

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	324
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2021 – Armenia
Udgivet:	3. marts 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. april 2021

Document #2048576

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Armenia

PARTLY FREE

55

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 22 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 33 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

53 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the [report methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

Overview

Armenia is in the midst of a significant transition following mass antigovernment protests and elections in 2018 that forced out an entrenched political elite. The new government has pledged to deal with long-standing problems including systemic corruption, opaque policymaking, a flawed electoral system, and weak rule of law. The country's politics were seriously destabilized, and more than 2,400 soldiers were killed in 2020, when fighting with Azerbaijan broke out over control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Key Developments in 2020

- Armenia and Azerbaijan began fighting over control of Nagorno-Karabakh in September, before a cease-fire agreement favoring Azerbaijan was finalized in November; over 2,400 Armenian soldiers were killed in the fighting, while 90,000 of the territory's residents fled to Armenia proper. The government of Nikol Pashinyan faced widespread criticism over the agreement, with protesters temporarily seizing the parliament's chambers soon after the cease-fire was announced, but it remained in power at year's end.
- The government declared martial law in September, as the conflict with Azerbaijan began. Despite these restrictions, major protests were held after a cease-fire was secured in November, including the one that led to the parliament takeover. The government rescinded most martial law restrictions in early December, and antigovernment protests continued through year's end.
- Authorities made continued progress in anticorruption efforts throughout the year. In February, a corruption trial against former president Serzh Sargsyan held its first session, while Prosperous Armenia party leader Gagik Tsarukyan was arrested on tax evasion charges in September. In December, the cabinet submitted a bill finalizing the creation of a new anticorruption office, which is expected to begin its work in 2021.
- The government declared a COVID-19-related state of emergency in March. Mass gatherings were heavily restricted, and Armenians were largely prevented from leaving their homes during the lockdown. Most lockdown measures ended in May, though the state of emergency did not expire until September.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair 2 / elections? 4

In late 2015, a voters approved constitutional changes that, among other things, transformed the country from a semipresidential to a parliamentary republic. The president, who had been directly elected for up to two five-year terms, would henceforth be chosen by the parliament for a single seven-year term, and most executive power would shift to the prime minister, who would also be chosen by a parliamentary majority. The new system took effect in 2018, when Serzh Sargsyan completed his second consecutive presidential term. The parliament elected diplomat Armen Sarkissian as president; though Sargsyan pledged to refrain from extending his rule by seeking the premiership, the then ruling Republican Party (HHK) nevertheless nominated him and ushered him into the post. This prompted mass antigovernment protests and led to Sargsyan's resignation after less than a week in office. Nikol Pashinyan, a deputy with the opposition Yelq Alliance who emerged as the leader of the demonstrations, sought and gained appointment as interim prime minister later in 2018.

Executive elections held before 2018 were dominated by the HHK, with incumbent elites benefiting from the abuse of administrative resources and severe limitations imposed on opposition candidates. However, Pashinyan and his new My Step Alliance swept the December 2018 parliamentary elections, which were markedly freer and fairer than elections in previous years, and took office in January 2019.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4

The National Assembly consists of a minimum of 101 members elected for five-year terms through a combination of national and district-based proportional representation. Up to four additional seats are reserved for ethnic minority representatives, and further seats can be added to ensure that opposition parties hold at least 30 percent of the seats.

Pashinyan announced his resignation as prime minister in October 2018 in order to trigger snap parliamentary elections that December. Reports by local and international observers noted that the elections were credible. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found that "the general absence of electoral malfeasance, including of vote-buying and pressure on voters, allowed for genuine competition." The My Step Alliance won 70 percent of the vote and was allotted 88 seats, including the four ethnic minority mandates. Prosperous Armenia, headed by wealthy businessman Gagik Tsarukyan, took 8 percent and 26 seats, while Bright Armenia, a small liberal party that had been part of the Yelq Alliance, took 6 percent and 18 seats. The HHK failed to cross the 5 percent threshold for representation.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 2 / election management bodies? 4

Members of Central Election Commission (CEC) are recommended and then confirmed by the National Assembly for six-year terms. In the past, the CEC was generally subservient to the HHK, and showed reluctance to investigate alleged electoral violations by the party. This resulted in a low level of public trust in the electoral process and the CEC. However, the commission reportedly exhibited more professional conduct during the 2018 snap election, making preparations on a shortened timeline, conducting voter education campaigns, and handling voter rolls, candidate registration, and publication of results in a transparent manner.

Critics of Armenia's preexisting electoral code argued that its complex system for voting and seat allocation gave an undue advantage to the HHK and affiliated business magnates. In 2019, a parliamentary working group was formed to consider major reforms to the country's electoral system. In February 2020, Pashinyan assembles a constitutional reform commission to consider electoral reforms, and its work was continuing at year's end.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political 3 / groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these 4 competing parties or groupings?

The HHK's political dominance and control of administrative resources has historically prevented a level playing field among the country's many competing parties. However, the protest movement that forced Sargsyan from office also increased pressure on the HHK to refrain from interfering in party activities, giving opposition groups significantly more freedom to operate ahead of the 2018 election. Political parties have since operated in a much freer environment, though they were largely unable to hold rallies due to COVID-19-related restrictions and the declaration of martial law during the conflict with Azerbaijan. However, small political parties were especially active in their public opposition to the November 2020 cease-fire agreement ending the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In late December 2020, amendments to the Law on Parties gained parliamentary approval. The amendments will tie public funding of political parties to female and nationwide representation, and will cap individual donations.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 3 / elections? 4

The HHK had been the main ruling party since 1999, and opposition groups had little chance of winning power in the flawed elections before 2018. However, that year's election transformed the political landscape, leaving the HHK with no parliamentary representation and paving the way for My Step to form the government. In 2018, opposition parties also defeated the HHK in municipal elections that it had long dominated, including in the capital city of Yerevan.

The ruling party and two largest opposition groups declined to field candidates for the September 2019 municipal elections, allowing current and former HHK members to retain the mayoralties of five villages. In May 2020, the three parties supported a bill abolishing direct mayoral elections in towns and some villages in favor of a party-list system. Local elections due in 2020 were postponed to 2021 due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with voters expected to participate under the new system.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 2 / 4

The HHK and its allies historically used vote buying, voter intimidation, and the abuse of administrative resources to distort the popular will, but the parliament adopted legislation that criminalized various acts related to vote buying in 2018. That year's snap election and local elections in 2018 and 2019 saw a decline in these practices.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

A system introduced as part of the 2015 constitutional reforms mandates the inclusion of up to four members of parliament representing ethnic minorities; all four must be elected on a party list. In 2018, My Step won all four minority seats, representing ethnic Russians, Yazidis, Assyrians, and Kurds.

No openly LGBT+ people have run in elections or been appointed to a public office in Armenia. Women remain underrepresented in politics and government, and most parties do little to address women's interests aside from meeting the gender quota on candidate lists. Armenia's first female mayor was elected in 2018.

Despite his praise of women's involvement in the 2018 protests, Pashinyan included only one woman, labor and social affairs minister Zaruhi Batoyan, in the cabinet in 2019. Batoyan was dismissed after the cease-fire agreement with Azerbaijan was announced in November 2020, leaving Armenia with an all-male cabinet.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 2 / 4

Through its significant majority, gained in a free and fair election, My Step controlled parliamentary decision-making throughout the year, despite significant pressure placed on it in the aftermath of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The HHK previously dominated policymaking, but it gained this power through a series of deeply flawed elections. Wealthy businesspeople, some of whom maintained close ties to the HHK, can still exert some influence over policymaking, though the Pashinyan government has worked to loosen their grip since taking office.

Russia also wields influence in Armenia, and its strategic priorities have prompted some significant policy changes in the past. Moscow refrained from interfering with the 2018 antigovernment demonstrations and the transfer of power, but did facilitate the cease-fire agreement ending the September-to-November 2020 conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

Relationships between politicians, public servants, and businesspeople have historically influenced policy and contributed to selective application of the law. The HHK government included some of Armenia's wealthiest business leaders, who continued private entrepreneurial activities despite conflicts of interest.

However, the Pashinyan government has made steady progress in investigating past wrongdoing and fortifying anticorruption mechanisms. In April 2020, the parliament passed legislation expanding the ability of prosecutors to investigate corrupt acts of former officials. Under the new law, prosecutors can more easily request the seizure of ill-gotten assets if their status is proven in court, and are allowed to investigate acts going back ten years. In early December, the cabinet submitted a bill finalizing the creation of the Anti-Corruption Committee (ACC), which was originally envisioned in 2019 as part of a three-year anticorruption plan. The ACC, as well as a specialized anticorruption court, are scheduled to begin operating in 2021.

Law enforcement agencies initiated high-profile investigations when Pashinyan took office, and those activities continued in 2020. A corruption trial against former president Serzh Sargsyan began in February; Sargsyan, along with former agriculture minister Sergio Karapetyan, two other officials, and the head of a fuel supplier, were accused of manipulating a government tender in the supplier's favor in December 2019. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

Sargsyan’s son in law, Mikayel Minasyan, who formerly served as the Armenian ambassador to the Vatican, was indicted on money laundering and income falsification allegations in April, and businesses connected to him were seized by prosecutors in June 2020. However, an appeals court voided an arrest warrant against Minasyan, who denied the allegations, in December.

Former finance minister Gagik Khachatryan faces several charges, including embezzlement of public funds, abuse of power, suppression of competition, and tax evasion. His son, Gurgen Khachatryan, was accused of aiding his activities in January 2020; Gurgen avoided arrest and vowed to remain at large in May, calling the investigation itself illegal. The cases against both individuals were ongoing at year’s end.

Prosperous Armenia leader Gagik Tsarukyan was questioned by authorities investigating vote-buying and tax-evasion allegations in June 2020, and was stripped of parliamentary immunity later that month. He was arrested by the National Security Service in late September and was later bailed, though he faced continued questioning over the accusations in early December. The case against Tsarukyan was ongoing at year’s end.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to a new law that strengthened Armenia’s anticorruption framework and the prosecution of former government officials and their associates for economic crimes.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

Transparency has historically been limited, and enforcement of asset-declaration rules for public officials has been weak. However, in 2020, the National Assembly made strides in enhancing transparency, including by strengthening asset-declaration requirements.

The Pashinyan government has also worked to expand the public’s access to information, speaking more frequently to the press and the general population, including through live video streaming on social media. However, the government faced protracted criticism for withholding information on fatalities during the conflict with Azerbaijan, and for signing a cease-fire agreement with little public discussion.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Independent and investigative outlets operate relatively freely in Armenia, and generally publish online. Small independent outlets provided robust coverage of the 2018 protests, challenging the narratives of state broadcasters and other establishment media. By comparison, most print and broadcast outlets are affiliated with political or larger commercial interests.

Violence against journalists has declined since 2018, but still occurs; the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), counted six injuries among journalists in the second quarter of 2020. In August, former police chief Vladimir Gasparyan physically threatened two Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) journalists reporting on a government plan to dismantle illegally constructed homes near Lake Sevan, and attempted to run them down with his vehicle. A criminal investigation into Gasparyan’s behavior was opened a day later.

Journalists also face legal action in the course of their work. The CPFE counted 22 cases lodged against journalists in its second- and third-quarter reports.

In March 2020, the government used COVID-19 state-of-emergency powers to restrict media outlets from reporting on information from unofficial sources, and several outlets and journalists were compelled to edit stories and social media posts that month. Bowing to pressure from journalists and media advocacy groups, the restriction was lifted in April, but the government vowed to monitor media outlets.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Article 18 of the constitution recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church as a “national church” responsible for the preservation of Armenian national identity; 94 percent of the population identifies as Armenian Apostolic. Religious minorities have reported some discrimination in the past. A temple for Yazidis—one of the country’s main religious minorities—opened in the village of Aknalich in 2019.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Although the constitution protects academic freedom, administrative and accreditation processes remain open to political influence. There is some self-censorship among academics on politically sensitive subjects.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4

Private discussion is relatively free and vibrant. The law prohibits wiretapping or other electronic surveillance without judicial approval, though the judiciary lacks independence and has been accused of excessive deference to law enforcement agencies requesting consent.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4

The right to assemble is legally guaranteed but inconsistently upheld in practice. In 2018, mass antigovernment demonstrations were organized across the country under the slogan Reject Serzh, aiming to stop the outgoing president from governing as prime minister. Despite some violent interference by police and the temporary detention of protesters, the demonstrations encountered fewer obstacles than in the past.

While conditions improved under the Pashinyan government, public assemblies were restricted when it introduced COVID-19-related emergency measures in March 2020, which prohibited gatherings of over 20 people. While the national lockdown ended in May, limits on the assemblies persisted through the end of the year; 252 people were arrested for violating social-distancing rules while rallying to support Prosperous Armenia leader Tsarukyan in June.

Assemblies were also restricted when the Armenian government declared martial law in September, as the conflict with Azerbaijan began. Despite these restrictions, major protests were held after a cease-fire was secured in November. Several hundred protesters occupied the parliament’s chambers soon after the cease-fire announcement, with police reportedly doing little to disperse the crowds. Two days after the cease-fire was made public, an opposition rally was called off after police cited martial law to order its cancellation.

The government rescinded most martial law restrictions in early December, including restrictions on assemblies, and antigovernment protests continued through year’s end. In late December, 77 demonstrators were arrested after clashes occurred in front of a Yerevan government building.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 3 / 4

Outspoken NGOs operate in Armenia, with most of them based in Yerevan. These NGOs lack significant local funding and often rely on foreign donors. Despite this impediment, civil society was active in the 2018 protests, and consulted with the government on policy matters in 2020, most notably on electoral, constitutional, and anticorruption reform.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

The law protects the rights of workers to form and join independent unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining. However, these protections are not well enforced, and employers are generally able to block union activity in practice.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The courts face systemic political influence, and judicial institutions are undermined by corruption. Judges reportedly feel pressure to work with prosecutors to convict defendants, and acquittal rates are extremely low. The government, which published a five-year judicial-reform strategy in 2019, embarked on continued reforms in 2020.

In late June, the parliament approved constitutional amendments requiring all Constitutional Court judges to abide by 12-year term limits, in a session boycotted by Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia parliamentarians. As a result, three Constitutional Court members who had served for longer than 12 years were immediately removed, and their successors were selected in a September parliamentary session.

Hrayr Tovmasyan, who previously served as chair, remained on the bench, but was forced to give the chair up as a result of the amendments. The Pashinyan government was previously embroiled in a conflict over his tenure; in June 2019, justice Vahe Grigoryan—a government ally—unsuccessfully attempted to claim the chair via a legislative technicality. That October, the government attempted to strip Tovmasyan’s powers, saying his HHK affiliation made him incapable of hearing the case of former president Robert Kocharyan, who was accused of playing a role in fatal clashes between protesters and police during the 2008 presidential campaign.

The trial against Kocharyan, which began in May 2019 and remained in session at year’s end, was a challenging matter for the judiciary. A judge assigned to preside over the case was harassed by two of Kocharyan’s supporters in Yerevan that September. Kocharyan’s lawyers later, and unsuccessfully, called on the judge to recuse herself three times, most recently in March 2020.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Authorities apply the law selectively, and due process is not guaranteed in civil or criminal cases. Lengthy pretrial

detention remains a problem, and the Armenian judiciary is largely distrusted by the public.

The raft of corruption investigations aimed at HHK elites and allies have prompted concerns about the ability of the country's judicial and investigative mechanisms to ensure fair application of the law.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Reports of police abuse of detainees and poor conditions in prisons persist. After the change in government in 2018, law enforcement agencies renewed dormant investigations into past cases of physical violence by police. Former president Kocharyan was controversially charged that year with attempting to overthrow the constitutional order over his involvement in the fatal clashes of 2008.

Conditions in areas adjacent to Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian-majority territory that previously gained de facto independence from Azerbaijan in 1994, worsened throughout 2020. In July, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces fought along the border, causing the deaths of four Azerbaijani soldiers.

In late September, the countries engaged in a full-scale military conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh; population centers in the territory were targeted during the fighting, causing civilian casualties and forcing residents to flee. A Russian-brokered cease-fire was agreed in early November; under its terms, parts of Nagorno-Karabakh taken by Azerbaijani forces remained under Azerbaijani control, along with neighboring territories formerly held by Armenia. The Armenian government reported the deaths of at least 2,425 soldiers in the conflict, while Azerbaijan reported the loss of 2,783. At least 143 civilians were killed, while over 90,000 of the territory's residents were displaced into Armenia proper. Dozens of Armenian prisoners of war reportedly remained in Azerbaijani custody at year's end. Some were reportedly tortured while in detention.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

Women reportedly face discrimination in employment and education, despite legal protections.

Although same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in 2003, LGBT+ people continue to face violence and mistreatment at the hands of police and civilians, and no antidiscrimination legislation exists to benefit this group.

In April 2020, an appeals court ruled that authorities did not appropriately investigate a 2018 assault against LGBT+ activists in the southern village of Shurnukh, in which six people were injured, and ordered a new investigation. Authorities had initially declined to prosecute the assailants after some of the accused were granted amnesty.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 4

The law protects freedom of movement and the rights of individuals to change their place of residence, employment, and education. In practice, access to higher education is somewhat hampered by a culture of bribery.

Authorities restricted the ability of Armenians to leave their homes or attend mass gatherings when a COVID-19-related lockdown was instituted in March 2020. The national lockdown ended in May, though the government maintained a COVID-19-related state of emergency through September. The September-to-November conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh also constrained freedom of movement along some border areas.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 3 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

Economic diversification and simpler regulations have increased the ease of doing business in recent years, but a lack of transparency and persistent cronyism created unfair advantages for those with ties to public officials during the HHK government's tenure. However, much of this has subsided since the 2018 change in government. Businesspeople, especially those connected to small- and medium-sized firms, previously faced arbitrary expropriation of assets and bribery demands at the hands of prominent HHK supporters, but this activity has become less common since the party's departure from office.

Armenian law adequately protects property rights, though officials have not always upheld them in the past.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because undue interference in business activities by HHK affiliates has subsided since the 2018 change in government.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

The constitution defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Domestic violence is common and not adequately prosecuted, and services for victims are inadequate. A new law on domestic violence that took effect in 2018 placed an emphasis on “restoring family harmony,” raising concerns that it would deter victims from leaving

dangerous situations. In October 2019, the government introduced amendments to remove that reference and expand the definition of what constituted domestic violence. In early January 2020, a women's rights activist reported that police became more responsive to domestic violence cases after the law's introduction.

The HHK government signed the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe (CoE) document that binds participating countries to bolster their efforts to combat violence against women, in 2018. The Pashinyan government attempted to ratify it in 2019, but the Apostolic Church publicly opposed the effort that year. While the government has not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention, the parliament did approve the ratification of the Lanzarote Convention, a CoE document that requires signatories to address sexual violence against children, in May 2020.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Legal protections against exploitative or dangerous working conditions are poorly enforced, and about half of workers are employed in the informal sector, where they may be more exposed to such conditions. Armenians are subjected to sex and labor trafficking abroad, and some children in the country work in agriculture and other sectors. Children residing in care institutions face a particularly heightened risk of trafficking. According to the US State Department, the government has made efforts to address trafficking in persons in recent years, in part by raising awareness of the problem and training law enforcement authorities, but it has done little to identify victims proactively, and the number of successful prosecutions remains small.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political
rights and civil liberties in 2020

Country:

Armenia

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

3 March 2021

Document ID:

2048576

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