

LONG WAY HOME: THE FAMILY FRACTURED BY A FREELANCE JOURNALIST'S ABDUCTION

 28/02/18 **Written by Sophie Baggott**



In his last moments of freedom, Afgan Mukhtarli called his wife to say he'd be home soon.

The Azeri freelance journalist, whose reports often criticised the Azerbaijan government, was heading back after meeting a friend in May 2017. It was early evening in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where Afgan had lived in self-imposed exile with his wife and daughter for three years.

But Afgan, 43, never made it home. Instead a bag would be thrown over his head and he'd be taken back to Azerbaijan and into a prison cell.

Seven months after that day, in January this year, Afgan was sentenced to six years in prison for smuggling, illegal border crossing and resistance to authority. His wife, Leyla Mustafayeva, also a freelance journalist, says the charges are false. Afgan had reported regularly on Azeri government corruption for the [Institute for War and Peace Reporting](#) and [Meydan.TV](#), which she believes made him a target.



Afgan, by Aziz Karimov

"Press freedom in our country steps backwards and further backwards each year", Leyla told RPT.

"Around ten journalists and bloggers are [currently] imprisoned, and 10 to 15 journalists are under a travel ban. They cannot go abroad, meet colleagues overseas, or attend training courses."

The shock of Afgan's sudden disappearance rocked Leyla and their four-year-old daughter, Nuray: "It was early morning on 30 May 2017 when I woke up with my child and realised Afgan hadn't come home." Leyla went to Georgia's police, who said he was not in prison nor in a morgue.

"All day I was just looking at the door waiting for someone to enter and say my husband had been killed", Leyla said. At around 5pm, she had a call from journalist friends: social media posts were reporting that her husband was in jail in Baku. Afgan's passport remained at home.

The ongoing impact on Leyla has been immense. "I can't dedicate time to my work as a freelance journalist now", she said. "I'm campaigning for my husband, organising for his medicine and necessary items to be delivered to prison." While Afgan's friends have been a huge source of help on deliveries in Azerbaijan, caring and providing for Nuray is now down to Leyla alone.



Leyla and Nuray, by Samra Sadraddinly

In the week that followed Afgan's abduction, Nuray accidentally caught a news broadcast about her father. She had stayed home from nursery for ten days after the abduction. "I had seen the security services after us: I knew them by face, by their car registration plates", explained Leyla. "My daughter saw the news while I left her with our housekeeper. When I came home she ran out, found me and said: 'Mum, the police have taken my father! They put a bag over his head!' ... His detention has had a psychological effect on both of us."

Leyla tries not to picture the future. "When your hopes don't come true, it can leave you devastated, so I don't hope for anything; I just do my best to help my husband. I do everything like a robot", she said. Among her many pressing concerns is, of course, her daughter's welfare.

After nine months already, Afgan is struggling with his diabetes and heart conditions. He has a very high pulse rate. "It came only after he was detained", Leyla said. "It will continue until the day he is released, but I don't know when that will be."

Shortly after Afgan's abduction, Leyla and Nuray left their home in Georgia for their own safety. Now separated by thousands of miles, Afgan and Leyla can only guess as to when they might again freely live and work together as freelance journalists.



Leyla and Afgan in happier times