

Khadija Ismayilova: Don't let Azerbaijan use political prisoners as props

By Khadija Ismayilova, The Washington Post

Khadija Ismayilova is an investigative journalist and contributor to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service. She has been imprisoned in Azerbaijan since December 2014.

BAKU. April 1, 2016: I am writing this letter from jail in Baku, Azerbaijan, where I'm serving a 7½ -year sentence for a crime I never committed.

I am a journalist and my only "crime" was to investigate high-level corruption within the government and family of Azeri President Ilham Aliyev . Aliyev inherited power from his father in 2003 and changed the constitution in 2009 so he could stay in power indefinitely. He has been called an enemy of the press by international watchdogs, while abusing other fundamental freedoms and violating people's right to truth and decency. Aliyev is in Washington this week to attend the Nuclear Security Summit that began Thursday. To get an invitation to this event from President Obama, he had to pardon several political prisoners. Although they have been released from jail, they remain confined within the country, barred from leaving, and justice has not been restored.

This is a very costly invitation for Aliyev, who for years refused to accept international pressure or criticism on this issue. His response was, always, that Azerbaijan doesn't have political prisoners. In December, Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.) introduced the Azerbaijan Democracy Act to recognize Azerbaijan's violations of human rights and freedoms and to hold individual officials accountable. It must pass.

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But why were some of the political prisoners suddenly set free? What has changed?

Aliyev needed these prisoners so that in exchange for their release, he could shake hands with Obama or get a loan from the World Bank to finance his failing currency and crippled economy after the sudden fall of oil prices.

Aliyev is shamelessly trying to use political prisoners as bargaining chips to advance his foreign policy agenda. And they are supposed to be happy that they were freed.

I am happy — very happy — that some political prisoners have been released. But their fights, and mine, are not over. I am not a toy to be exchanged for diplomatic gain by Baku or Washington so that officials can continue to pretend that it is business as usual. We are hostages of the regime, whether we are inside or outside of prison. Freedom

is my universal and constitutional right, and Aliyev failed to protect it as the head of state. I am not going to ask to be pardoned for a crime I never committed. I am free even now, in jail, and my freedom is not for sale.

So President Obama, please ask President Aliyev to stop muzzling the independent media and civil society. Ask him to explain the billions of petrodollars wasted on white-elephant projects for the benefit of a few. Ask him when he is going to hold free and fair elections. Ask him when he is going to let all the political prisoners go free. Ask him when fundamental freedoms can become a right, in practice — not a gift that he can give or take away. I asked these questions, and I ended up in jail.

These are important questions. They must not go unanswered. And we will fight until justice is fully served. -0-