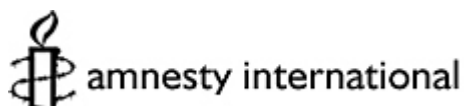


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Amnesty International Report 2009 - Armenia

Head of state: Serge Sargsian replaced Robert Kocharian in April
Head of government: Tigran Sargsian (replaced Serge Sargsian in April)
Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes
Population: 3 million
Life expectancy: 71.7 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f): 36/31 per 1,000
Adult literacy: 99.4 per cent

Mass protests over disputed presidential elections in February led to a 20-day state of emergency and a crackdown on civil and political rights evident throughout the year. Freedoms of assembly and expression were heavily restricted. Opposition and human rights activists were subjected to violent acts by unknown persons. Conscientious objectors continued to be imprisoned. Structures and resources to combat violence against women remained inadequate.

Freedom of assembly

Excessive use of force

On 1 March, police used force in the capital Yerevan to break up protests that had been ongoing since the results were published of the 19 February presidential election. Serge Sargsian, incumbent Prime Minister and close associate of outgoing President Robert Kocharian, had officially won. At least 10 people died, including two police officers, and over 350 were injured, including some 58 policemen. Police were reported as using truncheons, iron bars, tracer bullets, tear gas and conducted energy devices. The authorities declared a state of emergency on the same day.

In June a parliamentary commission was established for three months to investigate the March events. In mid-October, the commission requested a two-month extension in order to incorporate the findings of a second fact-finding group.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Dozens of opposition members were arrested in the aftermath of the 1 March violence,

including many high-ranking figures associated with Levon Ter-Petrosian, the main rival to Serge Sargsian, and members of the opposition Republic party. Some of those arrested were reportedly beaten or ill-treated in police custody. Many of those arrested were still in pre-trial detention at the end of the year. The Council of Europe repeatedly expressed concern at the excessive length of the official inquiry into the March events, and the continued imprisonment, in some cases without trial, of dozens of opposition supporters. The trial of seven of those detained started on 19 December.

Legal, constitutional or institutional developments

On 17 March the National Assembly approved amendments to the law on public assembly giving local authorities the power to ban public meetings. After the lifting of the state of emergency there were continued reports of extensive detentions and harassment by security officials of citizens gathering in public places in central Yerevan. Concerns expressed by the OSCE and the Council of Europe led to the Armenian authorities agreeing on 22 April to the repeal or revision of the March amendments. Nonetheless, the Yerevan municipal authorities continued to ban some demonstrations by the opposition.

Freedom of expression

Journalists and media outlets that covered opposition activities were harassed. The vague wording of restrictions on freedom of expression gave the authorities broad powers to restrict opposition or independent media. Several opposition media outlets reported having websites closed, and newspaper editions were refused permission for publication. The Yerevan Press Club, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, Internews, the Asparez Press Club of Giumri and the Femida public organization expressed concern that further delays to the government issuing broadcast licences would result in reduced media diversity.

- In August Haykakan Zhamanak (Armenian Times) journalist Lusineh Barseghian was beaten by unknown men. Later that month, Hratch Melkumian, acting head of the Armenian Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was beaten in central Yerevan. There was reportedly no progress in the investigations into these assaults by the end of the year.
- The independent Giumri-based television station Gala TV faced consistent harassment after it screened campaigning speeches by Levon Ter-Petrosian. On 19 March a fine of almost 27 million drams (about US\$87,700) was imposed on Gala TV for alleged tax evasion; the sum was reportedly paid off by contributions from private donations. In April Gala TV was ordered to vacate its premises in Giumri's television tower, forcing it to temporarily cease broadcasting.

Impunity

A number of assaults on opposition and human rights activists were not investigated promptly or thoroughly. On 21 May, Mikael Danielian, a prominent human rights activist and director of the Armenian Helsinki Association, a human rights NGO, was shot at point-blank range with a pneumatic gun (a gun firing compressed air), reportedly by a former leader of a political party. Mikael Danielian was not seriously wounded. On 28 May Arsen Kharatian, a leader of the Armenian Democratic Youth Movement, was assaulted in Yerevan by unknown men. He was hospitalized with severe head injuries. On 25 June Narek Hovakimian, a member of the Hima youth movement and the opposition Alternative coalition, was assaulted in Yerevan by two unknown men. No one had been charged for these assaults by the end of the year.

Discrimination – Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to face imprisonment because of their beliefs. As of 1 September, 77 young men were in prison for refusing on grounds of conscience to perform military service. The authorities still failed to introduce a genuinely civilian alternative service, in spite of previous commitments, with military supervision continuing over the alternative civilian service.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported further problems on release. The authorities refused to grant them certification of full service, without which important documents such as passports and internal residence permits were harder to obtain.

There were also reports of physical attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, including allegedly by supporters of the country's dominant religious group. Investigation of these assaults was said to be slow or non-existent.

Violence against women and girls

Over a quarter of women in Armenia were said to have been hit by a family member and about two-thirds were said to have experienced psychological abuse, yet the authorities failed to prevent, investigate and punish violence against women. Adequate structures and resources to combat violence against women were lacking. Shelters previously operated by NGOs had closed due to lack of funding early in the year; one was able to reopen in September. A draft law on domestic violence, promoted by the Women's Rights Centre NGO, was made available for public discussion.

Amnesty International visits

Amnesty International delegates visited Armenia in February, July and November.

Amnesty International reports

- Armenia: Fear of the freedom of conscience and religion – violations of the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses (16 January 2008)
- Armenia: No pride in silence: countering violence in the family in Armenia (13 November 2008)

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