

Case Analysis:

Retaliatory Suspension and Prosecution of Lawyer Zabil Gahramanov

11 November 2025

1. A new frontier in Azerbaijan's repression

The detention and prosecution of Zabil Gahramanov, a licensed defence lawyer from Ganja, marks a serious new phase in Azerbaijan's campaign to suppress independent voices. Long regarded as one of the few professional groups still partially shielded from criminal prosecution, lawyers had until now faced mainly administrative or disciplinary reprisals. By turning criminal law against a practising member of the Bar Association, the authorities have crossed a threshold that directly threatens access to justice and the very functioning of the legal profession.

Gahramanov's suspension and arrest are not isolated acts. They mirror the patterns of abuse of criminal law and retaliatory prosecutions that the Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan has documented across civil society, media, and political life. His case should be understood as part of the systemic repression that both *Quest for Justice in a Climate of Unprecedented Repression* ([September 2024](#)) and *Azerbaijan's Defiance: A Decade of Contempt for the Council of Europe* ([December 2024](#)) describe: a deliberate, state-driven policy of silencing dissent through the misuse of legal institutions and the subordination of the judiciary to the executive.

2. Profile of the victim and chronology of retaliation

Zabil Gahramanov is a veteran defence lawyer known for representing victims of police torture, politically motivated prosecutions, and miscarriages of justice in the provinces. He was counsel in emblematic cases such as:

- The Tartar trials of tortured military personnel;
- The defence of Ilkin Suleymanov, widely believed to have been wrongfully convicted; and
- Political activists Sahib Mammadzade and Shahin Hajiyev of the Popular Front Party.

His outspoken criticism of the Ganja Police Department, notably in his June 2025 Facebook post comparing its conduct to that of the city’s disgraced former governor, triggered formal retaliation.

Within months:

- The Ministry of Internal Affairs petitioned the Bar Council of Azerbaijan (BCA) for his disbarment.
- On 8 October 2025, the BCA suspended his licence for six months.
- Two weeks later, the Ganja Police opened a criminal case against him, charging “aggravated fraud” and “aggravated hooliganism.”
- On 25 October, the Ganja City Court ordered his pre-trial detention for three months, uncritically endorsing police claims of flight risk and witness tampering.
- On 28 October, the Court of Appeal upheld the ruling using identical reasoning.

This sequence—disciplinary sanction followed by criminal prosecution—illustrates the fusion of administrative and penal tools to silence defenders, a practice repeatedly condemned by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in earlier Azerbaijani cases.

3. Legal assessment: fabricated charges and biased investigation

The accusations against Gahramanov rest on two implausible complaints lodged on the same day by unrelated individuals, a coincidence consistent with fabricated victim testimony long identified by the ECHR as a structural flaw in Azerbaijani criminal investigations:

- Fraud charge (Article 178.2.4): based on a fee dispute with a former client. Even if true, it would be a civil-law matter; criminalising it violates the principle of ultima ratio in penal law.
- Hooliganism (Article 221.2.2): stems from a trivial altercation at a car-wash, elevated to “resisting a public-order official” without credible evidence of violence.

The investigation shows clear bias: the same police department that had sought his disbarment initiated the case; the courts merely repeated police arguments; and pro-government media amplified the smear campaign with a selectively edited video. Together these elements confirm that the prosecution serves retaliatory motives, not justice.

4. Broader pattern: weaponising the legal system

The case fits precisely into the pattern described in Azerbaijan’s Defiance (December 2024):

Pattern Identified

Misuse of criminal law to punish critics
Subservient judiciary rubber-stamping police requests
Retaliation against those cooperating with independent media
Collapse of professional autonomy (media, NGOs, lawyers)

Manifestation in Gahramanov Case

Application of fraud and hooliganism provisions to professional activity
Copy-paste reasoning by Ganja courts
Alleged contact with exiled journalist Ganimat Zayidov cited as “evidence”
BCA acting under instruction of Ministry of Internal Affairs

The targeting of Gahramanov indicates that lawyers are becoming the next category of political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

5. Structural enablers: absence of judicial independence and Bar capture

The ECHR's judgments in *Mammadli v Azerbaijan*, *Jafarov v Azerbaijan*, *Aliyev v Azerbaijan* and *Mustafayev v Azerbaijan* all found that criminal proceedings were used for "ulterior purposes of punishment and silencing." The Campaign's December 2024 report further documents that:

- The Bar Council of Azerbaijan *de facto* functions under executive control, routinely disciplining lawyers at the government's request;
- The judiciary lacks independence, with an absence of genuine judicial reforms and the alignment of the judicial council to the Presidential Administration; and
- The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe continues "business as usual" cooperation despite these violations.

Within this environment, disciplinary and criminal measures merge into a single mechanism of repression. Gahramanov's six-month suspension, followed by immediate prosecution, mirrors this institutionalised collusion between police, prosecutors, and the Bar.

6. Consequences for the legal profession and access to justice

The chilling effect is profound. Defence lawyers already operate under surveillance, intimidation, and threats of disbarment; many avoid politically sensitive cases altogether. Gahramanov's imprisonment signals that no lawyer is safe, which illustrates that . It undermines:

- The right to fair trial (Article 6 ECHR / Article 14 ICCPR);
- The right to freedom of expression and professional independence (Articles 10 ECHR and 19 ICCPR); and
- The guarantees set in the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and Council of Europe Recommendation R(2000)21.

By criminalising a lawyer for exercising professional duties and voicing criticism, Azerbaijan violates these norms and erodes the last remaining barrier protecting victims of arbitrary power.

7. International implications and Council of Europe context

Gahramanov's case emerges as the next test for the Council of Europe's credibility. The Azerbaijan's Defiance report warned that Baku has long used cosmetic cooperation with Strasbourg institutions to deflect accountability, while continuing repression domestically.

His detention replicates the Mammadli Group pattern under Article 18: deprivation of liberty for ulterior motives. If the Committee of Ministers again fails to act decisively, it will further confirm the erosion of the European human-rights enforcement system.

The Secretary General has authority under Article 52 of the Convention to launch an inquiry into the "weaponisation of the legal system." Gahramanov's prosecution, following dozens of politically motivated

arrests since 2023, reinforces the case for triggering that procedure and for suspending the Council of Europe's ongoing Action Plan 2022–2025 with Azerbaijan.

8. Conclusion: a case emblematic of systemic retaliation

The prosecution of Zabil Gahramanov is a microcosm of the repression chronicled in the Campaign's previous reports. It exposes how Azerbaijan's authorities:

- Subordinate professional institutions such as the Bar Council;
- Manipulate criminal law to silence critics; and
- Rely on a compliant judiciary to legitimise retaliation.

It also demonstrates the expansion of repression to the last semi-independent sector of civic life—the legal profession—signalling that the state's campaign to eradicate dissent is now total.

Unless Azerbaijan's partners, particularly the Council of Europe and its Committee of Ministers, confront this reality and adopt the firm measures recommended in Azerbaijan's Defiance—including suspension of cooperation programmes, adoption of a formal statement, and release of all political prisoners—the case of Zabil Gahramanov will not be the last. It will instead confirm that justice itself has become a punishable offence in Azerbaijan.
