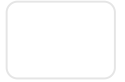


Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	366
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2023 – Armenia
Udgivet:	10. marts 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. juni 2023



Document #2088482

Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2023 - Armenia

PARTLY FREE

54

/ 100

Political Rights 23 / 40

Civil Liberties 31 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

55 / 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 continues to be seriously affected by the 2020 conflict with Azerbaijan, which saw several months of fighting over control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Key Developments in 2022

- In May, a report by Google's Threat Analysis Group (TAG) linked the Armenian government to the use of Predator spyware, created by the North Macedonian company Cytrox. The spyware had been used to target journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists in several countries,

including Armenia. Local media outlets reported that the devices of several political dissidents had been hacked.

- In September, Azerbaijani military forces entered Armenian territory. The escalation of the ongoing military conflict killed nearly 200 and injured more than 293 Armenian soldiers; three civilians were killed; and 20 soldiers were taken as prisoners of war. Official reports included credible evidence that Azerbaijani troops had committed war crimes. While active hostilities lasted two days, the subsequent ceasefire has been regularly violated.

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 elections? 2 / 4

Constitutional changes in 2015 transformed the country from a semipresidential to a parliamentary republic. The president is chosen by the parliament for a single seven-year term, and most executive power lies with the prime minister, who is chosen by a parliamentary majority. In January 2022, President Armen Sargsyan, who had been elected before the 2018 revolution, resigned. Vahagn Khachaturyan, who was serving as minister of high-tech industry, was elected as president.

In June 2021, Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party won a majority of seats in snap elections called after Pashinyan resigned as prime minister in April. The party's electoral victory allowed him to retain his position as prime minister. Though Pashinyan's win was contested by the opposition, the Constitutional Court upheld the election results, and local and international observers considered the elections to be free and fair, despite some irregularities.

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 under a newly adopted closed-list proportional representation system, simplifying the previous two-tier proportional representation system. 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.

In April 2021, Pashinyan resigned as prime minister, triggering snap parliamentary elections that June. Three parties gained seats in the June parliamentary elections, with Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party winning a stable majority of 71 seats with 53.9 percent of the vote. The new Armenia Alliance, led by former president Robert Kocharyan, gained 29 seats with 21.1 percent of the vote. Another new bloc, the I Have Honor Alliance, founded by former president Serzh Sargsyan (unrelated to Armen Sargsyan), gained 7 seats after receiving 5.2 percent of the vote, though one representative left I Have Honor to become an independent lawmaker in December. Though party alliances are required to meet a 7 percent electoral threshold, the threshold was waived for Sargsyan's alliance, as Armenian law mandates that legislature must be composed of no fewer than three parties.

Local and international observers deemed the elections to be competitive, well-organized, and fairly

administered, though there were some irregularities.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the 3 / relevant election management bodies? 4

Members of the Central Election Commission (CEC) are recommended and then confirmed by the parliament for six-year terms. According to international observers, during the June 2021 elections, the CEC conducted its work in a transparent and efficient manner, meeting all legal deadlines and enjoying a high level of confidence in its capacity to deliver its mandate. In October 2022, Vahagn Hovakimyan, a member of the ruling party, was elected head of CEC, drawing concerns from civil society groups about the independence and neutrality of the CEC.

In April 2021, the parliament amended existing electoral laws to reflect recommendations made by the Venice Commission and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The June snap elections were successfully administered under the reformed system, which eliminated territorial lists, simplifying the existing electoral system. The amendments enjoyed broad support by political forces and civil society; further reforms were also adopted in May 2021.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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

Political parties and opposition groups have been able to operate in a much freer environment since 2018. In January 2021, amendments to the Law on Parties took effect, tying public funding of political parties to female and nationwide representation and capping individual donations.

An unprecedented number of political entities—22 political parties and 4 alliances—took part in June 2021 snap parliamentary elections.

B2 0-4 pts

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

Before 2018, elections were highly flawed; the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) had been the main ruling party since 1997, and opposition groups had little chance of winning power. However, the 2018 polls transformed the political landscape, and elections have become significantly more competitive. International and local observers deemed the June 2021 snap elections, which saw two opposition alliances gain parliamentary seats, to be competitive.

Following local elections in December 2021, authorities within the Ministry of Justice began prosecuting several opposition-affiliated elected representatives of local government bodies, including various cities' Councils of Elders. Local human rights advocates claimed the cases against the elected officials were politically motivated and called on the government to enable them to carry out their duties. In September 2022 local elections, the opposition parties won control of 9 out of 18 communities.

In July 2022, the vice speaker of Parliament and the chairman of a standing committee—both from the opposition—were forced out of their positions due to absences. In protest, other opposition members resigned from their leadership posts in standing committees. The open posts remained vacant at the end of the year.

B3 0-4 pts

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

In April 2021, the parliament adopted amendments calling for heavier penalties for vote buying, election-related violence, and disrupting the electoral process. They also criminalized the obstruction of pre-election campaign activities.

Though the 2021 elections saw a decline in such practices, international observers reported allegations of election disruption, including isolated incidents of vote buying and the misuse of administrative resources.

B4 0-4 pts

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

A system introduced as part of 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 2021, the Civil Contract Party won three minority seats representing ethnic Russians, Yazidis, and Kurds, while the Armenia Alliance won one seat representing ethnic Assyrians.

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.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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

Through its significant majority, gained in a free and fair election, the Civil Contract Party controlled parliamentary decision-making after the June 2021 snap elections. Though Prime Minister Pashinyan promised to loosen the influence of business over policymaking, two wealthy businessmen entered the parliament from his party list. Some opposition parliamentarians also maintain close ties to businesspeople.

Since facilitating the November 2020 cease-fire agreement that paused the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia wields increased influence in Armenia as the main mediator in Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations and has deployed military forces across the Armenian-Azerbaijani borders.

In May, opposition groups in the parliament boycotted parliamentary sessions and demanded the prime minister's resignation due to Pashinyan's handling of the conflict with Azerbaijan. However, the opposition groups failed to gain public support and dismantled their tents after two months of

blockading the center of Yerevan. They continued boycotting parliamentary sessions until mid-November.

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. High-level government officials are rarely investigated despite clear evidence of improper uses of their office. Though the government attempted to investigate past wrongdoings and fortify anticorruption mechanisms after the revolution, those measures were significantly hindered by security challenges following the 2020 war.

In November 2022, the new Anti-Corruption Court and the Anti-Corruption Chamber of the Court of Cassation went into effect after legislation created the two bodies in April 2021. Though authorities have initiated high-profile corruption investigations, no charges have been brought forward. In August 2022, prosecutors initiated lawsuits to recover stolen assets from allegedly corrupt former officials from the prerevolution regime. In November, Mnatsakan Martirosyan's election as an Anti-Corruption Court judge sparked controversy, as several of his rulings in politically charged cases had been overturned by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

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. In 2020, the parliament made strides in enhancing transparency, including by strengthening asset-declaration requirements, though a lack of transparency and accountability persists.

Prime Minister Pashinyan no longer conducts in-person press conferences with journalists, instead conducting them online, which has been criticized by local media groups.

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 often provide robust coverage 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.

In 2021, authorities imposed several new restrictions on media freedom, including limiting the free movement of journalists in the parliament and in parts of the Syunik region. In July of that year, the parliament criminalized the act of directing serious insults (defamation) toward officials and public figures. After significant outcry from journalists' associations and human rights organizations raising concerns that the law could be easily abused, the law was removed from the criminal code in July 2022.

The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), recorded that 15 journalists had experienced physical violence between January and September 2022.

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.

In 2020, the National Security Service (NSS) opened an investigation into Yazidi activist Sashik Sultanyan after he publicly stated that Yazidis experience discrimination in Armenia; international human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have criticized the investigation as retaliatory and unlawful. The trial was in progress at the end of 2022.

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.

In March 2021, the parliament issued an executive order allowing the government to appoint most members of the boards of trustees for three of the country's leading state universities, which enables the authorities to exercise more control over the universities' key decisions, including the election of university rectors.

In August 2022, Yerevan State University student Taron Manukyan, son of opposition member of Parliament Gegham Manukyan who had been arrested for assault, was expelled from the university for failing to take in-person exams. Gegham Manukyan claimed authorities had stepped in to prevent his son from sitting for his online or at the place he is detained, as other people in prison had been able to do so.

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.

In July 2022, the minister of justice removed provisions from the criminal code that criminalized defamation, which had been implemented in July 2021 and had been used to open at least nine criminal cases against people accused of insulting public figures.

In late 2021, reports by Meta and Citizen Lab claimed that Armenian authorities had paid for the use of Predator spyware, created by the North Macedonian company Cytrox. The spyware had been used to target journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists in several countries, including Armenia. In May 2022, a report by Google's Threat Analysis Group (TAG) also linked the use of Cytrox spyware to

victims in Armenia, claiming “government-backed actors” were responsible. Local media outlets reported that the devices of several political dissidents had been hacked.

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.

Frequent antigovernment protests took place throughout the country in 2022. In June, police used stun grenades to disperse protesters in Yerevan who were demanding Prime Minister Pashinyan’s resignation after a law proposed by opposition that would reject any peace accord with Azerbaijan failed to pass in Parliament. At least 42 people, including police officers, were injured in the clashes between police and protesters.

In September 2022, relatives of soldiers who had been killed in the war with Azerbaijan peacefully protested during government-organized Independence Day events. Police violently detained at least 37 people, and some protesters were injured. In response, 35 local NGOs called for the resignation of the Yerevan chief of police.

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, most of which are 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 has consulted with the government on policy matters, 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 published a five-year judicial-reform strategy in 2019; reforms continued to be enacted in 2022, though progress has been slow.

In July 2022, the acting head of Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) resigned after a recording leaked in which he threatened then-head of the SJC with criminal charges if the latter refused to resign. In October, new SJC members were elected by the ruling faction, including a former minister of justice who had also been a member of the ruling party. The election was viewed as politically motivated.

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 1 /
insurgencies? 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.

Conditions in areas adjacent to Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian-majority territory that previously gained de facto independence from Azerbaijan in 1994, have declined following the 2020 military conflict in the region. Civilians in the region remain at risk of experiencing physical violence.

In September 2022, Azerbaijani military forces entered Armenian territory. The escalation of the ongoing military conflict killed over 200 and injured more than 293 Armenian soldiers. Three civilians were killed, and 20 soldiers were taken as prisoners of war. Official reports included credible evidence that Azerbaijani troops had committed war crimes. Civilian settlements and buildings Syunik, Gegharkunik and Vayots Dzor provinces were also targeted, causing significant damage and displacing thousands of civilians. While active hostilities lasted two days, the subsequent ceasefire has been regularly violated.

Dozens of Armenian prisoners of war reportedly remained in Azerbaijani custody in 2022. Some were reportedly tortured while in detention.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to an escalation in military aggression from Azerbaijan, with Azerbaijani forces launching several attacks on Armenian territory that killed more than 200 people and caused mass displacement of civilians.

F4 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the 2 /
population? 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. In 2022, several cases of attacks on trans women and public calls for violence against LGBT+ people were reported.

Under the new criminal code implemented in 2022, individuals who commit crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity may be held criminally liable.

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? 2 / 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.

Effects of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh have continued into 2022, continuing to constrain freedom of movement along some border areas. After the November 2020 ceasefire, Azerbaijani forces took control over a 21-kilometer (13-mile) stretch of the Goris-Kapan highway, the only major road connecting the Syunik region to the rest of Armenia, partitioning villages and affecting residents' ability to move freely. In November 2021, Azerbaijani forces built new checkpoints along the road.

Azerbaijani forces continued to occupy Armenian territory in 2022 and have frequently acted to impede the internal movement of Armenian residents, using threat of force against civilians to exert control. In September, Azerbaijani forces launched another military offensive, killing hundreds of soldiers and three civilians, and destroying infrastructure in the Syunik region.

G2 0-4 pts

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

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

Numerous incidents of burning pastures and farms, as well as theft of cattle, were reported after the escalation of the militarized conflict and the entry of Azerbaijani troops into Armenia in September 2022.

G3 0-4 pts

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

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 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. 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. The July 2022 criminal code includes more significant protections for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV).

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 does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2022

Country:

Armenia

Source:

[Freedom House](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2023>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

10 March 2023

Document ID:

2088482

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

