

Azerbaijan Releases 2 Opposition Activists in Amnesty

March 19, 2015

The  **Moscow Times**

BAKU— Two jailed opposition activists in Azerbaijan have been pardoned and released as part of a wider amnesty announced by President Ilham Aliyev, state media said Thursday.

Analysts say Aliyev has included some political prisoners in amnesties in recent years to smooth down Western criticism over the human rights record in Azerbaijan, a mainly Muslim ex-Soviet republic with oil and gas wealth.

One of those just freed, Orkhan Yeubzade, a member of NIDA youth movement, was arrested in October after joining protests in the capital Baku and was convicted of hooliganism, possessing drugs and explosives, and intent to cause public disorder.

Another, Bashir Suleimanly, the Baku-based election watchdog deputy head, was convicted of tax evasion in May 2014.

Both were on an Amnesty International list of political prisoners and among a group of 101 prisoners pardoned by Aliyev.

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Azerbaijan has been ruled by Aliyev since he succeeded his late father in 2003 and has been courted by the West because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

Human rights groups accuse the Baku government of muzzling dissent and jailing opponents, allegations it denies. Opposition activists say many other government critics remain behind bars.

"Unfortunately, only a few people from our list of political prisoners were pardoned today. We expected more people to be released," said Igbal Agazade, head of an opposition Umid party.

At least 22 prisoners of conscience are being held in Azerbaijan awaiting trial on charges ranging from fraud and embezzlement to abuse of drugs and treason, Amnesty said in its report earlier this month.

Opposition figures in Azerbaijan say there are 100 political prisoners in the country of 9.5 million people.

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