

Azerbaijan Police Arrest Businessman Linked To Tony Blair

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Police in Baku arrested Nizami Piriye, a high-profile Azerbaijani businessman closely associated with President Ilham Aliyev.

Mr Piriye, media reported, was charged with various financial crimes. He is in prison ahead of a trial in what appears to be a spectacular public fall.

One of Azerbaijan's richest men, Mr Piriye was the official owner of the Azerbaijan Methanol Company, a large and high-profile operation on the outskirts of Baku.

He paid for former British PM Tony Blair to fly to Baku in 2009 to open the plant. Mr Blair, criticised for taking cash from governments with dubious human rights records since he left office in 2007, was photographed at a press conference in Baku sitting between Mr Piriye and his son, Nasib.

Mr Piriye's holding company PNN Group also owned franchise rights to a number of Western brands in Azerbaijan and across the former Soviet Union. Its website said that this included the British high street news agent WHSmith and US fast food chain KFC. A spokesman for WHSmith, though, said that Mr Piriye did not hold its franchise in Azerbaijan.

Mr Piriye used to work in Russia for Gazprom and had businesses stretching across Central Asia.

It's unclear what triggered his arrest and whether he has been associated with Azerbaijan's increasingly marginalised opposition or if he had fallen out with President Aliyev. The United States and Europe have been increasingly critical of Mr Aliyev for cracking down on opposition.

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