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AZERBAIJAN: Election crackdown on independent Muslim leaders

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Amid the widespread violence in the wake of the 15 October presidential elections, police swooped on the Juma Mosque in the capital Baku during Friday prayers on 17 October and tried to arrest the imam Ilgar Ibragimoglu and one of his close colleagues Azer Ramizoglu. "They wanted to arrest me and radicalise the believers," Ibragimoglu told Forum 18 News Service from the Norwegian embassy in Baku, where he has taken refuge. He said he was "very worried" about Ramizoglu, who has not been seen since 17 October. "I don't know if he is in hiding or if he has been detained by the authorities." The two - both supporters of failed presidential candidate Isa Gambar - are leading members of religious freedom group Devamm, which has long been denied official registration, and the Islam-Ittihad society, whose registration was stripped from it by a Baku court in August. "Ibragimoglu will be a guest of the Royal Norwegian embassy until the matter is resolved," an embassy official told Forum 18.

From his refuge in the Norwegian embassy in the capital Baku, to which he had to flee to avoid arrest in the government's post-election crackdown, the imam of one of the city's oldest mosques has expressed concern about the fate of his colleague. "I'm very worried about Azer Ramizoglu," Ilgar Ibragimoglu, imam of the Juma mosque in Baku's old city, told Forum 18 News Service from the embassy on 20 October. "He has not been seen since last Friday [17 October]. I don't know if he is in hiding or if he has been detained by the authorities." Ibragimoglu and Ramizoglu, leading members of several independent Muslim groups and religious freedom organisations, have faced government opposition to their activity which only increased when they came out in support of opposition candidate Isa Gambar in the presidential elections held on 15 October. "Ibragimoglu will be a guest of the Royal Norwegian embassy until the matter is resolved," an embassy official told Forum 18 on 20 October. "Intensive negotiations are now underway at different levels."

Forum 18 was unable to find out whether Ramizoglu has been arrested or why the police raided Friday prayers at the Juma Mosque. The duty officer at the Interior Ministry in Baku, who refused to give his name, said they had "no information" about Ramizoglu or the raid on the mosque and put the phone down. Officers of the Sabail district police gave contradictory answers. One, who declined to give his name, categorically denied to Forum 18 that Ramizoglu had been detained, but refused to discuss the raid and put the phone down. Others refused to clarify his assertion.

Ramizoglu is leader of Devamm (Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion) and chairman of the Islam-Ittihad Society, which works for inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. As well as being imam of the Juma Mosque, Ibragimoglu is a board member of the Islam-Ittihad Society, leading coordinator of Devamm and Secretary General of the Azerbaijani Chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). The Justice Ministry has consistently refused to register both Devamm and the Azerbaijani IRLA chapter (see F18News 25 June 2003), and went to court to strip the Islam-Ittihad Society of its registration, accusing it of supporting Wahhabism (in the strict sense, the branch of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia) and the international terrorist group Al-Qaida. The Sabail district court ruled on 28 August in favour of the justice ministry.

In the early afternoon of 17 October, a few minutes before Friday prayers were due to begin, officers of the 9th police station of the city's Sabail district arrived at the Juma Mosque, apparently to arrest Ramizoglu and Ibragimoglu. "They wanted to arrest me and radicalise the believers," Ibragimoglu told Forum 18. Unable to seize the two because of protests from worshippers, the police took instead two other men, Azad Narimanoglu and Najaf Allahverdiyev, both Devamm coordinators and members of the IRLA Chapter. Other officers remained to try to arrest Ramizoglu and Ibragimoglu.

After Devamm appealed to the local offices of the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the OSCE's election monitoring group, the Norwegian embassy and other diplomatic missions, Norwegian ambassador Steinar Gil, Council of Europe representative Inkeri Aarnio-Lwoff and other representatives hurried to the mosque. "The representatives of the international diplomatic missions, while speaking to the police staff, stated that they were aware of the situation and that the latter should not act against the law," Devamm reported on 19 October. "At the same time the diplomats said to Devamm's press secretary that in case of the arrest attempt they could come to the embassy of Norway."

In his address at the mosque, Ibragimoglu called on believers not to respond to government "provocations" and to act strictly within the framework of the Constitution and international laws. "I told the believers not to engage in violence and to pray in the mosque," Ibragimoglu told Forum 18. After finishing his address at about 3 pm, the international representatives surrounded Ibragimoglu and

accompanied him to the nearby Norwegian embassy. Soon afterwards, Ibragimoglu told Forum 18, international representatives went to the Interior Ministry to urge ministry officials not to take any illegal action against Devamm's leaders. But they were unsuccessful in getting guarantees of their safety.

Police meanwhile questioned Narimanoglu and Allahverdiyev about the participation of Devamm and the Islam-Ittihad Society in the election coalition Bizim Azerbaijan (Our Azerbaijan), which backed Gambar. Although the two were soon released, Devamm fears they could be arrested again.

Ibragimoglu told Forum 18 that the authorities have made no attempt to close down the Juma mosque, despite the police swoop on Friday prayers, and regular prayers are continuing, led by his colleagues. He said the mosque gained registration with the Justice Ministry as an independent religious organisation in 1993, registration which remains valid. It has applied for re-registration with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, but has not so far received it. "It's their problem when they will register us," Ibragimoglu told Forum 18.

He stressed that the mosque is not subject to the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Caucasian Muslims, despite state insistence that independent mosques cannot function legally. Ibragimoglu vehemently denied the justice ministry's allegations against Islam-Ittihad and insisted that it will challenge the court ruling even as far as the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg if necessary. "It is fashionable for the government to accuse any democrats they don't like of links with Wahhabis and Al-Qaida," he told Forum 18. "But these accusations are absurd."

Because of their involvement with the opposition during the election campaign, Devamm and Islam-Ittihad have faced what human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov calls "harassment" from various state agencies. On 11 October, just days before the election, two government supported television channels, Lider TV and Space TV, broadcast items about Islam-Ittihad in their evening news bulletins that society members regard as slanderous. Further attacks appeared in government-supporting newspapers on 13 October, accusing it of having its own armed gangs, illegally storing weapons in the Juma mosque and receiving financial support from Wahhabis.

"I know Devamm as active supporters of the religious freedom of all believers of Azerbaijan," Zeynalov, the head of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 from Baku on 17 October. "In its newsletter, it propagates tolerance, morality and charitable activities."

Zeynalov points out that before Devamm made any comments about the presidential election, the head of the Spiritual Administration of Caucasian Muslims, Allahshukur Pashazade, had called on voters to back Ilham Aliev, son of the then incumbent president Heidar Aliev and, according to contested official figures, the outright winner in the poll. "That was considered by state officials normally. But the similar, and less aggressive actions of believers of the smallest religious community - which for the last 10 years has refused to subordinate itself to Pashazade - was described as foreign espionage and almost a coup d'etat," he reported.

"With all my opposition to the idea of the politicisation of believers, I see the obvious double standards of the authorities," Zeynalov warns, "and, moreover, the establishment of the institution of a new state religion."

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