

Shortlist of nominees

Index on Censorship Annual

Freedom of Expression

Awards 2010

Meeting Judges Panel

Judges Panel 2010

Shaheed Fatima, human rights lawyer; Emily Bell, editor of Guardian.co.uk;
Caroline Michel, chief executive PFD; Lemn Sissay, poet and writer; Lindsey
Hilsum, international editor for Channel 4 News.

Shortlist - Bindmans Law and Campaigning Award - 2010

1.2 Rashid Hajili (Azerbaijan)

“During the past five years the situation with the independent press has just deteriorated. Their financial capacity has been weakened. Currently the independent media has no opportunities for normal operation. Attacks on journalists and their arrests negatively affect the society and intimidate ordinary citizens. This fact undermines democracy, human rights and breaks the trust in the government. Such violence could strengthen radical Islamic sentiments in the society. On the other side, the country, where freedom of speech is suppressed, cannot have a positive image in the international community. Lack of tolerance to criticism means that the democratic principles and values do not function in this country”

- Rashid Hajili

Rashid Hajili is the chair of the Media Rights Institute in Azerbaijan, www.mediarights.az/index.php?lngs=eng, which works for the protection of journalists, bloggers and also for the reform of Azerbaijani media laws.

In a climate of worsening media freedom he is one of a small group of individuals who stands up to defend the rights of journalists. His organisation defends dozens of journalists every year both before domestic courts and before the European Court of Human Rights. His organisation is also a leading voice in the campaign for media law reform in Azerbaijan, with campaigning activities directed at decriminalising defamation, broadcasting law reform and advocating for greater access to information. Hajili is an inspiring figure without whom little of this work would have begun.

Between March 2004 and June 2005 Rashid Hajili defended the “Azerbaijani Lawyers Forum at the European Court of Human Rights. He accused the Azerbaijani government of causing significant delays in the state registration of the forum, “which the founders claimed had gone as far as amounting to a violation of their right to freedom of association.” In February 2008, Rashid Hajili defended Agil Khalil, a journalist with the opposition newspaper *Azadlig*, when he was repeatedly attacked due to his investigative journalistic activities.

Rashid Hajili is the author of reports on the implementation of access to information legislation, as well as the author of a law on Freedom of Expression in Azerbaijan and has, in December 2009, worked with Article 19 on a case in the European Court of Human Rights to decriminalise defamation in Azerbaijan.

Hajili has fought government plans to redraft the country’s media laws. He said: “These changes will severely limit the capacity of organisations and media critical of the government, and are a direct attack on freedom of expression and association in Azerbaijan.”

On the new media laws, Michael Allen of www.demdigest.net, said in June 2009: “The government will be able to disband media outlets convicted of writing ‘biased articles’ and subject to suspension for ‘abuse of power’ if they use anonymous sources, according to draft amendments to the law.

Starting an independent broadcast media outlet in Azerbaijan is already practically impossible, notes the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety. But the new proposed regulations also threaten to further restrict access to print media, which “has always been a liberal area where all people and groups have typically been able to contribute”.