



Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Armenia (2006)

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

5

Civil Liberties:

4

Status:

Partly Free

Population:

3,000,000

GNI/Capita:

\$950

Life Expectancy:

71

Religious Groups:

Armenian Apostolic (94 percent), other Christian (4 percent), Yezidi (2 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Armenian (93 percent), Azeri (1 percent), Russian (2 percent), Kurd and others (4 percent)

Capital:

Yerevan

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

A November 2005 national referendum on establishing a clearer separation of powers among the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of government in Armenia was emblematic of the continued standoff between the country's ruling coalition and the political opposition. While the opposition encouraged a "no" vote, believing that the proposed reforms did not go far enough, Armenian election officials said 94 percent of voters who cast their ballots backed the amendments proposed by President Robert Kocharian. In a country known for its public apathy, the turnout of 64 percent of eligible voters was questioned by the Council of Europe and U.S. State Department, as well as the political opposition.

Following a brief period of independence from 1918 to 1920, a part of the predominantly Christian Transcaucasus republic of Armenia became a Soviet republic in 1922, while the western portion was ceded to Turkey. Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991, following a nationalist movement for autonomy that had gained in strength during the Gorbachev period and became stronger once it became apparent by the late 1980s that the USSR would likely disintegrate.

The banning of nine political parties prior to the 1995 parliamentary elections ensured the dominance of President Levon Ter Petrosian's ruling Armenian National Movement (ANM) coalition. In February 1998, Petrosian stepped down following the resignation of key officials in protest of his gradualist approach to solving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the disputed enclave in Azerbaijan. Prime Minister

Robert Kocharian, the former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, was elected president in March of that year with the support of the previously banned Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutiun.

Parliamentary elections in May 1999 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Unity bloc, a new alliance of Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian's Republican Party and former Soviet Armenian leader Karen Demirchian's People's Party, which campaigned on a political platform of greater state involvement in the economy and increased social spending. In June, Sarkisian was named prime minister and Demirchian became Speaker of parliament.

The country was plunged into a political crisis on October 27, 1999, when five gunmen stormed the National Assembly and assassinated Sarkisian,

Demirchian, and several other senior government 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. Meanwhile, allegations that Kocharian or members of his inner circle had orchestrated the shootings prompted opposition calls for the president to resign. However, because of an apparent lack of evidence, prosecutors did not press charges against Kocharian, who gradually consolidated his power during the following year. In May 2000, Kocharian named Republican Party leader Andranik Markarian as prime minister, replacing Vazgen Sarkisian's younger brother, Aram, who had served in the position for only five months following the parliament shootings.

In 2003, Kocharian was reelected in a presidential vote that was widely regarded as flawed. He defeated Stepan Demirchian, son of the late Karen Demirchian, in a second round runoff with 67 percent of the vote. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) described the elections as falling "short of international standards for democratic elections" and asserted that "voting, counting, and tabulation showed serious irregularities, including widespread ballot-box stuffing." During the runoff, which was held on March 5 of that year, authorities placed more than 200 opposition supporters under administrative detention for over 15 days; the detainees were sentenced on charges of hooliganism and participation in unsanctioned demonstrations. The Constitutional Court rejected appeals by opposition leaders to invalidate the election results, although it did propose holding a "referendum of confidence" on Kocharian within the next year to allay widespread doubts about the validity of the election returns; Kocharian indicated that he would not comply with the proposal. In response to the problems associated with the election, a standoff emerged between Kocharian and the political opposition, formed by two major groups-the Artarutiun (Justice bloc) and the National Unity Party- with opposition parties choosing not to attend sessions of the National Assembly.

Protest rallies were organized in Yerevan from April to June 2004 over the failure of the government to redress the 2003 presidential vote. The authorities responded with violence, using police to disperse demonstrators in Yerevan with water cannons, batons, and stun grenades. After the crackdown by the authorities in April, these demonstrations grew ever smaller. In October, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a resolution expressing concern about the lack of investigation into the flawed 2003 elections and calling for steps to end pretrial administrative detention, physical ill-treatment, and other abuses.

On November 27, 2005, a national referendum was held that was designed to bring about a clearer separation of powers among the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of government and to create a more even distribution of power between the executive and legislative branches by pruning back presidential powers. It also contained provisions to lift the ban on Armenians holding dual citizenship. The extensive powers enjoyed by the presidency, and the lack of checks and balances within the constitution, had been among the principal points of contention between the Armenian authorities and

international bodies such as the Council of Europe, which took a strong role in encouraging the constitutional reform.

In spite of widespread apathy and a disconnection of average Armenians from public affairs, the official results of the referendum showed 94 percent in favor; turnout was reported to be 64 percent. The opposition, which believed that the proposed reforms did not go far enough, took issue with these figures, asserting that the authorities had inflated the numbers. In the aftermath of the referendum, opposition parties pledged mass protests. While some protesters took to the streets, their numbers were quite small.

There were few international observers for the referendum, although PACE sent 14 monitors, who voiced serious criticisms of the way the voting was conducted and suggested that the high turnout figure was questionable. While the monitors concluded that "the referendum generally reflected the free will of those who voted," they reported "serious abuse in several polling stations which cast a shadow over the credibility of the officially announced turnout." The monitors went on to say that "in a significant number of polling stations in Yerevan and other regions&the extremely low voting activity did not correspond to the high figures provided by the electoral commissions. There were also clear instances of forged additional signatures on the voters register and of ballot stuffing. The electoral regulations, requiring the stamping of the ballot after completion, created numerous situations where the secrecy of the vote was not respected." The U.S. State Department voiced similar concerns, concluding "We regret that the government of Armenia chose not to invite observers from the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, who could have given greater credibility to the results of the voting."

The long-standing conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh went unresolved in 2005, although a number of discussions between representatives of the two sides suggested some possible promise. The region, which is formally part of Azerbaijan, is now predominantly ethnically Armenian and effectively under Armenian control.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Armenians cannot change their government democratically. The 1995 and 1999 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections were marred by serious irregularities. The most recent presidential and parliamentary polls, in February-March and May 2003, respectively, were strongly criticized by international election monitors, who cited widespread fraud, particularly in the presidential vote. The 1995 constitution provides for a weak legislature (the National Assembly) and a strong executive, who appoints the prime minister. The president is elected by popular vote for a five-year term. Electoral reforms enacted in 2005 increased the number of parliamentary seats allocated by proportional representation from 56 to 90 and reduced the number of single-mandate seats from 75 to 41. Ninety-six of the 131 seats in parliament are occupied by pro-government parties or deputies that comprise the governing coalition.

At the exhortation of the Council of Europe and with the passage of the November 27, 2005, referendum, the Armenian government adopted modifications to the election code; the test of these amendments will be their implementation.

Political parties in Armenia are fractured. Opposition parties have pursued a policy of disengagement, including with respect to the constitutional referendum and the 2003 election, which the opposition has characterized as illegitimate. President Robert Kocharian, whose term expires in 2008, does not belong to any political party and relies on a three-party coalition to rule the country. The main opposition parties and blocs are Artarutiun (Justice) bloc, the National Unity Party, the Armenian National Movement (ANM), and the Communist Party of Armenia.

Bribery and nepotism are reported to be common among government bureaucrats, and government officials are rarely prosecuted or otherwise removed for abuse of office. Corruption is also believed to be a serious problem in law enforcement. Armenia was ranked 88 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

There are considerable limits on press freedom in Armenia. According to the 2005 U.S. State Department, senior officials within President Robert Kocharian's office continued to provide policy guidance to Public Television of Armenia (H1). Television is the dominant news source for most citizens. Armenia has some 40 television stations, most of which are privately run. While most newspapers are in private hands, the majority operate with limited resources and have a small circulation and consequently are dependent on economic and political interest groups for their survival. A media law adopted in 2003 abolishes the requirement that media organizations register with the Ministry of Justice, but the criminal code still includes libel as a criminal offense.

In 2002, the independent television station A1+ lost its license after the national television and radio broadcasting commission granted a tender for its broadcasting frequency to another channel. Journalists and opposition politicians criticized the closure of A1+, which had a reputation for balanced reporting, as a politically motivated decision to control media coverage in the run-up to the 2003 presidential and parliamentary elections. Following the decision, thousands of people demonstrated in a series of weekly protests over the station's closure and to demand Kocharian's resignation. In 2003, additional bids by A1+ for a broadcast frequency were rejected. According to the 2005 U.S. State Department report on Human Rights, Armenia does not restrict access to the internet.

Freedom of religion is somewhat respected. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, but the law specifies some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of minority faiths. The Armenian Apostolic Church, to which 90 percent of Armenians formally belong, enjoys some privileges not afforded to other faiths. While 50 religious groups are officially registered, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied registration repeatedly because of the group's strong opposition to compulsory military service.

The government generally does not restrict academic freedom. In September 2002, the Ministry of Education ordered the compulsory display of the portraits of Kocharian and the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in secondary schools. The history of the Apostolic Church is a required school subject.

Registration requirements for nongovernmental associations are cumbersome and time-consuming. The authorities abused administrative detention regulations to intimidate and punish peaceful demonstrators and political activists following the 2003 presidential election. This issue also arose in 2004 and 2005, with PACE condemning the use of violence by the Armenian authorities in April and criticizing them for the continued application of the administrative code to arrest protesters. 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. Cases of abuse go unreported out of fear of retribution. 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.

Freedom of travel and residence is largely respected. However, registering changes in residency is sometimes complicated by the need to negotiate with an inefficient or corrupt government bureaucracy.

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 activity. Key industries remain in the hands of oligarchs and influential clans who received preferential treatment in the early stages of privatization.

Domestic violence and trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution are believed to be serious problems.