

Azeri Police Detain 150 at 2 Protests

March 13, 2011



An opposition activist being detained Saturday at a Baku rally, where the opposition said 100 were detained. **Orhan Orhanov**

BAKU, Azerbaijan — Azeri security forces have detained about 150 people in Baku at two separate rallies, including one by anti-government activists who were inspired by the Arab uprisings to use social media to call for the street protest.

Police said 43 people were detained at the social media-organized protest Friday near the Oil Academy, a major university in central Baku. On Saturday, about 100 supporters of the opposition Musavat Party were detained as they protested the ruling party, Musavat's leader said.

The Friday rally, inspired by small groups of young people shouting anti-government rhetoric, was unrelated to the Musavat action, but the party members said they supported it.

Azerbaijan, an energy supplier to Europe and a transit route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, has been ruled by one family for nearly two decades since Soviet veteran Heidar Aliyev came to power in 1993. He was succeeded by his son Ilham in 2003.

On Friday, a reporter saw riot troops and plainclothes police seize young activists one by one and push them into buses near the Oil Academy.

"Today 43 people were arrested, 23 of which were released after questioning," the Interior Ministry said in a statement, adding that others faced charges of violating public order and defying police.

One of the opposition activists, speaking on condition of anonymity, said by telephone that some of the activists were wearing red T-shirts, the main color of their protest.

Activists inspired by the overthrow of autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt by pro-democracy protests vowed to stage more demonstrations as they were being taken away by police outside the Oil Academy.

"We will try to hold other protests in the future," one young man told reporters before police bundled him into a bus.

The European Union swiftly condemned the detentions. The EU delegation in Baku said in a statement that it "encouraged Azerbaijan to maintain an open dialogue with members of civil society organizations expressing views and opinions in a peaceful manner ... [and] to ensure due process in all recent cases of arrest of youth activists."

Six other people have been detained on various charges in the Caspian Sea nation since early February, when the "Great People's Day" campaign was launched on Facebook and Twitter.

The opposition activists sent out more than 35,000 invitations for people to support the anti-government group on Facebook and more than 3,000 clicked the "I'm attending" button to support the Friday action.

Human Rights Watch called on the authorities to immediately release all the detained.

On Saturday, some 200 members of Musavat gathered at Fountains Square in central Baku to stage a rally, which the party said had been banned by the authorities because it would disrupt traffic. It was the party's first street protest after parliamentary elections in November when opposition parties failed to win a single seat.

Police said about 150 people took part in the protest and 20 demonstrators face prosecution.

The opposition vowed to continue anti-government rallies.

"I believe the rally was a success. We will continue to stage protests against the authorities as we want to achieve radical changes in the country," Musavat leader Isa Gambar said, adding that the police detained about 100 people.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/13/azeri-police-detain-150-at-2-protests-a5556>