

SILENCED VOICES: Khadija Ismayilova

by Cathal Sheerin

Khadija Ismayilova, thirty-nine, is big, brave and defiant. Despite a relentless, two-year-long campaign of threats and judicial harassment (directed at her by the Azerbaijani government) she will not shut up. She is one of an increasingly small number of Azerbaijani journalists who, regardless of personal risk, still devote themselves to uncovering uncomfortable truths about their homeland, and who continue to resist the government's vicious, and sometimes downright bizarre, crackdown on independent voices.



Drawing: Maavne Young

Khadija Ismayilova

Fossil fuel rich Azerbaijan is riddled with corruption, much of it emanating from President Ilham Aliyev and the first family. Operating like a kind of Caucasus Tony Soprano, Aliyev uses a mixture of charm and threat to achieve his ends. He is well known for his “caviar diplomacy”—winning, dining and bribing foreign officials whom he hopes will promote Azerbaijan’s interests abroad and legitimize its elections at home. With home-grown opinion-formers, however, there’s more of a reliance on muscle and blackmail. The 2010 Wikileaks release of U.S. diplomatic cables revealed that the U.S. embassy in Azerbaijan often explicitly compared Aliyev to a mafia crime boss.

Unsurprisingly, Aliyev’s government accepts little serious opposition and has for many years engaged in a deliberate strategy to limit dissent. The situation has worsened considerably over the last two years, and the presidential elections of October 2013 heralded a new wave of repression which seems to have gathered force recently. In the last thirty months, the Azerbaijani authorities have jailed (on trumped-up

charges), blackmailed or otherwise persecuted, scores of independent journalists, political activists and employees of non-governmental organizations. They have also violently broken up peaceful political rallies and imposed legislation restricting the rights to free expression and free assembly. Like all corrupt governments (and like some not-so-corrupt ones) the Azerbaijani administration fears the internet, and journalists such as Khadija Ismayilova—who have large social media followings—are the writers they fear the most. The tactics that the government adopts in attempting to silence these voices are often nasty, and in the case of women writers, particularly damaging; Ismayilova got her first personal taste of this in 2012.

That March, Ismayilova was working on an investigation for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The focus of the report was the Aliyev family's alleged interests in highly lucrative construction projects connected to the Eurovision Song Contest, which would take place in Baku, the capital, later that year. Ismayilova began to receive anonymous threats warning her to steer clear of the subject. She refused to be intimidated; as a result, she received a letter threatening "public humiliation." Accompanying the letter were screenshots of a video recording of Ismayilova and her boyfriend having sex in her bedroom. Similar images were sent to the boyfriend, her family, and her colleagues. In Azerbaijan a woman who is exposed like this suffers, at the very least, irreparable damage to her reputation. Yet Ismayilova refused to bow down to her blackmailers.

Within a week, the original video footage was posted on the website of an opposition political party, Musavat. Musavat angrily denied having anything to do with it and Ismayilova decided to do some digging. She soon discovered that, while she had been abroad during the previous year, the Ministry of National Security had ordered technicians for the telephone exchange to enter her apartment, install an extra telephone cable, and, apparently, a hidden camera. At her apartment, they were met by an unidentified man, who claimed to be the owner. She also learned that the telephone exchange housed an office that operated independently of the exchange. In April 2013, another, similar video of Ismayilova was posted online.

On February 13, 2014, Ismayilova was accused by a pro-government website of passing on information discrediting members of Azerbaijan's political opposition to U.S. embassy staff in Baku; the accusation was apparently based on Ismayilova's Facebook post of a document used by the Ministry of National Security to recruit an informer inside a small opposition party. The document contained threats of blackmail and evidence of the government's attempts to infiltrate and subvert the weak opposition.

Ismayilova was summoned, on three consecutive days (February 18, 19 and 20) to the general prosecutor's office for questioning on suspicion of "disseminating secret documents." She sensed a new seriousness in the way the government was seeking to silence her, so just before being called in for interrogation on the second day she posted a message to her supporters, entitled "If I Get Arrested." She said:

Things are getting more complicated here, so there are couple things I want to ask for. To democratic countries, diplomats, international organizations: Just in case (I get arrested), I want to remind you of my request to the international community regarding possible advocacy actions following my possible arrest. Some of you want to help, but can do it only with private diplomacy—thank you, but No. Where my case is concerned, please support me by calling for freedom of speech and freedom of privacy in this country as loudly as possible. Otherwise, I would prefer you not to act at all. I don't want any private diplomacy for my case. I don't believe in human rights advocacy behind closed doors: The people of my country need to know that human rights are being supported. My possible arrest will be just one of more than one hundred politically motivated arrests.

She was not arrested, and in June 2014, Ismayilova published an article exposing the secretive and complicated investment structures linking President Aliyev's daughters, Arzu and Leyla, with the largest telecom service providers in the country. She suggested that the government, through the president's daughters, was potentially controlling three-

quarters of the mobile phone market and probably eavesdropping on mobile phone users.

Then, on December 5, 2014, the inevitable happened: Ismayilova was arrested. She was charged, bizarrely, with “provoking” a fellow journalist’s attempted suicide, and given two months’ pre-trial detention, pending trial. Her detention order was extended for another two months in January 2015 and in February she was charged with embezzlement, illegal business, tax evasion, and abuse of power—the charges so often used by the Azerbaijani authorities when they have decided to lock a critical voice away for a long time. In May of this year PEN in New York awarded her the Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. As this is being written, Ismayilova is in jail awaiting trial; she faces up to nineteen years in prison if convicted on all charges.

Please write to the Azerbaijani authorities at the following address, calling on them to stop the harassment, judicial or otherwise, of the independent investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova.

President Ilham Aliyev
Istiglaliyyat Street 19
1066 Baku, Republic of Azerbaijan
Fax +994124923543 Email: office@pa.gov.az

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Azerbaijani diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Mr. Elin Suleymanov
Ambassador to the U.S.
Email: azerbaijan@asembassy.us

Cathal Sheerin works for the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International.