



Leyla Junus - Laudation

The award of the Sergio de Mello prize for virtuous behaviour is usually an occasion for rejoicing by family and friends but in the case of Leyla Junus, in an Azerbaijani prison along with her husband Arif since the end of July, it is unfortunately a moment of sad reflection on the extent of injustice we still see around us in today's world. It is a moment when we acknowledge the courage of people like Leyla Junus who are ready to defend such ideals such as solidarity, justice, freedom and the rule of law. These values are defended by them in the face of dictators whose imagination fails to stretch beyond the simple expedient of locking their opponents into prison. Instead they should be engaging in a dialogue with their critics to attempt to improve the lot of society at large rather than to continue ruling in the interests of a narrow elite intent on retaining its privileged position.

Today Leyla languishes in prison but her friend Atachan Abilov who was forced to flee Azerbaijan himself, is here to accept the award. Both Leyla and her husband were arrested and now stand accused of state treason as well as fraud, tax evasion and conducting illegal business activities. They risk high prison sentences. The arrests came as other human rights defenders have also been imprisoned and sentenced in Azerbaijan in the wake of a rigged presidential election last autumn and before European Olympic Games which Baku is planning to stage next year. The number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan is now around 100 including Anar Mammadli, an election monitor who dared last autumn to declare that the election had fallen far short of European standards and has been sentenced to 5.5 years in prison, Hasan Huseynli, a civil rights activist sentenced to 6 years in prison on entirely false charges of assault or Ilgar Mammadov, the head of the Baku School of Political Studies who was sentenced to 7 years in prison after criticizing the authorities in the wake of riots in Ismayilli, north west of Baku in January last year.

We know the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, whose officials claim that the country holds no political prisoners, thanks to the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) which has been headed by Leyla Junus since 1995 and which put together and published the list of political prisoners last summer to the fury of the authorities.

This was in line with her work since the end of the 1980s for the independence and security of Azerbaijan and for the rule of law and release of political prisoners. A historian by profession Leyla Junus was one of the founders in 1988 of the "Popular Front of Azerbaijan in support of Perestroika". In January 1990 she helped to found the Social Democratic Party and was vice minister of defence from 1992 to 1993 even as the war raged over Nagorno Karabakh, a district disputed by Azerbaijan and Armenia.

As the war ended she understood that bringing the two societies together was a priority if further bloodshed was to be avoided and the IPD became a vehicle for this examining peace and security issues in the South Caucasus. At the IPD she worked for the release of political prisoners and for the rule of law. She worked on joint projects with Armenians to secure a measure of reconciliation while developing public dialogues (www.publicdialogues.info) on the internet and face to face meetings. But other issues closer to home were never far from her mind. In 2009 she charged that senior interior ministry officials were involved in trafficking young girls which led to an official campaign against her and she was saved from prison by international protests. In 2011 she came out





against the illegal eviction of Baku residents to make way for high worth construction projects. The protest angered the authorities and she risked imprisonment while her office was literally demolished without notice as a gesture of official revenge.

As the Azeri government's campaign against NGOs and human rights defenders developed over the past twelve months the storm clouds began to gather over Leyla and her husband Arif. Earlier this year they were stopped from leaving the country and on 30 July both were detained. Leyla was accused of spying for Armenia. If she is convicted then the prison sentences which include treason could be heavy and the Azeri authorities show no signs of liberalizing their tough approach to independent civil society and the opposition. Recently four veteran Russian dissidents from Soviet times Lyudmila Alekseeva, Svetlana Gannushkina, Sergei Kovalyov and Oleg Orlov were moved to protest at Leyla Yunus's fate and appealed to the European Parliament to award her the Sakharov prize. They said:

As members of the last generation of dissidents in the Soviet Union and followers of Andrei Sakharov, we wish to support our colleagues in Azerbaijan who are unfortunately suffering for the brave stand they are taking to defend human rights in their country. By receiving the award, Leyla would also be a worthy successor to Memorial which was awarded the prize in 2009.

They noted that Leyla Yunus has long worked for reconciliation, at times when few others dared:

In recent times Akram Ailisli has been persecuted by the Azerbaijani authorities for publishing his novel Stone Dreams in which he described the tragic events of January 1990 and life in his home town of Ailis, where Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together peacefully. Leyla and Arif Yunus were amongst the very few who decided to speak out in defense of the writer. This Armenian-Azerbaijani peace-building work is now being described as state treason.

It remains to congratulate the jury of the de Mello prize for recognizing Leyla Yunus's actions in support of peaceful coexistence and cooperation of societies, religions and cultures. We hope that she and her husband and other political prisoners will be freed forthwith. Azerbaijan needs such people as these prisoners to work in freedom for a peaceful and stable future rather than to suffer the waste of leaving them for years in prison.

Read by: Enrique ter Horst, former Deputy of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Elaborated on behalf of the Panel of Judges of the Polish Prize of Sergio Vieira de Mello, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2002-2003) by Krzysztof Bobiński.

