



January 2008

country summary

Armenia

The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) won almost 33 percent of the vote in the May 2007 parliamentary elections and controls nearly half of the seats in the National Assembly. Two other parties loyal to President Robert Kocharian won enough seats to guarantee a pro-presidential majority. Although the elections showed improvements over previous years, observers have documented irregularities and the opposition contested results in some locations. Harassment of opposition supporters and limits on media freedom marred the run-up to the February 2008 presidential election. Torture and ill-treatment remain a problem. Limits on media freedom and freedom of religion persist.

Elections

International observers have determined that the May 12 parliamentary elections largely met international standards, although they have noted pre-election irregularities, including pressure on employees to vote for the RPA, distribution of goods and services in exchange for votes, and abuse of administrative resources. Opposition parties held rallies without police harassment and had access to public television, although pro-government parties received disproportionate coverage. On election day there were reports of fraud and double voting as well as problems in transparency, counting, tabulation, and publication of results.

On April 27 President Kocharian publicly accused Orinats Yerkir Party leader Artur Bagdasarian of treason based on secret recordings of a February meeting between Bagdasarian and a British diplomat, during which reportedly Bagdasarian claimed that government officials were taking steps to rig the parliamentary elections and asked whether the European Union could respond. No charges have been brought against Bagdasarian.

On October 23 police in the capital Yerevan detained seven opposition activists who were informing passers-by about an October 26 rally for former Armenian president and prospective 2008 presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrosian. The group was released, but five were later charged with assaulting police.

Narek Galstian, an activist with the youth group of the opposition Social Democratic Hnchakyan Party, was beaten on November 15 by a group of unknown assailants. Two days prior, police briefly detained Galstian and another opposition youth activist as they posted leaflets critical of Prime Minister (and prospective 2008 presidential candidate) Serzh Sargsian and warned them to stop anti-government propaganda.

In mid-October, leading Armenian media figures expressed concern that the country's television outlets were curtailing political news, including coverage of news conferences by opposition politicians, and accused the authorities of restricting press freedom ahead of the presidential election. On November 12, the state tax service accused the Giumri-based independent Gala television channel of tax evasion. The station's leadership believes the tax inspection and other pressures from the authorities come in response to its broadcast of a September speech by Ter-Petrosian in which he called the government "corrupt and mafiosi."

On November 22 the Yerevan Press Club and the "TEAM" Research Center presented the initial results of a project analyzing eight broadcasters' evening news coverage of prospective presidential candidates and political party leaders ahead of the 2008 presidential elections. The research revealed that Prime Minister Sargsian has received disproportionately more positive coverage compared to opposition candidates.

Arrest with Possible Political Motivation

On May 7 police arrested former minister of foreign affairs Alexander Arzoumanian, now the head of the Civil Disobedience Movement, on charges of money laundering. Authorities claim that Arzoumanian, obtained funds for political activities from a fugitive Armenian-Russian businessman. Arzoumanian maintains that the money was given to him legally by friends and not for political purposes. Arzoumanian was released on September 6 pending investigation.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

The death in custody of Levan Gulyan highlights concerns about continuing torture and ill-treatment of suspects and witnesses. On May 9, 2007, Gulyan, a restaurant owner, witnessed a fight between several individuals, which resulted in one person being shot dead. Gulyan was called to the local police station repeatedly for several days for questioning. On May 12, after questioning Gulyan at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, officials informed Gulyan's family that he had died after supposedly jumping from a second-storey window. At the request of the family, Armenian authorities allowed international forensic experts to conduct an autopsy. Although the experts could not determine the circumstances in which Gulyan fell, they concluded that the severe injuries causing his death were consistent with a fall from a second-storey window and that "a few of the smaller bruises and abrasions could have been caused by another force, e.g. a punch or a blow, prior to the fall."

On August 25 Lori province prosecutor Albert Ghazarian was killed by an unknown assailant. According to local human rights groups and media reports, during the investigation into his death authorities subjected some witnesses to beatings and other ill-treatment in order to extract testimony. Officials deny the claims.

On December 22, 2006, the Court of Cassation overturned the murder conviction of three conscript soldiers, Razmik Sargsian, Musa Serobian, and Arayik Zalian, releasing them and returning the case to prosecutors for additional investigation. Sargsian testified that military investigators had beaten him and threatened him with rape, coercing him into signing a confession in which he named as accomplices Serobian and Zalian, who also claim to have been ill-treated by investigators.

Human rights groups reported that ill-treatment of military conscripts remains widespread as a result of impunity for perpetrators. In an exceptional case, military authorities arrested and charged with murder an officer who had in April 2007 shot and killed Gegham Sergoian reportedly because he believed Sergoian and another conscript were laughing at him.

Media Freedom and Freedom of Speech

In mid-July 2007 Armenian Public Radio ceased broadcasts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a United States government-funded program widely listened to in Armenia, notwithstanding that on July 3 parliament had narrowly voted against amendments to media laws that effectively would have banned RFE/RL and other foreign broadcasters from being rebroadcast through Armenian public television and radio. RFE/RL is currently being rebroadcast through private networks.

Journalists continue to face threats, harassment, and criminal charges. On September 15 unknown assailants beat Hovannes Galajian, editor of the opposition newspaper *Iskakan Iravunk* and a frequent government critic, outside his office moments after a man claiming to be from another Armenian newspaper telephoned Galajian requesting a meeting. Vandals burned the car of Suren Baghdasarian, the founder of *Football Plus* newspaper, on January 30 (his car had been similarly vandalized a year earlier), and on February 8 vandals set fire to the car of Ara Saghatelian, chair of the editorial board of *Im Iravunk* newspaper and Panorama.am news portal, both of which often criticize government institutions and prominent business people.

On June 6 a Yerevan court handed freelance journalist Gagik Shamsian a two-and-a-half-year suspended sentence, two years' probation, and a fine, for fraud, embezzlement, and "waste." In July 2006 Shamsian had published an article about a bank robbery for which relatives of the Nubarashen district administration head faced charges. Shamsian reported being harassed and assaulted in retaliation for the article, and pressed charges against his attackers, but then prosecutors instead charged him initially with insult, cheating, and extortion.

On January 12, 2007, an appeals court lessened the sentence of Arman Babajanian, editor of the opposition newspaper *Zhamanak Yerevan*, who had been convicted of forging documents in order to evade compulsory military service. The court cut six months from the original four-year sentence, which had been considered unnecessarily harsh.

Freedom of Religion

At least 80 Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison for refusing to perform military or civilian service. In accordance with its Council of Europe obligations, in 2004 Armenia established alternative service, but the allegedly civilian service remains under military control and regulations.

Human Rights Defenders

Armenia's Ombudsman Armen Harutyunyan received 1,353 complaints in the first six months of 2007, mainly against city administrations and police. His 2006 report described human rights protection in Armenia as "unsatisfactory." He noted the excessive use of pretrial detention, violence against journalists, and limits on freedom of speech, and the need for a more independent judiciary.

Key International Actors

Following the annual Partnership and Cooperation Council meeting between the European Union and Armenia in October 2007, the two parties underlined the "importance of the respect of the rule of law, democratic principles, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms as essential elements in the bilateral dialogue." The conclusions further stressed the importance the EU attached to the government's ensuring that the 2008 presidential election is held in full compliance with international standards.

The United States presidential budget request for 2008 proposes reducing funding for civil society programs in Armenia, including human rights programs, by 66 percent, from US\$ 8.3 million to US\$ 2.9 million.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution on Armenia in January acknowledging that Armenia's revised constitution is consistent with European standards but encouraging Armenia to fully implement electoral, media, and justice system reforms. It expressed disappointment over Armenia's failure to introduce a genuine civilian alternative to military service.