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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 45 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 4.5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 4 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Explanatory Note:

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is examined in a separate report.

Quick Facts

Population: 3,000,000

Capital: Yerevan

GDP/capita: \$3,618

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

Voters in Armenia have little say in policymaking, and formal political opposition is weak. High levels of corruption as well as political influence over the media remain concerns.

Key Developments in 2017:

- The incumbent Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) won April's legislative elections. The party's strong performance will allow it to nominate a prime minister in 2018, when Armenia will transition to a parliamentary system under recent constitutional changes.
- The elections were marred by credible allegations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party.
- A trial began for members of the armed opposition group Sasna Tsrer, who in 2016, seized a police building in Yerevan and killed three police officers, while holding others hostage.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 15 / 40 (-1)**A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 4 / 12 (-1)****A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4**

International election monitors documented severe limitations on opposition candidates in the 2013 presidential election, in which President Serzh Sargsyan of the HHK won a second term.

In late 2015, voters approved constitutional changes that, among other things, will transform the country from a semipresidential to a parliamentary republic. Therefore, no further presidential elections will be held; when Sargsyan completes his second term in 2018, executive power will be transferred to a prime minister, who is appointed by the National Assembly. There are no legal requirements that would prevent Sargsyan – whose HHK maintained a majority in the National Assembly in the 2017 polls – from assuming that position.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4 (-1)

National Assembly elections took place in April 2017. Given the context of Armenia's transition to a parliamentary system, the election was to decide not only the composition of the parliament, but also which party would hold executive power in 2018. The ruling HHK won 49 percent of the vote, and hence the ability to appoint the prime minister in April 2018, when Sargsyan's presidential term will end. Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) said the elections were "tainted" by credible allegations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party. The OSCE had reported more favorably on the 2012 parliamentary elections, calling them "competitive" and "vibrant" while also noting some administrative problems.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the year's parliamentary elections were marred by credible allegations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 2 / 4

The head of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and its members, who are nominally independent and serve six-year terms, are recommended and then confirmed by the National Assembly, which is controlled by the HHK. The CEC is generally considered to be subservient to the HHK, and has been reluctant to investigate allegations of wrongdoing made against the party. This has resulted in a low level of public trust in the election process in general, and the CEC in particular.

The OSCE, in its report on the 2017 legislative elections, said the CEC generally operated with transparency, but noted a reluctance to investigate complaints and said the body had failed to adequately scrutinize campaign finance reports.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 7 / 16**B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 2 / 4**

People have the right to organize political parties in Armenia, but the ruling party's dominance and control of administrative resources prevent a level playing field among parties. There were reports in 2017 that some opposition supporters were pressured into skipping campaign rallies for opposition parties.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 2 / 4

Generally, elections are not seen as a realistic opportunity for opposition parties to win governing power. In the April 2017 elections, only one opposition political force, Yelq, was able to enter parliament; the party won 8 percent of the vote, amounting to 9 seats. The HHK took 49 percent of votes and 58 seats; the remaining votes were distributed between HHK's minor coalition partner, Dashnaktsutyun, and the Tsarukyan bloc.

The presence in parliament of the Tsarukyan bloc – led by oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, who in 2017 appeared to have negotiated an uneasy coexistence with Sargsyan – helps the government to channel some of the protest vote, delegitimize the opposition, and create an illusion of a pluralistic political landscape.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

The dominance of Sargsyan's HHK and lack of a strong opposition to it effectively limits people's political choices. Election monitors cited credible reports of vote-buying in the 2017 legislative election. The Armenian Apostolic Church is politically influential.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

A quota system introduced as part of the 2015 constitutional reforms mandates the inclusion in parliament of four lawmakers representing ethnic minorities. However, the four new representatives are required to be elected on a party list. In 2017, three were elected on the HHK party list and one was elected on the Tsarukyan bloc's list, raising questions as to the new representatives' independence and ability to advocate on behalf of the respective minority groups they belong to.

No openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons have ever run for office in elections or been appointed to a public office in Armenia.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 4 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

The HHK and Sargsyan dominate political decision-making. The influence of the HHK's minor coalition partner, Dashnaktsutyun, remains limited.

Russia has significant influence in Armenia, and at times moves by the Russian government have prompted significant changes of policy. So-called "oligarchs," or influential businessmen who have close relationships with the government, can exert influence over political decision making.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Armenia does not have effective safeguards against government corruption. The parliament includes some of the country's wealthiest business leaders, who continue entrepreneurial activities despite conflicts of interest. Relationships between politicians and other oligarchs also influence policy and contribute to selective application of the law.

In 2017, a measure criminalizing "illegal enrichment," which also contained provisions designed to reduce conflicts of interest and to protect whistleblowers, was approved – though its practical effects remains to be seen.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

While members of government regularly issue statements and communicate with journalists (often preferring pro-government media outlets), the level of openness and transparency of the government remains limited.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 30 / 60 (+1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 9 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Independent and investigative journalists operate in Armenia, but their work is generally found online. Most print and broadcast outlets are affiliated with political or commercial interests. Journalists practice self-censorship to avoid harassment by government or business figures.

D2. 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. Religious minorities have reported discrimination in the past, and some have faced difficulty obtaining permits to build houses of worship.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Although the Armenian constitution protects academic freedom, government officials hold several board positions at state universities, leaving administrative and accreditation processes open to political influence. There is some self-censorship among academics on politically sensitive subjects. The Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), a domestic NGO, made credible allegations that heads of educational institutions pressured teachers and other individuals including students' parents to vote for the ruling party in the 2017 elections.

D4. 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. However, while the law prohibits wiretapping or other electronic surveillance without judicial approval, but there have been reports of judges issuing warrants in cases lacking sufficient justification.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 6 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

The right to free assembly is legally guaranteed, but inconsistently upheld in practice. In 2016, police employed violence against peaceful protesters in Yerevan, injuring hundreds of people. While a number of the protesters were prosecuted in connection with their activism, no police involved in the crackdown have faced criminal charges. Demonstrations during the 2017 campaign period, however, took place without issue.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 2 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) lack local funding and largely rely on foreign donors. However, there are a few outspoken rights organizations and watchdog groups, mostly in Yerevan and in northern Armenia.

In 2017, the CEC denied two local NGOs permission to monitor the year's elections. There have been reports of harassment against Veles, an NGO that assists victims of predatory lenders.

E3. 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, unions have little stature, and many are inactive.

F. RULE OF LAW: 6 / 16 (+1)

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Judges face systemic political pressure, and judicial institutions are undermined by corruption. Judges reportedly feel pressure to work with prosecutors to convict defendants, and acquittal rates are extremely low.

F2. 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 judges are generally reluctant to challenge arbitrary arrests.

Lawyers defending members of the armed opposition group Sasna Tsrer – which had seized a police building in Yerevan's Erebuni District in 2016, and killed three police officers while holding others hostage – reported that their work has been obstructed and that they were subject to excessive searches upon arriving at the courts to defend their clients. In June, five of the defendants were removed from the courtroom by police. The defendants later appeared with scratches and bruises, wounds they claimed were inflicted by the police.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4 (+1)

Reports of police abuse of detainees and poor conditions in prisons persist.

Areas near Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority territory that gained de facto independence from Azerbaijan following the breakup of the Soviet Union, remained tense in 2017. However, a 2016 outbreak of fighting along the border was not repeated in 2017, and there were otherwise no high-profile attacks or violent skirmishes in Armenia during the year.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to lower levels of violence and militarization as compared to 2016, when the security situation deteriorated due to a violent takeover of a Yerevan police station by a militant group, and heightened hostilities along the Nagorno-Karabakh border.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

Rights watchdogs have criticized the government for discriminating against asylum seekers who are not of ethnic Armenian origin. LGBT people continue to face violence and mistreatment at the hands of police and civilians.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 9 / 16

G1. 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 choose their place of education, residence, and employment. In practice, access to higher education is somewhat hampered by a culture of bribery.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Economic diversification and simpler regulations have increased the ease of doing business in recent years, but a lack of transparency and persistent cronyism continue to create unfair advantages for those with ties to public officials. Armenian law adequately protects property rights, though officials do not always uphold them.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

Although same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in 2003, the constitution defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Domestic violence is common and not adequately prosecuted.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Armenia is a source and, to a lesser extent, destination country for men, women, and children subjected to sex and labor trafficking. The government has made efforts to address the problem, including by initiating a national plan of action, identifying more victims, and setting up a compensation fund for trafficking victims. At the same time, there is no formal protection program for victims or witnesses, and funding to NGO-run shelters for trafficking victims has recently decreased.

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