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Freedom in the World 2010 - Armenia

Capital: Yerevan

Population: 3,100,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

The ruling Republican Party won municipal elections in the capital in May 2009, securing a majority of council seats and confirmation of the appointed incumbent as mayor. International observers alleged widespread fraud, and opposition parties refused to recognize the results. Meanwhile, police abuses committed during the violence that followed the 2008 presidential election remained largely unpunished, and a number of opposition supporters who were arrested during the 2008 crackdown were still behind bars at year's end.

After 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 Armenians in the Turkish portion were 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 gained strength during the tenure of reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. The movement 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, the former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, was elected president of Armenia in 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. The leader of the gunmen, Nairi Hunanian, maintained that he and the other assailants had acted alone in an attempt to incite a popular revolt against the government. 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 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 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 OSCE's final observation report stated that the electoral deficiencies had "resulted primarily from a lack of sufficient will to implement legal provisions effectively and impartially."

By the end of 2009, little had been done to punish police officers for abuse during the 2008 postelection violence. Though there were reportedly hundreds of internal inquiries, only a handful of officers were charged with using excessive force. In late 2009, investigators for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) criticized the results of an Armenian parliamentary inquiry, which found that the crackdown on the postelection protests had been "by and large legitimate and adequate." A general amnesty bill passed in June freed 30 protesters, but more than a dozen reportedly remained in prison at year's end.

Municipal elections for Yerevan were held in May 2009. The HHK secured 35 of 65 seats in the city council, meaning the appointed HHK incumbent was reinstated as mayor. Opposition parties refused to recognize the results, accusing the ruling party of fraud. Observers with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) reported witnessing "egregious violations," and the Council of Europe similarly cited "serious deficiencies."

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 serious 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 marred 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 indirectly elected rather than appointed by the president. They also suffered from serious 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. Armenia was ranked 120 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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. The independent television company A1+ continued to be denied a license in 2009 despite a 2008 ruling in its favor by the European Court of Human Rights. Libel is considered a criminal offense, and violence against journalists is a problem. The Helsinki Committee of Armenia reported that attacks on journalists increased in both frequency and cruelty in 2009. Among other assaults during the year, Argishti Kivirian, the founding editor of the news website Armenia Today, was severely beaten in late April, and a week later two assailants attacked Nver Mnatsakanian, a television journalist and commentator. Amnesty International reported that independent media outlets that covered the political activities of the opposition were often harassed. The authorities generally 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. At the end of 2009, there were 76 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. The majority of opposition requests to hold demonstrations in 2009 were rejected, and the authorities allegedly restricted road access to the capital ahead of planned opposition rallies. Police also reportedly continued to use force to disperse some opposition gatherings. In December, four police officers were convicted of abusing protesters in the 2008 clashes, but they avoided jail time under a general amnesty enacted in June.

Registration requirements for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are cumbersome and time-consuming. Some 3,000 NGOs are registered with the Ministry of Justice, although 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 judicial branch 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 account for 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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