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Azerbaijan: Baku Keeps Lid on Ethnic Minorities

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A neatly refurbished school in the village of Dygyah near the town of Lenkoran stands as a symbol of affluent times in Azerbaijan, fueled by the Caucasus country's energy boom. One thing, however, hasn't changed: in a village where almost the entire population is Talysh, an Iranian-speaking minority group, all instruction in schools is in the official language, Azeri.

Officials estimate the number of Talysh in Azerbaijan at 70,000, but some experts say their numbers go as high as 500,000. Whatever the case, Talysh are heavily represented in the regions of Lenkoran, Astara and Lerik in the southeast of the country, with a significant number also living in the capital city of Baku. Yet the situation in schools in Talysh-majority areas is similar to that in Dygyah, where there is virtually no instruction in the Talysh language.

Azerbaijan is party to the Council of Europe [Framework Convention on the National Minorities](#), which provides for the protection and promotion of the rights of ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani law provides for the maximum of two hours per week of non-compulsory Talysh language lessons in schools. The provision is mostly ignored, due to severe shortages of teachers and teaching materials.

There is not much else in the way of promoting the Talysh culture. Twice a week, the state radio-TV station, Araz, broadcasts a 15-minute program in Talysh, but according to Arif Yunus, an Azerbaijani expert, few Talysh are aware of the show's existence, and still fewer tune in. In addition, the only Talysh-language newspaper, Tolishi Sado (The Voice of Talysh), prints just a couple of hundred copies per issue, and officials keep a close eye on the publication.

Novruzali Mammadov, a former editor, was [arrested in 2007](#) on separatism charges after he published a fairly innocuous article on the history of the Talysh. Mammadov died in prison while

serving his 15-year sentence. Human rights defenders characterize the case as politically motivated. And just this past June, the editor's successor, Hilal Mammadov, was arrested charges of treason and espionage for Iran.

So far these developments have not triggered significant protests among the Talysh population. The Talysh are generally considered to be the most integrated of Azerbaijani minorities. Like Azeri Turks, most of them are Shi'a Muslims, and the rate of inter-marriage is high. As a result, ethnic or cultural identity is often fluid. At present, social and economic problems seem to have more traction among Talysh than the question of identity. This, however, may change in the wake of Hilal Mammadov's arrest.

The clampdown on Talysh advocates has come at a time of generally decreasing official tolerance for dissent and civic activism. In the aftermath of the Eurovision song contest, President Ilham Aliyev made menacing remarks against civil society leaders, journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders for '[spoiling the country's image](#)' before the international community. Hilal Mammadov's case has also sent a chilling signal to [other ethnic minorities](#), notably the Lezgin, who live mainly in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, adjacent to the Russian autonomous republic of Dagestan.

As for the Talysh, some observers believe the Aliyev's administration policies could end up stoking separatist sentiment where otherwise there would not be any problem. The arrest and death of Novruzali Mammadov, and the detention of Hilal Mammadov removed two prominent advocates of moderation from the political scene. The two Mammadovs consistently rejected separatism and advocated for the protection of ethnic minorities' rights within a democratizing Azerbaijani state. Their forced removal could embolden more radical Talysh activists, especially those living abroad, mainly in Western Europe and Canada.

There exists a possibility that the government's persistent tendency to link Talysh activism to Iranian-backed separatism could create a self-fulfilling prophecy. [Iran](#) has long sought to build friendly constituencies within Azerbaijan, and an ethnically close minority, such as Talysh, is an obvious target. There is not much love lost, however, between overwhelmingly secular Talysh activists and the Islamic Republic, which discriminates heavily against its own ethnic minorities, including the Talysh.

For example, to back up their separatism charges against Hilal Mammadov, authorities in Baku cited his contacts with Ali Abdoli, an Iranian citizen of Talysh origin. The absurdity of the accusation lies in the fact that Abdoli himself is a staunch opponent of the Islamist regime in Iran. To the extent, however, that the Talysh activists' rather modest demands are met with repression in Azerbaijan and indifference in the West, which prioritizes Azerbaijan's cooperation on security and energy matters, they may find themselves with nowhere else to turn to for support but Iran.

It would not be difficult for Aliyev's administration to keep the Talysh happy. All it needs to do is implement the country's own legislation, and its international commitments, particularly those stemming from the Council of Europe's Convention on the Rights of National Minorities. That's

a small price to pay to guarantee long-term social stability in portions of Azerbaijan that border Iran.