**////Title: Exploring the Tortuous History of Two Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan**

**////Standfirst:**

Human rights defenders Leyla and Arif Yunusplayed a crucial role in Azerbaijan’s politics and modern history. After being sentenced to 8.5 years in jail by the Azerbaijani government and being released due to health issues, Leyla and Arif Yunus shared the suffering and torture they endured as regime opponents and political prisoners in a book entitled *The Price of Freedom*. Dr Audrey L. Altstadt, a Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, recently published a short article outlining the dynamics underlying the arrest of the two political activists and the struggle described in their book.

**////Main text:**

Azerbaijan is a culturally rich and resource abundant country bordering Georgia, Russia, Armenia, and Iran. After gaining independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, the country was initially on a path toward democracy, but ended up with a political climate marked by corruption and extreme nationalism.

Today, Azerbaijan is ruled by Ilham Aliyev, who became President in 2003 after the rule of his father, Heydar Aliyev – a former communist leader. The political system enforced by the Aliyev family is authoritarian, as it is based on the limitation of civil rights, human rights violations and the silencing of political opponents.

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One of the most blatant examples of the suppression of political opposition enforced by the Ilham Aliyev government was the arrest and prosecution of the human rights defender Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif Yunus. This arrest and the suffering endured as a result is detailed in a book entitled *The Price of Freedom*, which was co-authored by the two political activists.

Professor Audrey Altstadt at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has conducted extensive research focusing on Azerbaijani history and politics. In a short article published by the UK version of the Caucasus Survey, a well-established human rights journal, Professor Altstadt offers an account of the political landscape surrounding the arrest of Leyla and Arif Yunus in 2014 and the events described in their book.

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Professor Altstadt first recalls the day when she heard the news about the two political activists’ arrest, while sitting at a hillside restaurant in Baku with her friend Jamil Hasanli. At the time, Hasanli was head of the National Council of Democratic Forces, an alliance established between parties opposing the rule of Ilham Aliyev, and had recently lost a rigged election against the president.

Leyla and Arif Yunus were arrested on the 28th of April 2014, after they boarded an outbound flight to Belgium, where they were to attend a conference. Theirs was the latest in a series of arrests by the government, targeting human rights defenders, journalists working for opposition newspapers, and other regime critics.

However, this was the first time that the regime targeted primary political activists, which made the arrest greatly unsettling. Leyla and Arif Yunus were not second-tier leaders or young journalists, like political opponents arrested so far, but rather well-established and internationally recognised scholars. Their arrest was thus highly alarming, as it signalled the increasing pressure that the regime placed on its critics.

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In her article, Professor Altstadt recalls that the two activists’ arrest was hardly mentioned by the state-run television, thus she purchased several newspapers from a nearby kiosk. She soon realised that *Azadlyq* (‘*Freedom*’), the oldest Azerbaijani-language newspaper opposing the regime, was not on display at the kiosk, and asked the shop attendant ‘*Azadlyq* yox?’, which literally translates into ‘No Freedom?’

She was struck by the dual meaning of this question and observed the young man in the kiosk for a long moment, wondering if he grasped it too. Although he said that the newspaper was not available, he sneaked it into her shopping bag, where she would find it shortly afterwards.

When she compared how the arrest was presented in the opposition newspapers she purchased, she found that they all equally condemned it, but *Azadlyq* also included an additional story expressing the support for Leyla from members of society and political parties.

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Leyla and Arif Yunus were released the day after their arrest but were prevented from travelling abroad. Leyla was arrested again on the 30th of July, while Arif was placed under house arrest and incarcerated a few days later, on the 5th of August.

Their arrest was followed by that of other political activists, including Rasul Jafarov, who had collaborated with Leyla to compile a list of all political opponents in prison, and human rights attorney Intiquam Aliyev. When members of the UN’s Human Rights Subcommittee visited the country in September 2014, their visit was cut short after being denied access to detention facilities.

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In her article, Professor Altstadt then summarises the events building up to Leyla and Arif’s arrest, highlighting the failure of post-Soviet Azerbaijan to build a democratic system and the subsequent rise to power of Heydar and then Ilham Aliyev. Ilham Aliyev’s regime was based on the suppression of political opposition, through corrupt election practices marked by the exclusion of political parties, restrictive laws against NGOs advocating for human rights, and media control.

One of the many NGOs vilified by Aliyev is the Institute for Peace and Democracy, which was founded and directed by Leyla Yunus. The Institute’s headquarters were razed to the ground in August 2011.

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Leyla and Atif Yunus were among the most influential political opponents at the time, as they often denounced regime actions and spoke openly about human rights violations in Azerbaijan. Arif had also written a series of books about Karabagh, a region of Azerbaijan that borders with Eastern Armenia. The Aliyev regime re-gained control of most of this region during the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict.

Leyla and Arif were also frowned upon by the regime for their ‘mixed’ ancestry, as Leyla’s great grandmother was German and Arif’s mother Armenian. Azerbaijani authorities often used ancestry to accuse activists of being disloyal to the country.

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Professor Altstadt finally outlines some of the highlights of *The Price of Freedom*, which includes two different sections: one written by Leyla and the other by Arif.

Leyla’s section focuses on her upbringing and her sense of national identity, explaining how the regime distorted these when persecuting her and her husband. Arif, on the other hand, shares details of his arduous experience in prison, where he struggled to maintain his mental and physical health after being tortured, interrogated, and placed in solitary confinement.

Professor Altstadt’s article offers a brief but informative account of Azerbaijan’s tumultuous history over the past few decades. She reflects on how striking it is that despite relentless suppression, brutal treatment and abuse, some individuals still find it in them to defend human rights and legality.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘And yet there are defenders’, in Caucasus Survey, 2021.