

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	269
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Annual Report 2017/18 – Armenia
Udgivet:	22. februar 2018
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	23. april 2018



Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - Armenia

Publisher [Amnesty International](#)

Publication Date 22 February 2018

Cite as Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - Armenia*, 22 February 2018, available at:
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a993953a.html> [accessed 17 April 2018]

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Republic of Armenia

Head of state: **Serzh Sargsyan**

Head of government: **Karen Karapetyan**

Lack of accountability continued for the use of unnecessary and excessive force by police during protests in the capital, Yerevan, in 2016. The trials of opposition members accused of hostage-taking and other violent crimes violated the right to a fair trial. A human rights defender faced criminal charges. The parliamentary and Yerevan city council elections were accompanied by incidents of violence.

BACKGROUND

On 2 April, the ruling Republican Party won a parliamentary majority, in the first elections since the 2015 constitutional referendum approved the transition from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. Monitors from the OSCE reported that the elections were "tainted by credible information about vote-buying, and pressure on civil servants and employees of private companies" to vote for the ruling party.

In November, Armenia and the EU signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, a looser form of co-operation than the Association Agreement which Armenia rejected in 2013 in favour of joining the Russian-led customs union.

IMPUNITY

There was limited accountability for the unnecessary and excessive use of force by police against largely peaceful anti-government protesters in Yerevan in July 2016, when hundreds of individuals were injured and arbitrarily arrested. Dozens of protesters faced criminal charges for allegedly violating public order and other offences. The criminal investigation into allegations of abuse of power by police officers did not lead to any criminal charges.

UNFAIR TRIALS

Members of the opposition group that occupied a police station in the run-up to the 2016 protests stood trial on charges of a range of violent crimes, including hostage-taking and killing of police officers. Several defendants reported being beaten in detention, while their defence lawyers reported that they themselves were subjected to pressure and harassment to obstruct their work.

Arayik Papikyan, Mushegh Shushanyan, Nina Karapetyants and other defence lawyers in the case complained that the detention facility's administration prevented them from visiting the accused men and holding confidential meetings with them, and unlawfully confiscated and destroyed some of the case-related materials they were carrying. Several lawyers also reported being subjected to lengthy and intrusive security searches when arriving at court. Lawyers who refused to undergo searches were denied entry to the courtrooms and subjected to disciplinary proceedings by the Bar Association.

The lawyers also reported that, on 28 June, five defendants were forcibly removed from the courtroom, taken to the basement and beaten by several police officers while the court was in session. The defendants showed signs of ill-treatment, including bruises and scratches on their faces and legs, documented by prison medical staff. The police claimed these injuries were self-inflicted when the defendants deliberately hit their heads and feet against walls and fences in protest. At the end of the year, investigations were ongoing into the allegations of the beatings and the harassment of the lawyers.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In January, court hearings commenced in the case against Marina Poghosyan, a human rights defender and director of the NGO Veles, known for exposing government corruption and providing legal aid to victims of human rights violations. She had been charged with extortion in 2015 after she alleged that former government officials were running a money laundering scheme. Local human rights defenders linked the trial to her work exposing corruption. On 30 April, Marina Poghosyan reported that a fake Facebook profile had been created under her name and used to send sexually explicit photos and videos to her contacts to smear her reputation.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The parliamentary and Yerevan city council elections, in April and May respectively, and the preceding electoral campaigns were accompanied by isolated incidents of violence against journalists and others attempting to expose violations of the electoral process.

On 2 April, two journalists were attacked in Yerevan's Kond neighbourhood while investigating allegations of vote-buying at the local Republican Party's campaign office. Supporters of the Party took away one reporter's video equipment as she was filming people leaving the campaign office. An investigation into the incident was ongoing at the end of the year.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

The CERD Committee raised concerns over the absence of data on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by minority groups, refugees and asylum-seekers. It also raised concern over the lack of information available on small minority ethnic groups – such as the Lom (also known as Bosha) and the Molokans – and requested that the authorities collect data on economic and social indicators disaggregated by ethnicity, nationality and country of origin.

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