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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Azerbaijan: Authorities Clamp Down on Protesters in First Election-Related Demonstration**

**Yesterday, up to 47 members of the opposition Musavat (Equality) Party were detained for participating in a political demonstration in Baku, in the first political rally ahead of Azerbaijan’s parliamentary elections in November 2010. Unidentified government officials were captured on film as they forced demonstrators into vans and buses, clamping their hands over the protesters’ mouths as they shouted slogans for freedom, equality and free elections.**

Demonstrators carried placards calling for freedom of speech, association and assembly, and one called for President Ilham Aliyev to resign. Uniformed officials tore these from protesters’ hands. Some journalists were also prevented from filming and photographing the event.

ARTICLE 19 expresses concern at these blatant attempts to restrict citizens in their right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. However, this is part of an ongoing and systematic process of restricting free expression in Azerbaijan – the authorities have often used harassment, physical force, spurious prosecutions and a range of other tactics to prevent opposition or critical voices from being heard.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Government of Azerbaijan to ensure that international standards for free and fair elections are upheld. *“It is critical that all Azerbaijanis are able to freely voice their political opinions and engage in robust debate, especially in an election year,”* says ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, Dr Agnès Callamard. *“Journalists must also be able to exercise their profession unimpeded and must have the freedom to report on political events.”*

Rashid Hajili, Director of the Baku-based Media Rights Institute, notes that the ability to conduct political demonstrations will be critical to this year’s parliamentary campaigns. *“Actions like those taken by the Azerbaijani authorities in yesterday’s demonstration should be considered as violations of the electoral process,”* he says.

ARTICLE 19 calls upon the Azerbaijani authorities to take action to ensure that all individuals are able to freely exercise their right to freedom of expression, in accordance with Azerbaijan’s commitments under international law. ARTICLE 19 will continue to monitor the Azerbaijani authorities’ actions in the pre-election environment and during the election process.

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

- For more information please contact Rebecca Vincent, Advocacy Assistant for Azerbaijan and the Europe Programme: [rebecca@article19.org](mailto:rebecca@article19.org) or +44 20 7324 2500.
- Video footage of the 14 April protest is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAwGB8Bid7g>.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.