

Azerbaijan's government strikes at the Shiite opposition

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On 26 November, an unprecedented special forces operation was launched in the village of Nardaran (9000 inhabitants). As a result, according to official figures, 14 members of the Muslim Unity were arrested, and automatic weapons and grenades were confiscated, among other arms. In the gunfight that ensued during the operation, seven people were killed (including two police officers). The next day, a blockade was introduced around Nardaran; electricity was shut off and traffic to the village was limited. Attempts by the council of elders in Nardaran to hold talks with the authorities failed, and on 1 December forces of the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of National Security entered the village. As a result a further 19 people were detained. The blockade of Nardaran is still ongoing (as of 3 December). At the same time, in the country's second largest city, Ganja, six members of Muslim Unity were arrested, and in Baku the editor of the opposition website *Azadheber* was detained. The authorities accuse Muslim Unity of wanting to change the constitutional order, introduce sharia and carry out attacks, and have also suggested that MU has links with Islamic State and Iran (at which the Iranian embassy has protested).

Commentary

- Nardaran is a conservative Shia town (with links to Iran) situated near Baku, which for years has effectively been outside the authorities' control, and which is the base for the Islamic opposition. The Muslim Unity organisation itself is associated with imam Tale Bagirzade (who was released from jail this summer); it has not been registered, and is more a political than a religious organisation. Two weeks before the raid in Nardaran, MU sent a letter to various embassies complaining of persecution by the government. In this context, this spectacular operation to pacify the town is another sign of growing repression by the regime in Baku. The operation demonstrates the government's determination to suppress all manifestations of opposition, and is in line with its increasingly tough authoritarian trend. The growing repression is the result of the authorities' fear of possible domestic destabilisation (a fear which has risen since the events at the Maidan in Ukraine in late 2013 and 2014); this has been exacerbated by the drop in income from oil exports and the deterioration of the economic situation in the country.
- The operation in Nardaran took place against the backdrop of a steep rise in tensions within the ruling elite, caused by the sacking of the ministers of national security (17 October) and communication (12 November), the arrests of their staff and of

businessmen linked to the ministries. These activities are most likely a sign of struggle at the highest levels of government for control of shrinking economic assets. It is possible that the institutions of force are competing for political influence, and are demonstrating their usefulness and loyalty by means of the operation against Islamic Unity.

- In addition, the government is disturbed by Azerbaijan's complex international situation. This consists of pressure caused by Russia's difficult relations with Turkey, concerns about the intentions of Iran, Azerbaijan's traditional rival, and the extremely poor relations with the West (mainly the EU). These factors, as well as the regime's increasing repressiveness against a background of a general rise in tensions within the country generated by the struggle within the elite and the difficult economic situation, is conducive to growing internal instability.