

Newcomer, Bell: Sister city violates Houston values

By Joshua Newcomer, and Chris Bell

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Photo: Larry Luxner

A security guard stands outside the Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, Azerbaijan, the site of the 2013 "US-Azerbaijan Vision for the Future" convention organized by Houston businessman Kemal Oksuz. (The Washington Diplomat)

Since 2011, a wide-scale crackdown on human rights and civil society has taken place in the country of Azerbaijan. The government has silenced independent voices, arresting journalists, lawyers and activists and sentencing them to long prison terms on fabricated charges.

Why should the repressive actions of a government thousands of miles away matter to the citizens of Houston? Because Houston and Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku are sister cities and have been for nearly 40 years. Though authoritarianism has been a mainstay in Azerbaijan since the Soviet era, the escalation under Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev compels

Houstonians to take a closer look at this relationship. Put simply, is Baku what we really want in a sister city?

Sister city relationships are created to promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation between citizens as well as foster cultural and scientific exchanges. Houston currently has 18 sister cities on five continents. Many of these relationships are positive and reciprocal. Our relationship with Leipzig, Germany, for example, was recognized by Sister Cities International in 2010 with the annual Arts & Culture Award.

When Houston and Baku became sister cities in 1976 it was hoped this relationship would open dialogue with Baku and reinforce principles of tolerance and freedom in a society yearning to break free from Soviet rule. No such lines of communication are open any longer and the government has grown extremely abusive of its citizens, disregarding the fundamental freedoms that are recognized the world over and cherished here in Houston: freedom of speech and press, freedom of association and freedom of religion.

President Aliyev has imprisoned scores of journalists, human rights activists, opposition politicians and religious believers. Azerbaijan now has twice as many political prisoners as Russia and Belarus combined. In the past year, the situation has deteriorated significantly; there are now approximately 120 political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

Houston should champion the cause of these individuals - not their repressor. Houston boasts a strong tradition of protecting citizen's rights and individual freedoms; when such a city proudly partners with one ruled over by an authoritarian regime, its imprimatur is stamped on the regime's repressive acts.

Participating in this sister city relationship, and keeping silent about these abuses, suggests Houston's tolerance for authoritarian regimes.

While we otherwise support the cultural enrichment derived from the concerts and lectures put on by the Houston-Baku Sister City Association, our continuing affiliation with such a despotic regime taints our city's commitment to individuals' freedoms.

It is time to demand that Baku live up to the ideals of openness and freedom that the citizens of Houston prize and those in Baku are seeking. We urge Mayor Sylvester Turner and the city council to call on the Azerbaijani government to end its violation of human rights and unconditionally release all political prisoners. If the Azerbaijani government refuses such a call to action, we then, the city of Houston, must terminate our sister city relationship with Baku.

Newcomer is a Houston-based board member of Freedom Now, an organization that works to free individual political prisoners around the world. Bell, a former congressman, is a practicing attorney in Houston.