

LESSONS FROM COP29

Climate Change & Human Rights



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About Crude Accountability

Crude Accountability is an environmental and human rights non-profit organization that works with communities in the Caspian and Black Sea regions, which struggle against threats to local natural resources and negative health impacts. Crude Accountability works on the local, national, regional, and international levels in partnership with communities and organizations committed to a just and environmentally sustainable world. Based in Northern Virginia, Crude Accountability also collaborates with other environmental organizations in the United States.

“A gift of God” – that’s how the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, describes the country’s rich oil and gas resources. The opportunity to host COP29 in Baku in November 2024 should also be considered one. Amid an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, extensive fossil fuel extraction, and growing instability in the region, Azerbaijan was given the opportunity to lead an international discussion on climate change under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Was it a successful discussion that led to meaningful change? Doubtful. Was it used to benefit the interests of big fossil fuel producers? Absolutely.

A stage for image-building and greenwashing in an environment of silenced dissent – rather than a forum for real climate solutions – that is COP29 in a nutshell.

Introduction

In 2023, the Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the UNFCCC reaffirmed that all UNFCCC sessions and mandated events should be convened “at a place where human rights and fundamental freedoms are promoted and protected, and where all participants are effectively protected against any violations or abuses.”¹ Yet, for the third year in a row, the Conference of the Parties was hosted by an autocratic petrostate—this time, Azerbaijan.

The lead-up to COP29 in Baku was marked by deepening authoritarianism. Following snap presidential elections in February 2025—held in an atmosphere devoid of political alternatives and critical voices²—incumbent Ilham Aliyev secured his fifth consecutive term in office. What followed was an unprecedented crackdown on independent civil society and media.

The Law on Media and the Law on NGOs, introduced years ago, had already created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship by severely restricting media operations³ and imposing deliberately complicated grant registration procedures.⁴ These laws, long criticized by international institutions, laid the foundation for the intensified repression that characterized 2024. By the time COP29 convened, the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan had reached an all-time high of 319—a staggering 243% increase compared to the previous year⁵—underscoring the growing repression unfolding behind the summit’s polished facade.

¹ Joint statement of the UN Special Rapporteurs: <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/IMM11-statement-EN.pdf>

² ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/586281_0.pdf

³ Joint written statement of the Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety and Institute for Human Rights submitted to the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/033/66/pdf/g2403366.pdf>

⁴ Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center analysis: <https://smdtaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Foreign-funding-for-NGOs-in-Azerbaijan.pdf>

⁵ Quest for Justice in a Climate of Unprecedented Repression, report by the Anar Mammadli Campaign to end repression in Azerbaijan: <https://free-anar.site/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AZ-Report-Finalised.pdf>

Heavily reliant on oil and gas extraction—with hydrocarbons accounting for 36.86% of Azerbaijan’s GDP, 51.53% of state budget revenues, and 90.12% of exports in 2023⁶—the Azerbaijani Presidency at COP29 raised eyebrows with its promotion of a green energy transition. This skepticism was further fueled by the fact that the ruling Aliyev family directly benefits both politically and financially from the country’s resource wealth.⁷

Ironically, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) played a central role in the COP29 Presidency team. COP29 President Mukhtar Babayev, a former SOCAR employee, was joined on the organizing committee by SOCAR’s current president, Rovshan Najaf—effectively turning the conference into a platform to promote the company’s business interests. This might have been dismissed as mere coincidence if not for an undercover investigation by Global Witness, which revealed that Elnur Soltanov, COP29 CEO and Azerbaijan’s Deputy Energy Minister, had offered to “establish joint ventures with SOCAR” to a well-known international investor.⁸

With fossil fuel executives shaping the agenda and climate diplomacy entangled with profit-making schemes, the line between public service and private interest became almost indistinguishable. For many, the green rhetoric of COP29 rang hollow—amplifying the perception that the summit was less about transition and more about branding a fossil-fueled future in shades of green.

Apart from being a party to the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement, and the Aarhus Convention, Azerbaijan is also a member of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Despite these proclaimed international commitments, the country has shown little genuine interest in upholding human rights. Major industries—including oil, gas, and mining—continue to have detrimental impacts on various fundamental rights, particularly the right to a healthy environment. Decades of extractive activity in Azerbaijan have resulted in significant environmental damage, with oil spills and

⁶ Analytical piece by Zohrab Ismayil, Friedrich Naumann Foundation:

https://www.freiheit.org/south-caucasus/quest-justice-climate-repression#_ftn5

⁷ COP Co-Opted?, report by the Transparency International:

https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/COP-CO-OPTED-How-Corruption-and-Undue-Influence-Threaten-Multilateral-Climate-Action_FINAL.pdf

⁸ Global Witness’ Investigation: <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/fossil-fuels/cop29-is-for-oil-deals/>

gas flaring contributing to widespread air pollution, breathing difficulties, and chronic lung illnesses.⁹

In July 2023, environmental and health concerns sparked a protest in the village of Soyudlu, Gadabay region, where residents opposed the operation of a nearby gold mine. Locals highlighted the harmful effects of the mine's production on both their health and the surrounding ecosystem. However, the protest was swiftly and violently suppressed by police, and the village was effectively sealed off from any independent evaluation missions. Intimidated residents have since refused to speak publicly, while the gold mine's operations were fully restored without any accountability.¹⁰

⁹ Flames of Toxicity: Environmental and Social Impacts of Azerbaijan's Oil and Gas Development, report by the Crude Accountability: https://crudeaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/Compressed_Flames-of-Toxicity-report.pdf

¹⁰ A year after environmental protests rocked Azerbaijan's village of Soyudlu, it is business as usual, Arzu Geybullayeva: <https://globalvoices.org/2024/07/04/a-year-after-environmental-protests-rocked-azerbajians-village-of-soyudlu-it-is-business-as-usual/>

Climate of Fear

COP29 took place against the backdrop of an unprecedented crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan, reaching a level that could be described as an ‘informational desert,’ as highlighted by numerous statements from media freedom organizations.¹¹ While the heads of the most outspoken media outlets in Azerbaijan – Abzas Media, Toplum TV, Kanal 11, Kanal 13, Khural TV, Meclis.info – were arrested and their offices sealed, an atmosphere of fear has forced many into self-censorship, refraining from criticizing the government.

In the run-up to COP29, a concerning new trend emerged: the silencing of researchers and political scientists. Iqbal Abilov, a Talysh scholar and editor-in-chief of the “Bulletin of the Talysh National Academy,” and Bahruz Samedov, a political analyst and advocate for peace with Armenia, were both arrested on fabricated charges of high treason, further tightening the government’s grip on civil society and eroding what remained of pluralism of opinion.¹²

¹¹ COP29 online briefing: <https://www.cop29.host/post/cop29-brifing-highlights-alarming-press-conditions-in-azerbaijan>

¹² Institute for Reporters` Freedom and Safety news article: <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/iqbal-abilov-talysh-activist-detained/>

No Climate Justice Without Human Rights

The detention of prominent human rights defenders, including Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, and Gubad Ibadoghlu, a researcher at the London School of Economics, have drawn increased international attention from human rights organizations and compelled the international community to take a closer look at the deteriorating situation in Azerbaijan.

In response to the escalating crackdown, the Climate Observers Partnership – a coalition of civil society organizations dedicated to promoting respect for human rights and inclusive climate action in Azerbaijan – was formed.¹³ To address the worsening repression, the coalition issued a human rights petition calling, among other demands, for the release of all individuals detained for exercising their fundamental rights and for the creation of a safe environment for civil society and media. The petition was endorsed by over 70 organizations and 200 individuals.¹⁴

The international coalition, Demand Rights at COP, also highlighted human rights concerns in Azerbaijan in the leadup to COP29 widespread international support.¹⁵

Not only civil society raised concerns.

In early 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) challenged the Azerbaijani delegation's credentials on substantive grounds, citing serious concerns over the country's failure to uphold democratic standards, judicial independence, and human rights, as highlighted by numerous European Court of Human Rights judgments. The Assembly also condemned Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, pointing to the humanitarian crisis and allegations

¹³ Climate Observers Partnership: <https://www.cop29.host/aboutus>

¹⁴ Climate Observers Partnership's Petition: <https://www.cop29.host/petition>

¹⁵ Demand Rights at COP: <https://www.demandrightsatcop.org/>

of ethnic cleansing, and criticized Baku's persistent lack of cooperation with PACE, including obstructing access for its monitoring missions.¹⁶

In October 2024, the European Parliament condemned Azerbaijan's intensified crackdown on activists ahead of COP29, calling it incompatible with hosting the conference. MEPs demanded the release of political prisoners, the suspension of the EU-Azerbaijan energy deal, and conditioned future agreements on human rights reforms and peace efforts with Armenia.¹⁷

In the run-up to the conference, a number of UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint statement, addressing "an alarming wave of arrests and criminal cases against human rights defenders in the country, including journalists and independent media," and calling on Azerbaijan to "uphold international human rights law before, during and after the conference, and to ensure that participants can exercise their human rights without fear of intimidation and reprisals."¹⁸

By the start of the conference, Azerbaijan was under heavy criticism from the international community and closely watched for its next steps.

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¹⁶ Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan; Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee):

<https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33302/html>

¹⁷ MEPs denounce violations of human rights and international law by Azerbaijan; Press release:

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan>

¹⁸ Joint statement of the UN Special Rapporteurs: <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/IMM11-statement-EN.pdf>

Climate Talks in Disguise

In his opening remarks at COP29, President Ilham Aliyev seized the opportunity to defend Azerbaijan's human rights record, rejecting criticisms from the international community. He dismissed claims of human rights violations and instead accused Western nations, NGOs, and global media of hypocrisy, framing their criticism of Azerbaijan as unjust and politically motivated. This rhetoric was particularly pointed against the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, both of which were labeled as "symbols of political corruption."¹⁹

The following day, Aliyev's speech took a further geopolitical turn. He targeted France and the Netherlands, accusing them of "brutal repression" in their overseas territories, using the climate change platform to address long-standing territorial disputes. President Aliyev also blamed France for unrest in New Caledonia and tied it to climate change, despite its irrelevance to the conference.²⁰ His comments were fueled by ongoing tensions over the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, distracting from the climate focus of the talks.

And as expected, the conference failed to focus on meaningful climate action.

The Least Developed Countries labeled the COP29 outcome as "A Staggering Betrayal of the World's Most Vulnerable" after the COP President closed the session without allowing countries that had requested to speak.²¹

Countries failed to reach an agreement on the new climate finance goal at COP29, with a trillion-dollar deal that campaigners called a "betrayal" of vulnerable

¹⁹ COP29 in Baku: Aliyev urges climate aid, slams France's 'colonial record', JAM news article: <https://jam-news.net/cop29-in-baku-aliyev-urges-climate-aid-slams-frances-colonial-record/>

²⁰ Promoting Human Rights in Climate Action: Report from the Baku Climate Conference COP29 ; CIEL: <https://www.ciel.org/reports/promoting-human-rights-in-climate-action-cop29/>

²¹ Cop29 agrees \$1.3tn climate finance deal but campaigners brand it a 'betrayal'; The Guardian news article: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/23/cop29-agrees-13tn-climate-finance-deal-but-campaigners-brand-it-a-betrayal>

nations.²² The deal sets a target of \$1.3 trillion annually by 2035 to help developing countries transition to low-carbon economies and address extreme weather impacts. However, only \$300 billion of that will come from grants and low-interest loans, with the rest depending on private investments and unconfirmed new funding sources.²³ Moreover, there is no guarantee that the finance provided through this framework will be human rights-based climate finance, raising concerns over the deal's ability to effectively support the nations most affected.

Additionally, COP29 missed the chance to tackle the urgent need to move away from fossil fuels, with no progress on the Global Stocktake or the Mitigation Work Programme. This was particularly worrying as it was the last COP before countries need to submit updated climate plans (NDCs).²⁴ The lack of action comes as no surprise, given Azerbaijan's heavy reliance on oil and gas and the presence of over 1,700 fossil fuel lobbyists in Baku.²⁵

Civic participation in COP29 was marred by the repression undertaken against Azerbaijan's own civil society and highlighted the broader impact of repression on international climate activism. With a closed civic space and an escalating crackdown on free voices in the country, many international climate activists chose to stay away from the conference or self-censor due to fear of reprisals. This atmosphere of intimidation, including strong surveillance within the Blue Zone, further discouraged meaningful participation and mobilization for transformative climate action.

The combination of Azerbaijan's human rights abuses, its oil dependency, and the suppression of civil society not only undermined the integrity of COP29 but also hindered global efforts to address the climate crisis effectively. The conference's lack of meaningful outcomes on key issues, such as climate finance and fossil fuel reduction, reflected the broader challenges in achieving transformative climate

²² Cop29 agrees \$1.3tn climate finance deal but campaigners brand it a 'betrayal'; The Guardian news article: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/23/cop29-agrees-13tn-climate-finance-deal-but-campaigners-brand-it-a-betrayal>

²³ Promoting Human Rights in Climate Action: Report from the Baku Climate Conference COP29 ; CIEL: <https://www.ciel.org/reports/promoting-human-rights-in-climate-action-cop29/>

²⁴ Promoting Human Rights in Climate Action: Report from the Baku Climate Conference COP29 ; CIEL: <https://www.ciel.org/reports/promoting-human-rights-in-climate-action-cop29/>

²⁵ Over 1,700 coal, oil and gas lobbyists granted access to Cop29, says report; The Guardian news article: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/15/coal-oil-and-gas-lobbyists-granted-access-to-cop29-says-report>

action, particularly as Azerbaijan’s political climate stifled open dialogue and participation.

Key climate justice issues as seen through the lens of Azerbaijan’s political environment and its role in COP29:

1. Corruption and Climate Finance Misuse

Azerbaijan ranks poorly in global corruption indices, with its oil and gas industry at the center of a deeply entrenched patronage system. The COP29 presidency itself was linked to high-level officials with ties to the SOCAR, raising serious concerns over conflicts of interest. In this context, climate finance becomes vulnerable to mismanagement and exploitation.

The absence of transparency mechanisms in Azerbaijan's environmental and climate-related spending undermines global trust. For climate justice to be realized, climate finance must reach the most affected and vulnerable populations—not be diverted to elite-controlled projects that reinforce fossil fuel dependence.

2. Suppression of Fundamental Freedoms

In the months leading up to COP29, Azerbaijani authorities intensified their crackdown on journalists, environmental and climate activists, and independent NGOs. This included the arrest of prominent media figures and the closure of civic space necessary for genuine public engagement in climate policymaking.

The rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association are foundational to environmental advocacy. When these are curtailed, marginalized communities lose the ability to raise environmental concerns, participate in policy dialogues, or hold duty-bearers accountable. Climate justice, by definition, requires inclusive participation—something structurally denied in authoritarian contexts like Azerbaijan.

3. Lack of Democratic Governance and Public Accountability

Azerbaijan has not held free or fair elections in decades. With political power centralized in the executive and parliament dominated by loyalists, there is no space for pluralism or public oversight of climate commitments.

Climate policy in such a setting becomes a tool for regime legitimization rather than a democratic process rooted in the needs of people. Without electoral accountability, environmental decisions remain opaque, unchallengeable, and often aligned with state or private interests rather than climate justice.

4. Environmental Injustice and Unequal Burden of Degradation

Local communities, particularly in rural areas, have suffered the consequences of Azerbaijan's extractive industries. Environmental degradation caused by mining operations, oil extraction, and industrial pollution has led to serious health and livelihood impacts. The village of Soyudlu, where protests over gold mine pollution were violently suppressed, serves as a stark example of repressive policies.

This reflects a broader pattern of environmental injustice, where marginalized groups bear the brunt of ecological harm without access to remedies or compensation. Climate justice requires not only mitigation and adaptation, but also remediation and protection for those affected by environmental harm.

5. Discrimination Against Minorities and Exclusion from Decision-Making

Ethnic minorities such as the Talysh and Lezgins are often excluded from national decision-making, including on environmental issues. The recent arrest of Talysh scholar Iqbal Abilov highlights the broader criminalization of ethnic identity and political expression.

True climate justice requires inclusive governance that respects and integrates the voices of all communities, particularly those historically excluded. Indigenous and minority communities must be recognized as rights-holders and knowledge-holders in climate responses.

6. Lack of Transparency in National Climate Commitments

Despite its international climate pledges, Azerbaijan continues to prioritize fossil fuel expansion. Approximately 90% of its exports remain tied to hydrocarbons, and the country lacks credible roadmaps for decarbonization.

Statements about transitioning to green energy made during COP29 were largely viewed as greenwashing, as they lacked independent verification, stakeholder participation, or meaningful timelines. Climate justice depends on trust, accountability, and transparency—elements sorely lacking in Azerbaijan's approach.

7. Exclusion of Civil Society from International Climate Processes

Civil society was largely sidelined during COP29. Surveillance, visa barriers, and restrictions on free movement limited the participation of both local and international NGOs. Such exclusion erodes the multilateralism and inclusivity at the heart of the UNFCCC process.

When authoritarian states host global climate conferences, they risk turning them into tightly controlled platforms for regime image-building, rather than democratic forums for collective problem-solving.

8. Climate-Induced Displacement and Lack of Protection

Although less publicized, climate-related displacement is an emerging issue in Azerbaijan. Caspian Sea coastal regions face rising sea levels, while inland

areas suffer from increasing drought and desertification. Coupled with legacy displacement from conflict zones, there is an urgent need for robust protections and policies.

Yet, the Azerbaijani government lacks transparent land-use policies or climate-resilient infrastructure for displaced populations. This compounds vulnerabilities and further distances the country from a rights-based climate response.

Recommendations to the OSCE

Based on the outlined issues from COP29 and the broader context in Azerbaijan, we offer several targeted recommendations for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to help uphold climate justice and human rights across the region:

Link Environmental and Human Rights Monitoring

Recommendation: Expand the OSCE’s monitoring mandate to explicitly integrate environmental and climate-related human rights issues (linking more explicitly the mandates of the second and third dimensions), particularly in autocratic states with extractive economies.

Rationale: As seen in Azerbaijan, climate policy and environmental degradation are often deeply entangled with human rights abuses. A holistic approach that monitors violations of environmental rights alongside civil and political freedoms is necessary for effective intervention.

Promote Democratic Participation in Climate Policy

Recommendation: Support member states in establishing participatory climate governance mechanisms—such as citizen assemblies, multi-stakeholder dialogues, and community consultations—with a focus on inclusion of civil society, youth, Indigenous groups, and marginalized communities.

Rationale: The suppression of democratic voices in Azerbaijan during COP29 shows that without public participation, climate agendas risk becoming state-controlled branding tools for extractive industries. This is true in many OSCE participating States and creating support mechanisms to include civic voices in a more robust manner will be helpful across the OSCE region.

Strengthen Civil Society Protections

Recommendation: Through the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), offer protective and capacity-building support to independent environmental defenders, investigative journalists, and human rights NGOs.

Rationale: Repression of media and civil society, such as the arrests of Azerbaijani journalists and researchers before COP29, directly undermines transparency and accountability in climate policy.

Address Corruption in Climate Finance and Resource Governance

Recommendation: Promote regional standards and transparency benchmarks for the disbursement and use of climate finance, including public registers of climate projects, beneficial ownership disclosures, and anti-corruption safeguards.

Rationale: The intertwining of fossil fuel elites with COP29 leadership in Azerbaijan exemplifies the risk of climate funds being diverted for political or private gain.

Support Electoral Integrity as a Foundation for Climate Justice

Recommendation: Encourage reforms and offer technical assistance for electoral integrity and democratic institution-building, recognizing that accountability in environmental governance depends on free and fair political systems.

Rationale: The absence of democratic elections in Azerbaijan allowed unchecked political control over climate discourse, weakening multilateral climate negotiations.

Enhance OSCE Early Warning and Rapid Response to Civic Space Shrinkage

Recommendation: Develop early warning indicators and rapid response mechanisms when governments repress civic actors under the pretext of national security or disinformation, especially during high-level international events such as COPs.

Rationale: The pre-COP29 crackdown created a chilling effect not just domestically, but regionally, impacting climate defenders' ability to engage safely and effectively.

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