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Armenia

PARTLY FREE

54
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	23 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	31 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

54 /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 experienced a significant transition following mass antigovernment protests and elections in 2018 that forced out an entrenched political elite. The government has since worked to address long-standing problems including systemic corruption, opaque policymaking, a flawed electoral system, and weak rule of law. The country has been seriously affected by military pressure from Azerbaijan in recent years. In September 2023, nearly the entire ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, which had enjoyed de facto independence from Azerbaijan since 1994, fled to Armenia after the Azerbaijani military defeated local defense forces and took full control of the territory.

Key Developments in 2023

- A joint research investigation released in May concluded that a number of journalists and civil society activists had been targeted with the Pegasus spyware product between October 2020 and December 2022. The researchers said circumstantial evidence led them to suspect that the surveillance was related to the military situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and that the perpetrators were linked to the Azerbaijani government.
- Yerevan municipal council elections were held in September. Monitors said the polls featured significant irregularities but were generally competitive. A ruling-party candidate was elected mayor.
- Following a lengthy blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh that resulted in a humanitarian crisis, Azerbaijani forces launched a military operation against the territory on September 19, aiming to disarm and dismantle its de facto government. Vastly outnumbered, local ethnic Armenian forces agreed to a

Russian-proposed a cease-fire the following day, and the territory's president signed a decree that effectively dissolved its separate state institutions.

- The capitulation of Nagorno-Karabakh's leaders and defense forces prompted almost the entire ethnic Armenian population to flee to Armenia, leading to a housing crisis and other challenges as the government and civil society struggled to accommodate the displaced people.

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

The president is chosen by the parliament for a single seven-year term. 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 the new president.

In June 2021, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won a majority of seats in snap parliamentary elections. The party's electoral victory allowed him to retain his position. Though the outcome was contested by the opposition, the Constitutional Court upheld the election results, and local and international observers considered the elections to be relatively 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 closed-list 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 the June 2021 snap elections, three party groups won representation. Pashinyan's Civil Contract secured 53.9 percent of the vote and a stable majority of 71 seats. The new Armenia Alliance, led by former president Robert Kocharyan, took 21.1 percent of the vote and 29 seats. Another new bloc, the I Have Honor Alliance, founded by former president Serzh Sargsyan (unrelated to Armen Sargsyan), won 5.2 percent of the vote and 7 seats, though one representative left the group to become an independent lawmaker. While party alliances are required to meet a 7 percent electoral threshold, the threshold was waived for Sargsyan's alliance, as Armenian law requires a minimum of three party groups in the legislature.

Local and international observers deemed the elections to be competitive, well-organized, and fairly administered, though there were some irregularities.

Fourteen political forces took part in elections for the Yerevan municipal council in September 2023, which drew a turnout of only 28.4 percent of eligible voters. The domestic monitoring group Independent Observer found that while there were "massive abuses of administrative resources" during and before the campaign, voters were generally free in expressing their electoral will. The group also recorded instances of unauthorized individuals in voting rooms, violations of voting confidentiality, "directing voters," and violation of the rights of observers or media representatives.

A3 0-4 pts

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

3/4

Members of the Central Election Commission (CEC) are recommended and then confirmed by the parliament for six-year terms. According to international observers, the CEC conducted its work in a transparent and efficient manner during the June 2021 parliamentary elections. In October 2022, Vahagn Hovakimyan, a member of the ruling party, was elected head of the CEC, drawing concerns from civil society groups about the body's independence and neutrality.

An April 2021 reform introduced a simple proportional electoral system based on a nationwide constituency, and the June snap elections were successfully held under the new system. In May 2023, the government proposed new amendments to the electoral code. The Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in a joint report called the frequency of electoral legislation amendments “striking” and expressed regrets that not all prior recommendations had been addressed.

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 groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

3/4

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 four alliances—took part in the June 2021 snap parliamentary elections.

B2 0-4 pts

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

3/4

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. In the September 2023 Yerevan municipal council elections, the opposition National Progress party and Mother Armenia alliance received approximately 19 percent and 15 percent of the votes, respectively, with the ruling Civil Contract party securing only 32.5 percent.

In December 2023, the Civil Contract party replaced the mayor of Alaverdi in a no-confidence vote that the opposition said was illegal, under a legal provision allowing only two no-confidence votes per year. A coalition of civil society groups condemned the move, saying the ruling party had repeatedly sought to remove the mayor using “pressure and intimidation.” Also in an unusual move in December, a Yerevan court banned activist Avetik Chalabyan, a member of the opposition Unification Initiative, from participating in public rallies for two years over allegations that he had attempted to bribe students to participate in antigovernment rallies in 2022. He rejected the charges and appealed the decision.

There have been some prosecutions of opposition-affiliated elected representatives in recent years that local rights advocates described as politically motivated.

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

In April 2021, the parliament adopted amendments that set heavier penalties for vote buying, election-related violence, and disrupting the electoral process. They also criminalized the obstruction of preelection campaign activities. Though the June 2021 elections featured a decline in such practices, international observers continued to report allegations, including isolated incidents of vote buying and the misuse of administrative resources.

Independent Observer said that no outright voter bribery took place during the 2023 election campaign for the Yerevan municipal council, but noted several cases of voters being offered items or services by various parties.

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 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 the 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 the policies of the government?

2 / 4

The Civil Contract party, which won a significant parliamentary majority through competitive elections, effectively controls government policy and legislation. Although Prime Minister Pashinyan promised to reduce the influence of business interests over policymaking, two powerful businessmen entered the parliament on his party list. Some opposition lawmakers also maintain close ties to influential businesspeople.

Moscow appeared to strengthen its influence over the Armenian government after mediating a November 2020 cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan and deploying peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. Significant components of national infrastructure, including railroads and energy supplies, are also dependent on Russia, and Russian border guards remained positioned at locations along Armenia's border as of 2023. However, Armenian authorities have been diversifying their international security partnerships since Azerbaijani forces

blockaded Nagorno-Karabakh beginning in December 2022 and then conquered the territory in September 2023 despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers.

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 2018 revolution, those measures were significantly hindered by security challenges following the 2020 war with Azerbaijan.

Several media investigations into the heads of the Anti-Corruption Committee and the Commission to Prevent Corruption (CPC) have raised concerns about the genuine intentions of these bodies to tackle corruption. In December 2023, CPC chair Haykuhi Harutyunyan was not reelected as a CPC member following allegations of improper behavior from the ruling party. Harutyunyan said the claims amounted to a politicized campaign against her.

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. Armenia's freedom of information law is unevenly upheld. During the period from January to September 2023, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) recorded 106 cases in which the rights of journalists to receive and disseminate information were violated. In October, journalists were banned from entering the Yerevan municipal building to attend the inauguration of the newly elected mayor.

Prime Minister Pashinyan reestablished direct engagement with the media in 2023, holding four press conferences as well as one question-and-answer session with

citizens. He had not participated in press conferences and other such direct engagement since 2021.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	2/4
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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 limits on the free movement of journalists in the parliament and in parts of Syunik Province.

In September 2023, the Union of Informed Citizens, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that founded the fip.am fact-checking platform, announced that a Yerevan court had imposed a 1 million dram (\$2,500) lien on its assets. This lien resulted from a lawsuit filed after fip.am published an article alleging abuse of administrative resources by the ruling party ahead of the Yerevan municipal council elections. Local media freedom organizations condemned the imposition of the lien.

CPFE recorded three cases of physical violence against journalists between January and September 2023.

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. Members of religious minority groups have reported some discrimination in the past.

In 2020, the National Security Service opened an investigation into Yazidi activist Sashik Sultanyan after he publicly stated that Yazidis experience discrimination in Armenia; international human rights NGOs criticized the investigation as retaliatory and unlawful. The case was apparently ongoing in 2023.

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. The government is empowered to appoint most members of the boards of trustees for three of the country’s leading state universities, enabling a degree of state control over their key decisions and senior leadership. There is some self-censorship among academics on politically sensitive subjects.

In 2023, the office of the Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia reported cases in which exams were disrupted in Yeraskh due to gunfire from the Azerbaijani military.

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 November 2023, Avetik Ishkhanyan, the head of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, was charged with “inciting violence” for a social media post in which he called the prime minister a “traitor” over his handling of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and declared “death to traitors!” Local rights advocates allege that the state Investigative Committee has prosecuted such cases selectively, intending to induce self-censorship among government critics.

In 2021 and 2022, reports emerged suggesting that journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists in Armenia had been targeted with the Predator spyware product, created by the North Macedonian company Cytrox, and implicated the Armenian government in surveillance activity.

In May 2023, a joint investigation by Access Now, CyberHUB-AM, Citizen Lab, Amnesty International’s Security Lab, and independent researcher Ruben Muradyan concluded that a number of journalists and civil society activists in Armenia had been targeted with the Israeli-based NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware product between October 2020 and December 2022. The researchers said circumstantial evidence led them to suspect that the surveillance was related to the military situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and that the timing and the spyware used suggested involvement by the Azerbaijani government. They also noted that it was “the first documented evidence of the use of Pegasus spyware in an international war context.”

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	3/4
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The right to assemble is legally guaranteed but inconsistently upheld in practice.

A series of antigovernment demonstrations were held after Azerbaijani forces seized control of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. In Yerevan, police used light- and sound-based tools against protesters who were demanding Prime Minister Pashinyan's resignation; at least 33 people were injured in clashes between the two sides.

E2 0-4 pts

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

3/4

A variety of outspoken NGOs operate in Armenia, and most are based in Yerevan. These NGOs lack significant local funding. Civic groups regularly consult with the government on policy matters, most notably on electoral, constitutional, and anticorruption reforms.

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. As of mid-2022,

only 32 percent of actions and subactions outlined in the strategy had been implemented on time, and 56 percent had not been implemented.

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

The suspension of several judges by the SJC in 2023 prompted further concerns among rights advocates about potential political interference in the judiciary.

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.

A series of high-profile cases involving members of the HHK elite have stretched on for years, generally without convictions. In September 2023, a criminal case initiated against former president Serzh Sargsyan for alleged waste of public funds was dismissed. In December, after a four-year trial, a corruption prosecution against former president Robert Kocharyan was halted when a judge agreed with a petition arguing that the statute of limitations had expired.

F3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

Reports of police abuse of detainees and poor conditions in prisons persist. A Ministry of Internal Affairs was established in early 2023 as a part of reforms to the police force. Vahe Ghazaryan, the police chief and a close associate of Pashinyan, was appointed as minister. Three local NGOs then ceased their work in

the coordinating council for the reform project, arguing that genuine institutional changes were unlikely with Ghazaryan in charge.

Security conditions in areas adjacent to Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh deteriorated following the 2020 military conflict. Following large-scale military clashes along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in 2022, Azerbaijani forces on Armenian territory moved closer to Armenian villages. This has “created serious security problems for the civilian population and infrastructure,” according to a 2023 report from the office of the Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia. Throughout 2023, sporadic shooting by the Azerbaijani military was reported in the border areas of Gegharkunik, Syunik, and Ararat Provinces, disturbing residents’ daily life.

The Center for Truth and Justice reported in 2023 that a number of Armenian civilians had been taken hostage by Azerbaijani forces within the borders of Armenia, and that some may be in Azerbaijani jails, where they are at risk of torture.

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 experience violence and mistreatment at the hands of police and civilians. Under the new criminal code implemented in 2022, individuals who commit offenses based on sexual orientation and gender identity may be held criminally liable, but local human rights organizations say the new hate-crime articles are not applied in practice. In August 2023, a transgender woman was murdered in her apartment in Yerevan. The suspect was arrested, though the state Investigative Committee said that the murder had been motivated by a drug-related argument. The Human Rights Defender’s office condemned widespread hate speech about the murder on social media, and urged a fair and thorough investigation.

Most of the more than 100,000 people who fled to Armenia from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 held Armenian passports with a specific code

designating the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In October, they received a new “temporary protected status.” Analysts have expressed concern that these individuals face a difficult choice under the temporary protection law between opting for refugee status or becoming Armenian citizens with full political rights and other benefits. Those who choose citizenship are likely to lose access to the assistance provided to refugees.

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.

Following the September 2022 conflict along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, approximately 200 square kilometers of Armenian territory remains under occupation. Azerbaijani forces have advanced their positions closer to Armenian residential areas, compelling some civilians to leave their homes and resulting in the depopulation of some villages near the border.

The influx of ethnic Armenians fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh in late 2023 caused a housing crisis in Armenia. Thousands of people have rejected government assistance to reside in border regions, instead opting for more secure temporary shelters near the capital.

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. Economic diversification and simpler regulations have increased the ease of doing business in recent years.

Livestock farming and agricultural work in Syunik and Gegharkunik Provinces have become more difficult for security reasons in recent years, with economic activity disrupted in the fields and pastures located near Azerbaijani military positions. In June 2023, Azerbaijani forces fired repeatedly at a metallurgical plant being constructed in Yeraskh, injuring two workers. As a result, the plant's backers were forced to move it away from the border.

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 2018 law on domestic violence placed an emphasis on “restoring family harmony,” raising concerns that it would deter victims from leaving dangerous situations, though that provision was removed in a subsequent amendment. The July 2022 criminal code included more significant protections for survivors of gender-based violence.

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. The US State Department reported in 2023 that the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so.



On Armenia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

54/100 **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

72/100 **Free**

Other Years

2023

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