

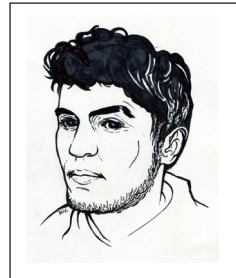
SILENCED VOICES: Mehman Huseynov

by Cathal Sheerin

The Huseynov Brothers—Emin and Mehman—have been thorns in the side of Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s authoritarian president, for many years.

Emin, the elder brother, is a journalist and human rights activist who founded the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety (IRFS), which fights for civil liberties and against the corruption of the Aliyev regime. It’s high risk work: Aliyev does not take kindly to public criticism, and dissident voices often end up in jail or exiled.

In 2014 Emin was charged with tax evasion and “illegal entrepreneurship,” charges commonly made against critics of the government. Knowing the impossibility of getting a fair trial (the judiciary is not independent in Azerbaijan), and fearing that he might not survive prison (police beatings in 2003 and 2008 had left him with ongoing health problems), Emin went into hiding. In August 2014, he found refuge in the Swiss embassy in Baku.



Mehman Huseynov

Illustration by Maxine Young

He stayed there for ten months, during which the police raided the IRFS offices, intimidated the staff, and harassed Emin's family, including his elderly mother. In June 2015, after negotiations between the Swiss and Azerbaijani governments, Emin was flown into exile accompanied by the Swiss foreign minister. Before being allowed to board the plane, he was forced to renounce his Azerbaijani citizenship, rendering him stateless.

Emin's dramatic story made headlines in the European press; it was soon to be matched for drama by what would happen to his brother Mehman.

Like Emin, Mehman exposes state corruption for the IRFS. He is also a prize-winning photojournalist. The authorities began targeting him in 2012, after he published photographs of the police attacking anti-corruption protesters at the Eurovision Song Contest in Baku. Mehman was arrested and charged with "hooliganism." Thereafter he was subjected to a long campaign of harassment by the state, including detentions, the confiscation of his passport and identity papers, and a travel ban issued days before he was to fly to Oslo to receive the Fritt Ord Foundation's prestigious Press Prize.

This grinding, low-intensity harassment, a common experience for journalists and rights activists in Azerbaijan, escalated into something much more brutal. On January 9, 2017, while walking the streets of central Baku, Mehman was grabbed by unidentified men (later revealed to be police officers) and bundled into a waiting car, which then drove off at high speed. His whereabouts remained unknown for a full day, despite his family's many visits and calls to local police stations. Months later, when he was being prosecuted on a trumped-up slander charge, Mehman described in detail what had happened to him that day:

After driving around the city for a while with a bag over my head, they brought me to the police department... At the department one of them lay on top of me, tormenting me... They filmed me in an insulting manner and laughed. Afterward, they took the bag off my head. I recognized two of those who were in the room. I knew that they were working for the

Nasimi District Police Department because one of them had previously participated in the arrest of my brother Emin. They openly told me that I was detained because of my journalism. I fainted at the police station... They took me to another room and began to insult me. They slapped me a couple of times. Doctors came and gave me an injection of some unknown drug. In that semi-conscious state they had me sign some documents. Even the doctors at the first aid station asked the police officers, “Why have you done this to a regular citizen?”

The day after he was pulled off the street, Mehman was prosecuted, convicted of resisting arrest, and fined. His problems were just beginning.

During the prosecution, Mehman’s lawyer had called for an investigation into the brutal treatment that his client had received in police custody. A few days later, in retaliation, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs filed a suit against Mehman in which the young journalist was accused of slandering the Nasimi District Police Department. The subsequent prosecution took place in March 2017 and was quick and riddled with irregularities; the judge required only two minutes to find Mehman guilty and sentence him to two years in jail.

Mehman has repeatedly been denied parole. In July 2018, he was also denied temporary compassionate release to visit his terminally ill mother. Emin—because of his forced exile—was unable to visit her either. She died in hospital on August 6, 2018, without her sons.

Please write to the Azerbaijani authorities, calling for the immediate release of Mehman Huseynov and for his slander conviction to be overturned. Messages may be sent to:

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](#).

Cathal Sheerin is a journalist, editor, and free-expression consultant.