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By Ellen Barry
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A Dissident Is Free From Jail, but His Punishment Is Not Over

BAKU, Azerbaijan — When the blogger and opposition activist Emin Milli was summoned from his prison barracks and told he was free to return to his old life, he dialed his wife’s number and crowed with happiness. It took a while for him to realize that the old life was gone.

It did not matter that Mr. Milli’s 17-month imprisonment was for hooliganism, a charge laughable to anyone who knows him. In this oil-rich and tightly controlled state, international organizations that once employed him as a translator would no longer hire him for official events, for fear of angering the government.

His wife’s father had been fired from his government job because of Mr. Milli’s political activities. His own father had died while he was in prison. His wife, her own future in turmoil, had asked for a divorce. Mr. Milli spent much of this spring in his apartment, free time gaping before him like a chasm.

“I think this is the way they function,” said Mr. Milli, 31, who left Azerbaijan for England last week. “They don’t organize mass killings. They just do it this way. They punish some people and let everyone else watch. To say, ‘This is what can happen to you.’”

Long before the upheaval in the Middle East, Azerbaijan’s government had identified a tiny Facebook class within its population — young people with wealth, education and time — and took action before it became a threat. Protests begun this spring died down quickly; this is partly because Azeris have enjoyed rising income and are not inclined to topple the government.

But they are also afraid. It is a fear born of soft authoritarianism, which has replaced blunt repressions throughout much of the former Soviet Union. Selective prosecutions, of which Mr. Milli’s is one example, are frightening precisely because they are unpredictable. This allows the state to halt worrisome trends, said Vafa Guluzade, who was an adviser to President Heydar Aliyev, whose son, Ilham, has succeeded him.

“It’s absurd to you, but very sensible to us,” Mr. Guluzade said. “When two bloggers are punished in this way there will not be a third.”

Azerbaijan is a sought-after ally; it pumps about a million barrels of oil a day and has provided critical support for the war in Afghanistan. Cartier and Chopard have set up shop beside the Gothic palaces of 19th-century oil barons in the capital. The children of the elite return from universities in the West, free to choose among desk jobs and nightspots.

Some come back with a taste for politics. Mr. Milli studied law in Germany; his friend Adnan Hajizada attended the University of Richmond, a private college in Virginia. Neither was particularly prominent, but they epitomized a class of restless young people experimenting with flash mobs, social media and parody. Mr. Milli made speeches overseas.

Which is where the donkey came in.

During the summer of 2009, Mr. Hajizada asked Mr. Milli, who was in New York, to accept delivery of a voluminous Chinese-made donkey suit and carry it back. In Baku, Mr. Hajizada shot a five-minute film in which he, in donkey gear, gave a news conference about the lush life available to donkeys in Azerbaijan. He meant to satirize a report that accused the government of spending \$60,000 to import donkeys, he said. But people took it as something riskier.

“I started worrying one week into the video, because everyone started saying, ‘Oh, are you targeting the president?’ ” Mr. Hajizada said. “Then I said, ‘To hell with it, I’m standing by my words.’ ”

A week later Mr. Milli and Mr. Hajizada were at a restaurant when strangers accosted them. When they rushed to a police station to report the incident, the authorities charged them with hooliganism, both men said. Despite international protests, Mr. Milli was sentenced to two and a half years, and Mr. Hajizada to two. They were freed in November, after 17 months.

Ali M. Hasanov, a top official in the presidential administration, said President Aliyev had allowed the two to be released early because their parents asked for mercy.

“They said they were young and could unintentionally commit some crimes,” Mr. Hasanov said, “that they were creative people and have to serve the motherland. This is why maybe you will give them a chance to return to the right way of life. And the president granted this request out of humane considerations.”

Mr. Milli remembers those first hours of freedom as delicious.

He dialed his wife, Leyla Karimli, from his lawyer’s car, and when she asked where he was, he said, “I’m calling from freedom!” Reporters were waiting for interviews, but many acquaintances kept their distance, he said. He figured they were giving him time to rest.

A month later, he called the embassies one by one to tell them he was back on the market as a translator. But the calls he expected did not come, he said.

One employee of an international organization, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she is not authorized to speak to the news media, said that her managers had proposed using Mr. Milli to translate at a seminar but that state officials had refused, calling him “a politically incorrect person.” A man from another international body, who also refused to give his name, said his manager had warned him that the organization needed to continue working with the government.

“The manager said: ‘It’s not a situation where we need to risk having Emin Milli. It’ll send the wrong message,’ ” he said.

Christel Fricke, an academic from Norway who taught a course in Baku, hesitated even to mention the bloggers’ case in class, which a friend had asked her to do, because she feared authorities would shut down the teaching program. She felt such remorse afterward that she wrote an essay about it.

“At this most harmless moment,” she wrote, “I nonetheless refused to take any risk.”

As for Ms. Karimli, 34, who is completing a doctorate in social work at the Columbia University School of Social Work, she found herself married to a symbol. In an interview in Baku last month, a few days after their divorce became final, she recalled seeing Mr. Milli for the first time, about five years ago. She had read his writing, and expected him to be homely. He was not. When he walked in, she said, “I thought I saw a light around him.”

The years since have weighed heavily on her. After Mr. Milli organized a 15-person picket to protest the elimination of presidential term limits, her father called her in New York to say he had lost his job as a physician. The only reason he was given was his relationship to Mr. Milli.

Desperate to find her father another job, Ms. Karimli dialed the phone again and again before she realized that no one would take the risk of helping her.

“Part of his life is taken from him,” she said of her father. “Just like that.”

Like her former husband, to whom she remains close, Ms. Karimli is trying to imagine a new future for herself. She is fairly sure it is as a scientist, not the selfless wife of a dissident. She is also not sure she will stay in Azerbaijan, as Mr. Milli plans to.

“I feel you should not have to choose between two fundamental human things,” she said. “You’re supposed to have a life and you’re supposed to have dignity. You’re not supposed to choose between those things.”

Mr. Milli said goodbye to Ms. Karimli last week, when he flew to England to participate in a monthlong training program on democratic activism and social justice. He said he could understand her decision, though he also has no interest in meeting other women.

“I told her, ‘See if you can be happy with someone else,’ ” he said. “ ‘If you see that you cannot be happy with someone else, I will be here.’ ”