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# Ahead of COP29, the International Community Must Advocate for the Respect of Human Rights

*During the UN's annual convention on climate change in Baku next month, democracy's defenders have an opportunity to hold the Azerbaijani regime accountable for its human rights violations—and to push for change.*

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Illustration: Gil Wannalertsiri, Freedom House. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

In early November, the world's leaders, environmental activists, and researchers will gather in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, for the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP29), the United Nations' annual forum on climate change. For the third year in a row, the "supreme decision-making body" of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change is being presided over by an authoritarian [petrostate](#)—a state that, ironically for a COP host, is heavily reliant on fossil fuels—with an abysmal human rights record.

Little more than a year ago, Azerbaijani armed forces launched a lightning military assault on the previously self-governing territory of [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), dissolving the territory's political, legal, and civic institutions and [displacing virtually the entire population of ethnic Armenians](#). Since then, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's regime has turned up the dial of oppression both within and outside of Azerbaijan. While calling publicly for a "[COP29 truce](#)" to "transcend political differences and stand together in unity," in actuality, Azerbaijani authorities have only escalated the crackdown across the country.

Allowing autocrats to burnish their reputations by hosting global conferences potentially threatens to undermine efforts to address urgent global issues and challenges and the credibility of multilateral forums. The international community must not miss the opportunity to use COP29 to draw attention to Azerbaijan's human rights record and advocate for change.

## Continuing the crackdown

[Azerbaijan](#) is among the least free countries in the world. The country lacks a free media and the rule of law and prohibits freedom of assembly. The operation of opposition political parties and civil society organizations is tightly controlled by authorities. Since violently seizing the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh last year, the Aliyev regime has unleashed an extreme crackdown on citizens and further cemented the president's power through unfair elections.

Aliyev, who has been in power for over two decades, has long targeted those who most vocally disagree with his positions, including on environmental issues. In June of last year, protesters took to the streets in the village of Söyüdlü to [rally against plans to build a second artificial lake in the community](#), as the previously



constructed lake has allegedly been used for the dumping of toxic waste from a nearby gold mine. The state's response was swift and violent, featuring restrictions on the press and the disproportionate use of force against local residents and civic activists alike.

Ahead of the arrival of the international community this November, Baku has sought to stave off any public discontent or dissent by “clearing out critics” and holding unfair and unfree elections to further consolidate the regime's power. Recent targets of the regime include Anar Mammadli, a prominent human rights activist and cofounder of the Climate of Justice Initiative, a civic group that seeks to promote climate justice in Azerbaijan.

But it's not only ecological or climate activists who have experienced the hostility of the Aliyev regime. In August, Bahruz Samadov, an Azerbaijani researcher and advocate for peace with Armenians, was arrested on trumped-up charges of treason while visiting Azerbaijan on a break from university. In the days after, two other peace activists—Samad Shikhi and Javid Agha—were detained, with the latter allegedly apprehended to testify against Samadov.

## A threat to exiles

Aliyev's repression is not contained within the borders of Azerbaijan. The country is one of 44 that are known to use tactics of transnational repression to target activists, journalists, and other members of the diaspora with violence and intimidation to silence criticism. In addition to going after their own critics abroad, authorities in Azerbaijan have a track record of helping both Turkey and Russia target their dissidents living in exile.

In recent years, critics of Aliyev have faced violent attacks in Europe, and Azerbaijani journalists reporting from neighboring Georgia have received threats. Last month, Vidadi Isgandarli, a prominent critic of the Aliyev regime living in exile in France, was violently attacked at his home by unknown assailants. Isgandarli was stabbed more than 20 times during the assault, and died as a result of his injuries two days later.

All of this bodes poorly for the safety of those soon heading to COP29. In the past, governments hosting the COP have cooperated to detain dissidents. In 2022, while hosting COP27, Egyptian authorities asked the authorities of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to arrest Sherif Osman, an Egyptian-American who had called for

peaceful protests against Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during the conference. Osman narrowly avoided extradition to Egypt, but still spent over a month in custody in Dubai.

## What can be done?

Azerbaijan joins only a handful of countries rated Not Free in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report to host a COP over the last 30 years, the others being Qatar in 2012, Egypt in 2022, and the UAE in 2023. Baku received the honor with a lot of help from Russia; taking advantage of the need for consensus, the Kremlin repeatedly blocked most of the candidates from the Eastern Europe and Caucasus region—whose turn it was to host the event according to UN rules—in retaliation for sanctions those countries placed on Moscow following the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Eventually, Armenia agreed to lift its block in an effort to advance peace negotiations with Azerbaijan—though a year later, the countries' bilateral treaty remains unsigned. And when Bulgaria withdrew from consideration in late 2023, Azerbaijan was left as the only remaining candidate.

The conference in Baku is going ahead, but it is not too late to use the event to highlight the ongoing abuses perpetrated by the Aliyev regime and advocate for a greater respect for human rights.

As a starting point, participating governments should insist that authorities guarantee the safety of all domestic and international civil society actors in or traveling to the country to ensure that these important climate negotiations are inclusive and meaningful. Likewise, all participants should use every opportunity to voice strong concerns about Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society, especially highlighting the plight of environmental activists, thereby limiting the regime's ability to use the conference to greenwash its record. Finally, with so much attention on the country, this is a crucial time to advocate for the immediate and unconditional release of the nearly 300 political prisoners held in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is opening itself up to bask in the world's attention. Advocates of freedom and democracy should seize on this opportunity.

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