive prosecution, rather than to establish the facts through genuinely adversarial adjudication.

The authorities' conduct:

31. The relevant authorities failed to ensure effective procedural safeguards at several stages. In the administrative proceedings, the courts accepted a thin police evidentiary package, proceeded on appeal despite the absence of the police authority that had drafted the protocol, and treated Abdulla's denial as evasion rather than a defense requiring closer scrutiny. In the criminal proceedings, the court converted police supervision into detention on the basis of internal police correspondence and made that custody decision non-appealable; it then rejected house arrest through generalized risk reasoning despite concrete submissions on compliance, health, and family dependency. Public monitoring groups and civil-society organizations have correspondingly presented the case as part of the broader repression of journalists, election-monitoring actors, and activists in Azerbaijan. In these circumstances, the authorities' conduct appears directed less toward ensuring fairness and equality of arms than toward maintaining coercive leverage over a defendant in a politically charged case.

Additional considerations:

32. Finally, international human rights observers have denounced the charges against A. Abdulla as politically motivated.

CONCLUSION

33. The personal factors (Anar Abdulla'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 Anar Abdulla should be considered a political prisoner in light of Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

RECOMMENDATION

34. Based on this conclusion, Anar Abdulla should be released unconditionally and immediately. Furthermore, he should be compensated restitutio in integrum.

¹ Tapdıq Fərhadoglu, ‘Bakıdakı insident zamanı bir neçə jurnalistin təzyiqa məruz qaldığı və saxlanıldığı bildirilir’ (Amerikanın Səsi, 15 July 2020) <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/amp/bak%C4%B1dak%C4%B1-insident-zaman%C4%B1-bir-ne%C3%A7%C9%99-jurnalistin-t%C9%99zyiq%C9%99-m%C9%99ruz-qald%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1-v%C9%99-saxlan%C4%B1ld%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1-bildirilir/5503653.html> accessed 14 March 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 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.

⁴ 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

⁵ 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

⁶ 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

⁷ Musavat, “No-Warçıların 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

⁸ Eurasianet, Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025

⁹ 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

¹⁰ Council of Europe, Safety Of Journalists — FOM Alert <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107640886> accessed 28 August 2025

¹¹ 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

¹² 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

