

Freed Azeri Editor to Return to Work

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BAKU, Azerbaijan — An Azeri editor who rights groups say was jailed on political grounds plans to reopen his opposition newspaper following a presidential pardon.

Eynulla Fattulayev, jailed in 2007 on charges including incitement of hatred, terrorism and tax evasion, said human rights abuses had worsened in Azerbaijan and he hoped for a guarantee that he would not be jailed for his writings again.

Fattulayev was one of 70 prisoners who were freed or had their sentences reduced by President Ilham Aliyev last month.

"Unconditionally the situation regarding human rights and civil society has grown significantly worse," said Fattulayev, who served about half of his 8 1/2-year sentence.

"The country has gradually turned into a mono-party political system," he said, citing opposition charges that the government tramples on freedoms of assembly and expression.

The government says Azerbaijan enjoys full freedom of speech and a thriving opposition press.

Human rights groups say journalists face pressure to limit criticism of Aliyev and his government.

These groups say Fattulayev, 34, was jailed on trumped up charges intended to force the closure of his opposition newspaper, Real Azerbaijan. He was released after a campaign by supporters on messaging web site Twitter demanding his release.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled last year that Fattulayev's imprisonment was illegal and that Baku was obliged to pay him 25,000 euros (\$35,710) in compensation. Azerbaijan said at the time that the decision was nonbinding.

Fattulayev's newspaper had drawn attention before his arrest because of its open criticism of the government.

"I can stay in Azerbaijan and restart my publication, which in its own time was very popular ... not only in Azerbaijan but in the entire South Caucasus," he said in an interview.

"But I hope there will be some kind of guarantee" for my safety and professional activities, he said, "because if practicing journalism means ending up under arrest in prison, I don't have the strength for it."

A leading political activist was sentenced to two years in prison last month in another case that drew criticism against Aliyev.

Opposition protests inspired by the upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa have been snuffed out this year in Azerbaijan, which is courted by both the West and Russia for its hydrocarbon reserves. More than 100 protesters were detained in March and April during the protests.

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