

SHIFTS IN ARMENIAN POLITICS: PERSISTENT DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS

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From 2023 to 2025, Armenia has undergone a period of pronounced political volatility characterized by internal unrest, contested policy reforms, and escalating concerns regarding the erosion of democratic norms. The consequences of the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis precipitated a significant transformation in the country's political environment, weakening public confidence in state institutions and intensifying opposition to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's leadership. Confronted with territorial concessions to Azerbaijan, widespread public demonstrations, and mounting accusations of authoritarian tendencies, the government faced growing tensions with opposition forces and influential actors, including the Armenian Apostolic Church. This period has been marked by deepening social polarization, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and a strategic realignment in Armenia's foreign policy, shifting its orientation from Russia toward Western alliances. These political developments highlight the precarious equilibrium between the government's efforts to maintain stability and the increasingly widespread perception that essential democratic principles are being compromised.

A clear illustration of this pattern of governance can be observed in earlier events that set a precedent for the suppression of dissent. On June 14, 2020, Armenian authorities employed heavy-handed tactics against opposition forces, detaining over 90 demonstrators during clashes with police outside the headquarters of the national security service. The protest in Yerevan was triggered by a search conducted at the residence of the leader of the country's principal opposition party, signaling the government's willingness to resort to repressive measures to

silence political critics.¹ This approach to public dissent, which has persisted in various forms in subsequent years, highlights the broader trend of shrinking civic space and the marginalization of opposition voices in Armenia's evolving political order.

In general, in 2020, the Armenian Helsinki Committee, which monitored approximately 30 protests and public gatherings during the state of emergency, reported significant inconsistency in the police response. While certain demonstrations were allowed to proceed without intervention, others were forcibly dispersed by law enforcement, even when involving fewer than five participants or single-person pickets. This occurred despite the fact that demonstrators were wearing masks and adhering to social distancing requirements.

On August 6 and 10, 2020, demonstrators in Yerevan organized socially distanced single-person pickets in solidarity with the Amulsar environmental protests. Law enforcement authorities briefly detained the participants, citing violations of Covid-19 restrictions as the justification. Among those detained were prominent human rights advocates Nina Karapetyants, Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, and Ara Gharagyozyan. Additionally, on August 6, officials prohibited a planned bicycle rally in support of the Amulsar cause and detained several cyclists involved in the event.²

In addition to the arbitrary practices of law enforcement, Armenia's judicial system is significantly compromised by corruption and political interference. The courts are subject to systemic pressure from political actors, which undermines the independence and impartiality of judicial institutions. Reports indicate that judges frequently experience coercion to cooperate with prosecutors in securing convictions, contributing to exceptionally low acquittal rates.

¹ More than 90 arrested at Armenia protest during clashes. AP, June 14, 2020. <https://apnews.com/85b9b66cd84dd658174ea34afd7d657d>

² Armenia: Events of 2020. Human Rights Watch, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/armenia>

Reflecting these structural deficiencies, Freedom House has assigned Armenia a score of 55 out of 100 for its overall performance in protecting human rights and political freedoms,³ and called it “Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime.”⁴

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan initiated a large-scale military offensive that intensified hostilities between Azerbaijani forces, Armenia, and the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh. The escalation prompted tens of thousands of residents to flee Nagorno-Karabakh, with the majority seeking refuge in Armenia. In an effort to halt the conflict, Russia brokered a ceasefire and deployed peacekeeping forces to monitor its implementation. Throughout the hostilities, all warring parties engaged in violations of international humanitarian law, resulting in unlawful harm to civilian populations. Armenian forces, in particular, conducted indiscriminate attacks, including the use of unguided artillery rockets, heavy artillery shells, and ballistic missiles targeting population centers, some of which lacked identifiable military objectives. These operations caused significant civilian casualties. Moreover, the Armenian military deployed cluster munitions in populated areas, resulting in dozens of deaths and injuries. The use of cluster munitions, which are prohibited under international conventions, is especially harmful due to their indiscriminate impact and the long-term dangers they pose to civilian populations.⁵ The weaponry employed by Armenia during the conflict was predominantly sourced from Russia. Moscow played a pivotal role in brokering the cessation of hostilities between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, deploying its peacekeeping troops to the conflict zones as part of the ceasefire agreement. This intervention not only ended the immediate military

³ Armenia. Freedom House, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021>

⁴ Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>

⁵ Armenia: Events of 2020. Human Rights Watch, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/armenia>

confrontation but also enabled Russia to consolidate its influence and strategic presence in Armenia.

On June 21, 2021, Armenia conducted parliamentary elections in which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's party secured a parliamentary majority. However, the election results were contested by opposition parties, which alleged widespread electoral irregularities. As noted by *Kommersant* in a tone of irony, "The members of Mr. Pashinyan's team received strong results [in the elections] even in places where his motorcade had been pelted with eggs."⁶

Almost immediately after the elections, on July 7, 2021, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan traveled to Moscow to secure the backing of Russian President Vladimir Putin. During their meeting, Putin extended personal congratulations to Pashinyan on his electoral victory, stating: "I would like once again, personally, to congratulate you on the election results. I believe this is significant for everyone, but above all for Armenia. The pressing and sensitive issues that require resolution can only be addressed effectively when there is the capacity to work productively. For this, the key factor is the trust of the people. You have that trust, as the election results have demonstrated. This is of great importance; indeed, it is the most crucial element."⁷

Russian intelligence services maintain an extensive presence in Armenia, viewing the country as a sphere of strategic influence. A network of so-called "friends of Russia," comprising both overt and covert operatives, is deeply embedded across key state institutions, including the government, parliament, security agencies, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This pervasive influence was exemplified in June 2018, when pro-Russian Armenian National Assembly deputy Hayk Babukhanyan visited Crimea, prompting a formal protest from the Ukrainian embassy in

⁶ Никол Пашинян привезет из Москвы легитимность. (Nikol Pashinyan will bring legitimacy from Moscow). *Kommersant*, July 7, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4890064>

⁷ Никол Пашинян привезет из Москвы легитимность. (Nikol Pashinyan will bring legitimacy from Moscow). *Kommersant*, July 7, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4890064>

Armenia. Shortly thereafter, a diplomatic document from Kyiv addressed to the Armenian Foreign Ministry was reportedly accessed by the Russian government, illustrating the extent of Russian intelligence penetration. The National Security Service (SNB) of Armenia is frequently referred to as an informal “branch of the Lubyanka” (a reference to the headquarters of Russia’s Federal Security Service, FSB), underscoring the depth of Moscow’s operational influence within Armenian state structures.⁸

Armenia has held the rotating chair of the Russian-led military bloc since September 2021,⁹ which includes such dictatorships as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Armenian government, which came to power through antigovernment street protests in 2018, has agreed to send troops to help quell anti-government protests in Kazakhstan as part of a joint ‘peacekeeping mission’.¹⁰ Armenia’s involvement in the military mission in Kazakhstan highlighted the fundamentally antidemocratic tendencies of its governing regime. This action, widely criticized by international observers, reflected the government’s willingness to align with repressive measures rather than democratic norms.

Armenia has undergone only superficial political transformations, with the events of April 2018 failing to steer the country toward genuine democracy or alter the underlying nature of its governance. The state apparatus, including law enforcement and judicial institutions, remains largely intact, preserving entrenched patterns of corruption and authoritarian control. Similar to Georgia, which experienced a revolution, Ukraine with two revolutions, Kyrgyzstan with two revolutions, and Moldova with student-led uprisings that resulted in leadership changes,

⁸ Часть четвертая: «Борода» из Еревана и мягкая сила в Баку: Как Кремль вмешивается во внутреннюю политику соседних стран. (Part Four: "Beard" [Pashinyan’s nickname in the FSB] from Yerevan and Soft Power in Baku: How the Kremlin Interferes in the Domestic Politics of Neighboring Countries). <https://dossier.center/azerb/>

⁹ Ani Avetisyan. Armenia Sends Troops to Quell Kazakhstan Protests. The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, January 6, 2022. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2022/01/06/armenia-sends-troops-to-quell-kazakhstan-protests/>

¹⁰ Ani Avetisyan. Armenia Sends Troops to Quell Kazakhstan Protests. The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, January 6, 2022. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2022/01/06/armenia-sends-troops-to-quell-kazakhstan-protests/>

Armenia has seen little substantive reform. Deeply rooted political culture and the Soviet legacy have prevented the dismantling of old structures, allowing the same systemic practices to persist despite leadership turnover. In Armenia, the administrative and security institutions remain unpurged, continuing to operate within frameworks marred by corruption, abuse, and a lack of accountability.

Pro-democracy activists are frequently subjected to harassment, intimidation, and mistreatment by state authorities, reflecting the regime's hostility toward dissent. The government's approach to public protests underscores its repressive character. For instance, on May 2, 2022, demonstrators in central Yerevan set up tents for a continuous protest, declaring their intention to remain until Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his administration resigned. Protesters erected barricades using garbage containers and street benches, effectively blocking traffic on France Square, a key junction linking four major avenues in the capital. Demonstrators, including members of the opposition, chanted slogans such as "Armenia without Nikol!" The police responded with force during some detentions, and journalists covering the protests reported being physically pushed and obstructed by law enforcement officers.¹¹ This pattern of state response highlights the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in Armenia, where political dissent is met with coercive measures rather than dialogue.

Following the armed clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, which resulted in approximately 155 fatalities on both sides, mass protests erupted in Yerevan during the night of September 14–15. Thousands of demonstrators assembled to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The protests were largely triggered by reports suggesting that Pashinyan had indicated a potential willingness to make territorial concessions to Azerbaijan

¹¹ Armenia detains 180 protesters calling on Pashinyan to quit. ABC News, May 2, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/armenia-detains-125-protesters-calling-pashinyan-quit-84437247>

concerning the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region as part of ongoing negotiations toward a future peace agreement.¹²

On January 8, 2023, Armenian authorities detained dozens of demonstrators in the country's second-largest city, Gyumri, after dispersing a rally held outside a Russian military installation. The protesters demanded that Armenia sever its ties with Moscow amid escalating tensions with Azerbaijan over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region. According to a statement cited by local media, the Armenian police confirmed the detention of 65 individuals during the demonstration near the 102nd Military Base, where approximately 3,000 Russian troops are stationed close to the borders with Turkey and Georgia.

Reports indicate that around 100 participants marched toward the barracks, voicing opposition to Russia's military presence. A livestream of the event captured confrontations between detainees and both uniformed officers and plainclothes agents, including members of the notorious Red Berets riot police. The crowds were heard chanting slogans demanding Armenia's withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), highlighting growing public dissatisfaction with Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus.¹³

Armenia has been moving toward a state of political instability, driven by the loss of authority stemming from its defeat in the conflict with Azerbaijan. The democratically elected leadership has struggled to maintain effective governance, as Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's political position has been severely undermined by the outcome of the war. His standing continues to weaken, while the ruling party appears to be fighting for its political survival

¹² Armenia: Thousands of protesters gather in Yerevan to call for resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan overnight Sept. 14-15. Crisis24, September 14, 2022. <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2022/09/armenia-thousands-of-protesters-gather-in-yerevan-to-call-for-resignation-of-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-overnight-sept-14-15>

¹³ Armenia detains anti-Russia protesters as anger grows over Karabakh blockade. Eurasianet, January 9, 2023. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-detains-anti-russia-protesters-as-anger-grows-over-karabakh-blockade>

without the capacity to develop viable solutions to address the ongoing crisis.¹⁴ Political forces within the country increasingly rely on pressure, confrontation, and even episodes of political violence against one another.

The fall of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control triggered a wave of mass protests across Armenia, particularly in Yerevan. On September 25, 2023, opposition supporters staged demonstrations at multiple locations in the capital, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan following Azerbaijan's military offensive in the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region and the subsequent agreement with ethnic Armenian separatist leaders. In addition to a large-scale march, smaller groups of demonstrators blocked traffic and urged citizens to join the civil disobedience campaign organized by the National Committee, a coalition of opposition parties. According to the Interior Ministry, dozens of protesters were detained for obstructing traffic and failing to comply with police orders.¹⁵ The demonstrators expected their government to take stronger action against Azerbaijan,¹⁶ i.e. to start a military campaign with Azerbaijan.

In 2024, the Armenian authorities once again demonstrated the coercive nature of their governance. On June 12, a violent confrontation broke out between law enforcement and protesters near the parliament building. Reports indicate that police forces deployed a large number of sonic grenades in close proximity to the demonstrators while forcefully dispersing the crowd. Over 100 individuals sustained injuries requiring medical assistance. Subsequently, authorities filed charges of hooliganism against 15 protesters and accused one individual of participating in mass disturbances, with legal proceedings ongoing at the time of reporting.

¹⁴ Armenia Country Report 2022. BTI Transformation Index, 2022. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ARM>

¹⁵ Armenian Protesters Block Traffic In Yerevan. Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, September 25, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-protesters-block-traffic/32608369.html>

¹⁶ Armenian Protests Continue After Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh Offensive. Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, September 23, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-nagorno-karabakh-march/32606166.html>

Although an inquiry was launched into the conduct of police officers, no charges were brought against law enforcement personnel as of the latest available information. At the time of the incident, Armenian legislation did not explicitly permit the use of the type of sonic grenades employed during the dispersal. However, in July, these devices were officially added to the Interior Ministry's police arsenal, though the government withheld critical information regarding the specific conditions under which their use would be authorized.¹⁷

Armenian law enforcement continues to employ coercive measures to suppress dissent and silence critics of the ruling authorities. For instance, on April 15, 2024, Samvel Vardanyan, who had been detained following a confrontation with a member of the ruling party, reported being assaulted by masked individuals while being transported to a detention facility. Allegedly, police officers left Vardanyan unsupervised shortly before his attackers appeared and inflicted physical harm upon him. Although an investigation into the incident was formally launched, no charges had been brought against any individuals involved as of the latest reports.¹⁸ In addition to direct acts of violence, relatives of opposition figures have at various times experienced harassment and pressure from state authorities. While such practices are not officially codified, the government has employed indirect methods of intimidation, including surveillance, smear campaigns, and questionable legal actions targeting the family members of political critics. These tactics, characterized by intimidation and violence, have become a recurring strategy for the police and other security agencies to maintain control.

In a parallel development, Armenian authorities have arrested seven individuals associated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), also known as Dashnaktsutyun,

¹⁷ Armenia: Events of 2024. Human Rights Watch, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/armenia>

¹⁸ Armenia: Events of 2024. Human Rights Watch, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/armenia>

on terrorism-related charges following a series of coordinated police raids. The arrests appear to form part of a broader campaign to neutralize dissent ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. One of the detained individuals has been formally accused of preparing a terrorist act. According to an ARF statement, law enforcement operations specifically targeted the residences of several members of parliament, with at least one MP and the son of another being taken into custody. These arrests follow criminal charges filed earlier in the week against three members of the Armenia Alliance, the broader opposition coalition that includes the ARF. Opposition leaders have publicly denounced the arrests as politically motivated, alleging that the government is manipulating the judicial system to silence critics and eliminate political competition. Among those accused of plotting to seize power is Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, a prominent religious figure, who, along with others, has strongly rejected the allegations, describing them as part of a broader campaign to stifle dissent. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's administration has faced mounting criticism for targeting opposition leaders, including high-profile political figures, a former president, and influential religious representatives, in what is increasingly viewed as a strategy to consolidate power through judicial repression.¹⁹

Corruption remained a critical challenge in Armenia throughout 2023–2024, posing significant obstacles to democratic governance and institutional integrity. Observers contend that the government's anti-corruption initiatives have often been applied selectively, disproportionately targeting political rivals while failing to address the systemic and structural roots of corruption. Public dissatisfaction has been further exacerbated by entrenched practices of nepotism, patronage, and the absence of robust accountability mechanisms within state institutions. The judiciary and law enforcement sectors, in particular, are frequently cited as

¹⁹ Armenian police detain seven opposition figures on suspicion of terrorism, The Gazette, July 10, 2025. https://gazette.com/news/us-world/armenian-police-detain-seven-opposition-figures-on-suspicion-of-terrorism/article_15feab48-0168-5cf3-bc59-084b351e49bb.html

problematic due to persistent allegations of bribery, political interference, and biased decision-making, which have eroded public confidence in these institutions. At the local and municipal levels, corruption continues to impede effective governance, resulting in misallocation of resources and significant delays in developmental projects.

The persistence of such practices has significantly undermined Armenia's broader democratic aspirations, reinforcing skepticism about the government's willingness and capacity to implement genuine reforms. Critics argue that despite official rhetoric about transparency and rule of law, systemic corruption remains deeply embedded in the political and administrative structures of the state. This situation has contributed to the perception of a widening gap between the governing elite and ordinary citizens, who increasingly doubt that meaningful and sustainable change is achievable under the current leadership.

Moreover, the entrenchment of corrupt practices perpetuates a cycle of weak institutions, where laws are selectively enforced, and accountability mechanisms are compromised by political and economic interests. This environment not only limits civic engagement and public oversight but also undermines the functioning of democratic processes, including free and fair elections. The lack of judicial independence further compounds the issue, as courts are often seen as instruments for consolidating power rather than upholding justice.

At the municipal level, corruption manifests through opaque procurement processes, clientelism, and the diversion of funds meant for public services and infrastructure development. These practices have created a climate of inefficiency and stagnation, where local governance fails to meet community needs effectively. This deep-seated problem has also led to increased social discontent, as citizens perceive public resources as being mismanaged for the benefit of a

small political and economic elite.²⁰ In sum, Armenia's ongoing struggles with corruption underscore its continued departure from democratic norms. The persistence of systemic corruption, combined with limited tolerance for political pluralism and dissent, has reinforced the characterization of Armenia as a state where democratic institutions are fragile, and governance is marred by opacity, favoritism, and authoritarian tendencies.

Although Armenia has distanced itself from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), collaboration between Russian and Armenian security agencies continues to constitute a central element of their strategic relationship, underpinned by shared interests in maintaining regional stability. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) maintains extensive and coordinated cooperation with Armenia's National Security Service (NSS), reflecting enduring security interdependencies between the two states.²¹

Armenian authorities maintain ongoing cooperation with Russian security structures, particularly in matters concerning Russian nationals residing within Armenia. The case of Roman Shklover is particularly illustrative of this dynamic. On February 13, 2025, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly–Vanadzor reported that Shklover, a Russian national under its legal representation, had been summoned to a police station in Yerevan by the Protection Division of the Yerevan Metro. During his visit, which he attended alongside the Assembly's attorney, Samson Galstyan, Shklover was informed that criminal proceedings had been initiated against him in Russia. While at the station, individuals believed to be operatives of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) entered the premises and attempted to persuade Shklover to return to

²⁰ Armenia. Freedom House, 2024. Human Rights Watch, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2024>

²¹ Spymaster: Armenia: Split between generations in Armen Abazyan's National Security Service. Intelligence online. June 23, 2023. <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2023/06/23/split-between-generations-in-armen-abazyan-s-national-security-service,109996995-art>

Russia voluntarily, promising him leniency. The Assembly's lawyer intervened, characterizing the event as an unlawful attempt at coercion, and Shklover refused to comply.

This incident underscores the apparent ease with which Russian security agents are able to access Armenian law enforcement facilities and pressure Russian nationals to submit to the demands of Russian authorities. According to the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, this was not an isolated case but one of several similar incidents in which Russian law enforcement or military operatives have been implicated. As early as March 2024, the Assembly reported receiving multiple warnings from Russian citizens who had fled political repression and sought refuge in Armenia. These individuals claimed to have observed persons dressed in Russian military uniforms stationed near their residences, conducting surveillance and attempting to gather information on the inhabitants of surrounding apartments. Such developments point to Armenia's ongoing security dependence on Russia, even as Yerevan publicly signals a gradual geopolitical shift.²²

The bilateral cooperation between Russia and Armenia extends to initiatives aimed at countering cyber threats, underscoring their shared interest in protecting critical infrastructure from potential attacks. Despite periodic political tensions, the sustained collaboration between Russian and Armenian security services demonstrates a mutual commitment to regional security and the management of common risks. While Armenia has suspended its participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Moscow continues to maintain a significant military presence in the country, most notably through the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, which serves as a tangible reminder of Russia's enduring influence in the South Caucasus.

²² Arshaluys Barseghyan. Russian police 'broke into' Armenian police station in a ploy to extradite Russian national. OC Media, February 20, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/russian-police-broke-into-armenian-police-station-in-a-plot-to-extradite-russian-national/>

Additionally, longstanding historical ties and the presence of a large Armenian diaspora in Russia strengthen these connections, effectively keeping Armenia within Moscow's geopolitical sphere of influence. This trajectory parallels the experience of Georgia, which, despite its efforts to break free from Russian dominance, has continued to feel the pull of its strategic orbit.

The Armenian political system has largely preserved its existing structures, effectively blocking the development of democratic governance. The regime, strongly supported by Russia, continues to play a decisive role in maintaining the status quo. Political authority remains concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, limiting genuine competition and civic participation. Although elections are conducted periodically, significant concerns persist regarding electoral transparency, media censorship, and the systematic suppression of dissenting voices, all of which underscore the absence of substantive democratic governance. Political opponents, civic activists, and independent journalists frequently face intimidation, restrictive legal measures, exclusion from public life, and violence, reducing the possibility of pluralism within the political sphere. While the judiciary is nominally independent, its susceptibility to political influence often undermines the impartiality of legal proceedings. Widespread corruption, nepotism, and restrictions on press freedom further weaken democratic foundations, obstructing the emergence of a transparent and accountable government.

Between 2023 and 2025, Armenia has undergone significant political upheavals marked by increasing tensions between the ruling authorities and opposition groups, accompanied by growing concerns over democratic regression. The 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis proved to be a pivotal moment, triggering mass public demonstrations in September 2023. Protesters accused Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of betraying the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and failing to safeguard national interests. These demonstrations often escalated into violent

confrontations with security forces, resulting in widespread arrests and accusations of government overreach. The National Security Service reported the disruption of an alleged coup attempt involving nationalist groups, a narrative that the authorities utilized to tighten control over political life. By 2024, dissatisfaction with Pashinyan's leadership deepened, particularly in response to the contentious decision to cede four border villages to Azerbaijan, which was widely perceived as a concession eroding national sovereignty. The "Tavush for the Homeland" movement led months of mass protests, road blockades, and acts of civil disobedience, which were met with forceful police crackdowns and mass detentions.

Relations between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church have deteriorated sharply, reflecting the administration's increasing intolerance of critical voices. The arrest of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan in June 2025, along with several opposition activists accused of plotting a coup, highlighted the escalating conflict between state authorities and ecclesiastical figures. Soon after, a failed attempt to detain Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan outside the Etchmiadzin Cathedral further intensified public outrage. Ajapahyan was subsequently charged with incitement to overthrow the government, though both domestic and international observers have questioned the legitimacy of these accusations, viewing them as part of a wider strategy to silence opposition.²³

During this period, the use of legal and institutional mechanisms to suppress political opposition has intensified. In July 2025, several high-ranking members of the Armenia Alliance, including Seyran Ohanyan, Artsvik Minasyan, and Artur Sargsyan, were stripped of

²³ Security Forces Raid Etchmiadzin as Another Archbishop is Prosecuted. Asbarez, June 27, 2025. <https://asbarez.com/security-forces-raid-etchmiadzin-as-another-archbishop-is-prosecuted/>

parliamentary immunity and charged with corruption.²⁴ Critics argue that these charges were politically motivated and designed to neutralize opposition forces ahead of the 2026 elections. Similarly, coordinated police raids targeting pro-Russian activists on terrorism-related allegations have raised concerns about selective justice and the erosion of due process. These developments point to an increasing reliance on coercive tactics by the ruling elite to maintain its political dominance.

The overall democratic landscape in Armenia has continued to decline as key state institutions have become increasingly subservient to the executive branch. The government frequently invokes national security concerns to justify the restriction of press freedoms and civil liberties, thereby consolidating its power. Civil society organizations and independent media have expressed growing alarm at what they describe as Armenia's drift toward authoritarian governance, drawing parallels to other illiberal regimes in the region. The National Assembly has become a focal point of escalating conflict, with parliamentary sessions degenerating into physical confrontations and punitive measures, such as the removal of opposition legislators' immunity, being used to suppress dissenting voices.

Simultaneously, Armenia's foreign policy shift has further intensified internal political polarization. Following the decision to freeze membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2024, the government pursued closer relations with Western partners, highlighted by the signing of a strategic partnership charter with the United States in January 2025 and efforts to deepen cooperation with the European Union. While this geopolitical realignment aims to reduce Armenia's dependence on Russia, critics contend that the

²⁴ Yusef Bardouka. Armenian Parliament waives immunity for 3 MPs, including one accused in coup plot. OC Media, July 8, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/armenian-parliament-waives-immunity-for-3-mps-including-one-accused-in-coup-plot/>

government has used its Western pivot to marginalize pro-Russian opposition and consolidate power. Coupled with the rise of nationalism, growing societal divisions, and shrinking political freedoms, these developments raise serious concerns about the resilience of democratic institutions and the long-term prospects for political pluralism and accountable governance in Armenia.

July 26, 2025