

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) won almost 33 percent of the vote in the May 2007 parliamentary elections and controls nearly half of the seats in the National Assembly. Two other parties loyal to President Robert Kocharian won enough seats to guarantee a pro-presidential majority. Although the elections showed improvements over previous years, observers have documented irregularities and the opposition contested results in some locations. Harassment of opposition supporters and limits on media freedom marred the run-up to the February 2008 presidential election. Torture and ill-treatment remain a problem. Limits on media freedom and freedom of religion persist.

International observers have determined that the May 12 parliamentary elections largely met international standards, although they have noted pre-election irregularities, including pressure on employees to vote for the RPA, distribution of goods and services in exchange for votes, and abuse of administrative resources. Opposition parties held rallies without police harassment and had access to public television, although pro-government parties received disproportionate coverage. On election day there were reports of fraud and double voting as well as problems in transparency, counting, tabulation, and publication of results.

On April 27 President Kocharian publicly accused Orinats Yerkir Party leader Artur Bagdasarian of treason based on secret recordings of a February meeting between Bagdasarian and a British diplomat, during which reportedly Bagdasarian claimed that government officials were taking steps to rig the parliamentary elections and asked whether the European Union could respond. No charges have been brought against Bagdasarian.

On October 23 police in the capital Yerevan detained seven opposition activists who were informing passers-by about an October 26 rally for former Armenian president and prospective 2008 presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrosian. The group was released, but five were later charged with assaulting police.

Narek Galstian, an activist with the youth group of the opposition Social Democratic Hnchakyan Party, was beaten on November 15 by a group of unknown assailants. Two days prior, police briefly detained Galstian and another opposition youth activist as they posted leaflets critical of Prime Minister (and prospective 2008 presidential candidate) Serzh Sargsian and warned them to stop anti-government propaganda.

In mid-October, leading Armenian media figures expressed concern that the country's television outlets were curtailing political news, including coverage of news conferences by opposition politicians, and accused the authorities of restricting press freedom ahead of the presidential election. On November 12, the state tax service accused the Giumri-based independent Gala television channel of tax evasion. The station's leadership believes the tax inspection and other pressures from the authorities come in response to its broadcast of a September speech by Ter-Petrosian in which he called the government "corrupt and mafiosi."

On November 22 the Yerevan Press Club and the "TEAM" Research Center presented the initial results of a project analyzing eight broadcasters' evening news coverage of prospective presidential candidates and political party leaders ahead of the 2008 presidential elections. The research revealed that Prime Minister Sargsian has received disproportionately more positive coverage compared to opposition candidates.

On May 7 police arrested former minister of foreign affairs Alexander Arzoumanian, now the head of the Civil Disobedience Movement, on charges of money laundering. Authorities claim that Arzoumanian, obtained funds for political activities from a fugitive Armenian-Russian businessman. Arzoumanian maintains that the money was given to him legally by friends and not for political purposes. Arzoumanian was released on September 6 pending investigation.

The death in custody of Levan Gulyan highlights concerns about continuing torture and ill-treatment of suspects and witnesses. On May 9, 2007, Gulyan, a restaurant owner, witnessed a fight between several individuals, which resulted in one person being shot dead. Gulyan was called to the local police station repeatedly for several days for questioning. On May 12, after questioning Gulyan at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, officials informed Gulyan's family that he had died after supposedly jumping from a second-storey window. At the request of the family, Armenian authorities allowed international forensic experts to conduct an autopsy. Although the experts could not determine the circumstances in which Gulyan fell, they concluded that the severe injuries causing his death were consistent with a fall from a second-storey window and that "a few of the smaller bruises and abrasions could have been caused by another force, e.g. a punch or a blow, prior to the fall."

On August 25 Lori province prosecutor Albert Ghazarian was killed by an unknown assailant. According to local human rights groups and media reports, during the investigation into his death authorities subjected some witnesses to beatings and other ill-treatment in order to extract testimony. Officials deny the claims.

On December 22, 2006, the Court of Cassation overturned the murder conviction of three conscript soldiers, Razmik Sargsian, Musa Serobian, and Arayik Zalian, releasing them and returning the case to prosecutors for additional investigation. Sargsian testified that military investigators had beaten him and threatened him with rape, coercing him into signing a confession in which he named as accomplices Serobian and Zalian, who also claim to have been ill-treated by investigators.

Human rights groups reported that ill-treatment of military conscripts remains widespread as a result of impunity for perpetrators. In an exceptional case, military authorities arrested and charged with murder an officer who had in April 2007 shot and killed Gegham Sergoian reportedly because he believed Sergoian and another conscript were laughing at him.

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