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Republic of Armenia

Head of state: **Serzh Sargsyan**

Head of government: **Hovik Abrahamyan**

Largely peaceful protests were repeatedly disrupted, including with the use of excessive force by police, which led to yet more and larger protests. Protest organizers faced arrest and criminal prosecution on questionable charges. An anti-government protester was reported attacked and beaten. Torture and other ill-treatment, and impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators, remained a concern. New provisions for alternative civilian service, introduced into law in 2013, were made available for conscientious objectors.

BACKGROUND

In a referendum on 6 December, Armenians voted for constitutional amendments that transferred executive power from the presidency to parliament. However, concerns were raised by the opposition that this could also allow the incumbent President to remain in power after his second term.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The year was marked by growing public discontent and widespread protests around a range of social and political issues, and the authorities' attempts to clamp down on their organizers and participants. The two issues prompting the strongest protests across the country were a planned rise in electricity prices, and the constitutional amendments that would allow the President to remain in power beyond the second term, in June and in October respectively.

On 21 September, Smbat Hakobian, a member of a political group critical of the government, was severely beaten after returning from an anti-government demonstration in Yerevan, sustaining head injuries and broken ribs. Police opened an investigation and detained three men as suspects. An investigation into a similar attack against three protesters in 2014 reached no conclusion in 2015.

Excessive use of force

On repeated occasions, police targeted peaceful protesters and largely peaceful gatherings with excessive force and arrests. Activists taking part in anti-government protests continued to face risk of violence from police and pro-government groups.

On 15 January, police blocked thousands from marching towards the Russian Consulate in Gyumri, to protest against the murder of a family of six by a Russian soldier. According to eyewitness reports, clashes ensued after police in riot gear used truncheons and fired tear gas and stun grenades, while the protesters threw stones in response. Police detained 21 people and released them the following day. Nine protesters and three police officers were reported wounded. Investigation into the incident was opened but was still ongoing at the end of the year.

On 19 June, thousands started a multi-day sit-in protest in the centre of the capital, Yerevan, prompted by the government's announcement of a planned increase in electricity tariffs. On 23 June, approximately 500 demonstrators marched towards the Presidential Administration building, and blocked the road in front of the police cordon. Police used excessive force to disperse them, including dousing people with water cannon. In response, some protesters threw water bottles but otherwise the crowd remained peaceful; 237 people were detained and then released without charge. Police also used excessive force against several journalists, confiscating and damaging their equipment, for which they later issued an official apology. Investigation into the incident was still ongoing at the end of the year.[1]

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Five members of the Founding Parliament opposition movement were arrested on charges of planning mass unrest after they announced their plans to hold an anti-government rally on 24 April, the day which Armenians marked as the centenary anniversary of the Armenian genocide. This was despite the fact that the organizers had secured official permission to hold the rally. On 9 April, a court in Yerevan ruled to remand them for two months. They were released on 4 May, following mass protests in Yerevan, but the criminal proceedings against them were not closed.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment in police custody and in prisons, as well as impunity for the perpetrators, remained a concern. Local human rights groups highlighted the practice by which law enforcement officials suspected of using torture were often removed temporarily from their positions and later re-appointed to the same, or higher, position in a different police department.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX PEOPLE

On 17 May, some 100 activists marked the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia in a closed venue.

Discrimination against LGBTI individuals remained a concern, in the absence of gender-specific anti-discrimination legislation and amid widespread reports of hate speech.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

Armenia started implementing the legal amendments from 2013 on alternative civilian service, allowing conscripted conscientious objectors to work in public service instead of serving in the armed forces.

[1] Armenia: Investigate alleged police abuses after protesters doused with water cannon and arrested (News story, 23 June)

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