

29 July 2025

## AZERBAIJAN: Large fines for religious meeting

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

*Officers were watching a home in Nakhichevan where Christians were meeting. About 20 officers raided a Sunday worship meeting in April. They held three visitors from Baku for two days without food. Police brought cases against them and two local people. Nakhichevan City Court fined the five up to three months' average wage each on 19 June. The five will struggle to pay the large fines, an individual familiar with the cases said. Also fined and apparently deported were members of a Korean family who allowed the meetings in their home.*

A court in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan handed large fines on 19 June to three visitors from the registered Vineyard Christian Church in Baku and two local people for meeting for worship without state permission. The fines represent up to three months' average wage each. About 20 officers of the police and possibly the State Security Service secret police raided a meeting for Sunday worship in a home in April. The visitors were then detained with no food for two days and questioned.

The court also fined members of a Korean family who allowed the meetings in their home. It appears they were fined and then deported.

The Court held multiple hearings in the cases. This meant that the three from Baku had to make repeated visits to Nakhichevan, which is accessible from Baku only by air. "This is expensive and flight tickets are difficult to find," an individual who knows the situation told Forum 18. "When they reached the court each time they found the hearing had been postponed" (see below).

The three visitors from Baku and the two local residents chose not to appeal against the fines. "As the leader of the group acknowledged responsibility for the books in the Koreans' home, the court decisions were in line with the law," the individual familiar with the cases told Forum 18. Nevertheless, the individual recognised that the fines are so large that the five will struggle to be able to pay them (see below).

In July, court bailiffs started calling the two people from Nakhichevan, demanding that they pay the large fines.

The telephone at Nakhichevan City Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called. An official from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Nakhichevan answered the phone but said nothing before putting it down. Subsequent calls went unanswered. The telephone at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku went unanswered (see below).

Officials from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku or its branch in Nakhichevan do not allow non-Muslim communities to gain the compulsory state registration in Nakhichevan, an exclave wedged between Iran, Turkey and Armenia. This means that anything any non-Muslim communities do in Nakhichevan is illegal and punishable (see below).

In summer 2025, officials warned a Christian in a town away from Baku to halt holding meetings for worship or risk being fired from work. The state assigned a man who had previously attended some of these meetings to keep the individual under surveillance (see below).

All mosques must be subject to the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board, and the State Committee names and removes imams. Mosques usually have security cameras both inside the prayer hall facing worshippers and surrounding the mosque. It remains unclear who has access to footage from the cameras (see below).

The State Committee routinely denies registration to new non-Muslim communities. The last community it granted registration to was the Baku community of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) in July 2024. This was the first new non-Muslim community the State Committee had registered since December 2020 (see below).

Several non-Muslim communities are known to be awaiting State Committee registration, one for three years. "One community keeps asking the State Committee what progress there is," an individual familiar with the application told Forum 18. "We're considering it," officials tell the community. "But while we're considering it, you're not allowed to hold meetings. If you do, the

police will come and you will be fined" (see below).

### Compulsory state permission to exist

Under the Religion Law, backed by Administrative Code Article 515 ("Violation of the procedure for creating or running religious organisations"), all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by a group of people is illegal unless it has obtained state registration ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)), and so permission to exist.

To apply for permission to exist, a group must have at least 50 adult founding members ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)), which bans all small religious communities. Many people are afraid to sign such registration applications, for fear of harassment and reprisals by the regime.

Without state registration religious communities – and even informal groups of people meeting together – cannot legally exist or exercise freedom of religion and belief ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)). Police and the SSS secret police have raided many religious communities that have chosen not to register, or have tried to register but have been refused. Requiring state permission to exercise freedom of religion and belief and other human rights is against Azerbaijan's legally binding international human rights obligations.

### About 20 officers raid religious meeting

Officials from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku (headed by Ramin Mammadov) or its branch in Nakhichevan (headed by Vugar Babayev) do not allow non-Muslim communities to gain the compulsory state registration in Nakhichevan, an exclave wedged between Iran, Turkey and Armenia. This means that anything any non-Muslim communities do in Nakhichevan is illegal and punishable ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)).

As in the rest of Azerbaijan, all mosques must be subject to the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board, and the State Committee names and removes imams ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2749](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2749)).

Police or the State Security Service (SSS) secret police conducted surveillance on a group of Protestant Christians who met in a home in Nakhichevan for some months in 2025. Members of the registered Vineyard Church would often visit from the capital Baku to join the meetings for worship. The Christians met in the home of a Korean family who were working in the exclave.

On Sunday 13 April, about 20 police or SSS secret police officers raided the meeting for worship, some of them in uniform and some not. The officers included a man who had attended the meeting earlier after expressing interest in coming to the meetings, but left soon after arriving. The officers filmed those present.

Officers took all those present to the police or SSS secret police office. They took away their identity documents, phones and other items. Officers forced them to write statements about their activity.

Officers then released the local people, warning them not to have contact with the "traitors to Islam". However, they held the visitors from Baku (including a baby) for two days without food. Officers repeatedly questioned them until late in the night. They were then freed, being told to return the following morning.

Over the next two days, officers held and questioned the visitors from 9 am to 9 pm.

The leader of the group from Vineyard Church signed a statement taking responsibility for the literature found in the home of the Koreans, even though it was in Korean. The literature was not connected to Vineyard Church and included books on the teachings of Confucius.

### Court hands down large fines

Officials prepared cases against 8 people under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)) ("Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies"). Punishment for individuals is a fine of 1,500 to 2,000 Manats, several months' average wage.

The cases were presented to Nakhichevan City Court, five on 22 May and three on 26 May, according to court records. Four were assigned to Judge Gulnar Safaraliyeva and four to Judge Gulsum Aliyeva.

The Court held multiple hearings in the cases. This meant that the three from Baku had to make repeated visits to Nakhichevan, which is accessible from Baku only by air. "This is expensive and flight tickets are difficult to find," an individual who knows the situation told Forum 18. "When they reached the court each time they found the hearing had been postponed."

At the final hearings on 19 June, Nakhichevan City Court fined the three visitors from Baku and the two local people 1,500 Manats

each. This represents about three months' average wage for residents of Nakhichevan and two months' average wage for residents of Baku.

The three visitors from Baku and the two local residents have chosen not to appeal against the fines. "As the leader of the group acknowledged responsibility for the books in the Koreans' home, the court decisions were in line with the law," the individual familiar with the cases told Forum 18. Nevertheless, the individual recognised that the fines are so large that the five will struggle to be able to pay them.

The court is believed to have also fined members of the Korean family and deported them from Azerbaijan.

In July, court bailiffs started calling the two people from Nakhichevan, demanding that they pay the large fines.

The telephone at Nakhichevan City Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 29 July.

An official from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Nakhichevan answered the phone on 29 July but said nothing before putting it down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

The telephone at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku went unanswered on 29 July.

Threatened with dismissal from work for worship meetings

Officials elsewhere have taken steps to try to stop individuals sharing their faith. In summer 2025, officials warned a Christian in a town away from Baku to halt holding meetings for worship or risk being fired from work.

The state assigned a man who had previously attended some of these meetings to keep the individual under surveillance to make sure such meetings do not restart.

Registration denials: "you will be fined"

The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku granted the Vineyard Christian Church in the capital state registration in April 2018, according to the State Committee website. This status allows the community to conduct activity only at their registered address in Baku.

All mosques must be subject to the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board. Since March 2022, the State Committee names and removes imams ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2749](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2749)). Mosques usually have security cameras both inside the prayer hall facing worshippers and surrounding the mosque. A key mosque in Baku, Taza Pir, has six cameras inside, an individual told Forum 18. It remains unclear who has access to footage from the cameras.

The State Committee routinely denies registration to new non-Muslim communities. The last community it granted registration to was the Baku community of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) in July 2024. This was the first new non-Muslim community the State Committee had registered since December 2020.

Forum 18 knows of several non-Muslim communities which have lodged applications which have not been approved. One has been waiting for three years. Sometimes officials promise that registration is about to be approved, but nothing happens.

"One community keeps asking the State Committee what progress there is," an individual familiar with the application told Forum 18. "We're considering it," officials tell the community. "But while we're considering it, you're not allowed to hold meetings. If you do, the police will come and you will be fined."

"It is so sad," a member of another of the communities whose registration application has languished with no response told Forum 18. "And they say nothing." They noted that registration is important for the community to be able to function normally.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been trying to register a national centre to allow them to operate throughout the country, or at least to register communities outside Baku. The State Committee has failed to approve any of these applications.

The telephone at the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Baku went unanswered on 29 July. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=23>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429))

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments

([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1351](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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