

Opposition Newspaper Editor Jailed in Azerbaijan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BAKU — Azerbaijan jailed the editor of an independent newspaper for nine years on Tuesday, a court spokesman said, in a case that government critics say highlights a crackdown on civil rights in the oil-rich country.

Azerbaijan is governed by strongman leader Ilham Aliyev, whose rule is often lambasted by international rights organizations for curbing public dissent and freedom of speech.

Avaz Zeynally, editor of the Khural daily, was arrested in October 2011 and charged with extortion after a ruling party lawmaker told prosecutors he had demanded a bribe from her. The lawmaker was later charged with fraud herself.

Zeynally denies the charges and says the case is a reprisal by the government for a story criticizing senior officials.

After a judge read out the verdict, a crowd of his supporters shouted "Freedom!" outside the courthouse.

The case is not the first against the newspaper's staff.

One of its journalists, Aidyn Janiyev, was sentenced to three years in jail in November 2011 on hooliganism charges. His arrest came shortly after he penned a story critical of a Muslim religious leader with close ties to Aliyev's government.

Khural has been shut since police seized its computers in a 2011 raid on its offices linked to a defamation suit filed by two presidential administration officials over a story alleging corruption in Aliyev's government.

Azerbaijan is an energy supplier to Europe and a transit route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a role that rights groups say has cushioned the country from Western criticism of its democracy record.

Aliyev's government says Azerbaijan, a country of 9 million people, enjoys full freedom of speech and a thriving opposition press.

Janiyev was among 87 people pardoned in a New Year amnesty seen by rights activists as a move to curry favor with the West.

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