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Freedom in the World 2011 - Armenia

Capital: Yerevan

Population: 3,097,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

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

Overview

Despite a 2009 amnesty that freed many opposition supporters who had been arrested in a crackdown following the deeply flawed 2008 presidential election, about a dozen of the original detainees remained behind bars at the end of 2010. Also during the year, Armenia signed a protocol with Russia that extended the two countries' 1995 bilateral defense treaty until the year 2044.

Following a short period of independence amid the turmoil at the end of World War I, Armenia was divided between Turkey and the Soviet Union by 1922. Most of the Armenian population in the Turkish portion was killed or driven abroad during the war and its aftermath, but those in the east survived Soviet rule. The Soviet republic of Armenia declared its independence in 1991, propelled by a nationalist movement that had initially focused on demands to transfer the substantially ethnic Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan to Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh was recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan, but by the late 1990s it was held by ethnic Armenian forces who claimed independence. Prime Minister Robert Kocharian, a former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, was elected president of Armenia in March 1998.

The country was thrust into a political crisis on October 27, 1999, when five gunmen stormed into the National Assembly and assassinated Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, assembly speaker Karen Demirchian, and several other senior officials. Allegations that Kocharian or members of his inner circle had orchestrated the shootings prompted opposition calls for the president to resign. Citing a lack of evidence, however, prosecutors did not press charges against Kocharian, who gradually consolidated his power during the following year.

In 2003, Kocharian was reelected in a presidential vote that was widely regarded as flawed, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) alleging widespread ballot-box stuffing. During the runoff, authorities placed more than 200 opposition supporters in administrative detention for over 15 days; they were sentenced on charges of hooliganism and participation in unsanctioned demonstrations. The Constitutional Court upheld the election results, but it proposed holding a "referendum of confidence" on Kocharian within the next year; Kocharian rejected the proposal. Opposition parties boycotted subsequent sessions of the National Assembly, and police violently dispersed protests mounted in the spring of 2004 over the government's failure to redress the problems of the 2003 vote.

The Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) – the party of Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian, a close Kocharian ally – won 65 of 131 seats in the May 2007 National Assembly elections. Two other major pro-presidential parties took a total of 41 seats, giving the government a clear majority. Opposition parties suffered from disadvantages regarding media coverage and the abuse of state resources ahead of the vote.

The 2008 presidential election was held on February 19. Five days after the balloting, the Central Election Commission announced that Sarkisian had won with 52.8 percent and the main opposition candidate, former president Levon Ter-Petrosian, had taken 21.5 percent. The results, which the opposition disputed, allowed Sarkisian to avoid a runoff vote. Peaceful opposition demonstrations that began on February 21 turned violent a week later when the police engaged the protesters. According to the OSCE, 10 people were killed and more than 200 were injured during the clashes. Outgoing president Kocharian declared a 20-day state of emergency, and more than 100 people were arrested in the wake of the upheaval.

The authorities' inadequate steps to investigate police abuses during the 2008 violence were criticized by the Council of Europe, and although a June 2009 amnesty freed 30 protesters, about a dozen remained behind bars at the end of 2010. Meanwhile, the HHK secured a majority in May 2009 municipal elections in Yerevan, but opposition parties rejected the results as fraudulent.

In August 2010, Sarkisian and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev signed a protocol that extended the two countries' 1995 bilateral defense treaty until 2044. Also during the year, the National Assembly postponed a vote on legislation that would require Yerevan to formally recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Armenia is not an electoral democracy. The unicameral National Assembly is elected for four-year terms, with 90 seats chosen by proportional representation and 41 through races in single-member districts. The president is elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. However, elections since the 1990s have been marred by major irregularities. The May 2007 parliamentary vote was described by the OSCE as an improvement, albeit flawed, over previous polls, but the 2008 presidential election was seriously undermined by problems with the vote count, a biased and restricted media environment, and the abuse of administrative resources in favor of ruling party candidate Serzh Sarkisian. The Yerevan municipal elections held in May 2009 were the first in which the capital's mayor was elected by the city council rather than appointed by the president. They also suffered from significant violations, though international observers claimed that the fraud did not jeopardize the overall legitimacy of the results.

Bribery and nepotism are reportedly common among government officials, who are rarely prosecuted or removed for abuse of office. Corruption is also believed to be a serious problem in law enforcement. A five-year initiative to combat graft, announced in 2008, has not made meaningful headway against the country's entrenched culture of corruption.

There are limits on press freedom in Armenia. The authorities use informal pressure to maintain control over broadcast outlets, the chief source of news for most Armenians.

State-run Armenian Public Television is the only station with nationwide coverage, and the owners of most private channels have close government ties. In June 2010, the National Assembly enacted legislation that fixed the maximum number of television stations at 18 – down from at least 22 that are currently operating – and obliges a number of the new total to focus on content other than domestic news and political affairs. The changes were seen as an effort to retain government dominance of the broadcast media, partly by continuing to deny a broadcast license to the independent television company A1+ despite a 2008 ruling in its favor by the European Court of Human Rights. A1+, which had been forced off the air by a government licensing decision in 2002, made a fresh bid for a license in October 2010. The new legislation's caps on the number of regional outlets were also expected to affect GALA TV, the one remaining station that regularly criticizes the government. In December, the A1+ bid was again rejected by the National Commission on Television and Radio, which claimed that A1+ had submitted fraudulent documents in the bidding process; A+ disputed this assertion.

The criminal code still includes libel as a criminal offense, and violence against journalists is a problem. In December, Nikol Pashinian, editor-in-chief of the independent daily *Haykakan Zhamanak*, was beaten in prison custody. Pashinian, an opposition activist, was serving a four-year sentence in Kosh prison outside of Yerevan for allegedly organizing mass riots spurred by flawed February 2008 presidential elections in Armenia. He was moved to Artik prison, a harsher detention environment, where according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, he reportedly was beaten and transferred to solitary confinement. The authorities do not interfere with internet access.

Freedom of religion is generally respected, though the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church enjoys certain exclusive privileges, and members of minority faiths sometimes face societal discrimination. In 2010, there were 35 Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison terms for refusing to participate in either military service or the military-administered alternative service for conscientious objectors.

The government generally does not restrict academic freedom. Public schools are required to display portraits of the president and the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and to teach the Church's history.

In the aftermath of the 2008 postelection violence, the government imposed restrictions on freedom of assembly. At the end of 2010, about a dozen of the opposition protesters arrested in the 2008 crackdown remained in jail. The Yerevan city administration in 2010 barred the opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK) from holding a September rally in the city's Liberty Square, saying it would interfere with preparations for an annual festival set for October. The authorities offered an alternative location that was farther away from the city center.

Registration requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are cumbersome and time-consuming. Some 3,000 NGOs are registered with the Ministry of Justice, though many are not active in a meaningful way. While the constitution provides for the right to form and join trade unions, labor organizations are weak and relatively inactive in practice.

The judiciary is subject to political pressure from the executive branch and suffers from considerable corruption. Police make arbitrary arrests without warrants, beat detainees during arrest and interrogation, and use torture to extract confessions. Prison conditions in Armenia are poor, and threats to prisoner health are significant.

Although members of the country's tiny ethnic minority population rarely report cases of overt discrimination, they have complained about difficulties in receiving education in their native languages. Members of the Yezidi community have sometimes reported discrimination by police and local authorities.

Citizens have the right to own private property and establish businesses, but an

inefficient and often corrupt court system and unfair business competition hinder such activities. Key industries remain in the hands of so-called oligarchs and influential cliques who received preferential treatment in the early stages of privatization.

According to the current election code, women must comprise 15 percent of a party's candidate list for the parliament's proportional-representation seats and occupy every 10th position on the list. Women currently hold 12 of the 131 National Assembly seats. Domestic violence and trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution are believed to be serious problems. Though homosexuality was decriminalized in 2003, homosexual individuals still face violence and persecution.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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