

Igor Kotler

**ARMENIA: INCREASING POLITICAL CONTROL, NATIONALIST PRESSURES,
AND MINORITY VULNERABILITY, 2025–2026**

Armenia entered the second half of 2025 and the 2026 parliamentary election period amid growing political polarization, increasingly confrontational relations between the government and its opponents, tension between the state and the Armenian Apostolic Church, concerns regarding selective law enforcement, continuing allegations of police abuse, and a public environment increasingly affected by hostile political rhetoric and nationalism. Although, elections continue to take place, opposition parties operate, and civil society organizations continue to criticize the government, but with some reservations. Nevertheless, these formal characteristics should not obscure a significant deterioration in important elements of democratic governance. Freedom House continues to identify Armenia as a “Transitional or Hybrid Regime,” while international election observers in 2026 documented unequal campaign opportunities, a concentration of criminal proceedings against opposition candidates and activists, and pressure on public-sector employees to participate in ruling-party events.

These developments are especially important because authoritarianism does not necessarily develop through the formal abolition of elections or the immediate prohibition of opposition parties. Political systems can retain elections, courts, legislatures, and nominally independent institutions while the practical space available for opposition activity becomes progressively narrower. Armenia during 2025–2026 demonstrates several characteristics associated with such democratic erosion: concentration of political authority, increasingly hostile rhetoric toward opponents, extensive reliance on criminal investigations and detention in politically sensitive cases, concerns regarding judicial independence, surveillance, pressure

against journalists and critics, and recurring allegations that law-enforcement mechanisms are applied selectively. Human Rights Watch characterized Armenia's human-rights record during 2025 as "uneven" and identified concerns involving increased state surveillance, restrictions affecting media freedom, ineffective investigations of police abuse, lack of judicial independence, and excessive reliance on pretrial detention.

The developments of June and July 2025 represented an important stage in Armenia's increasingly confrontational domestic politics. Armenian authorities arrested seven individuals associated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun) on terrorism-related allegations following coordinated police operations. Opposition representatives argued that these proceedings were politically motivated. The broader confrontation also encompassed Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, one of the leading figures of the "Sacred Struggle" opposition movement, and other prominent critics of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government. The seriousness of the criminal allegations should not itself be treated as proof that the proceedings were politically motivated; nevertheless, the concentration of coercive measures against prominent opposition figures understandably intensified concerns regarding the political neutrality of the criminal-justice system.

The confrontation extended beyond conventional party politics. On June 27–28, 2025, police confronted supporters of the Armenian Apostolic Church at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin following an arrest order for Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan. The government maintained that law-enforcement authorities were carrying out legitimate criminal procedures, while Church supporters viewed the operation as governmental interference with one of Armenia's most historically significant institutions. Regardless of the competing interpretations, the episode demonstrated that the political conflict had expanded into the religious sphere and

had placed state institutions in direct confrontation with senior representatives and supporters of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The situation continued to generate concern during the second half of 2025. Armenian civil-society and opposition organizations described detentions of activists and politicians, restrictions affecting legal defense, and an increasingly visible police presence as evidence of shrinking political space. In September 2025, Spartak Ghukasyan, the son of Gyumri's opposition mayor, was arrested on extortion charges and subsequently placed under home detention. Opposition representatives characterized the proceeding as an attempt to pressure his father. The allegations remain contested, and an expert assessment should distinguish allegations of political motivation from established judicial findings. Nevertheless, the cumulative significance of these cases lies in the repeated use of criminal proceedings against individuals situated within or closely connected to opposition political networks.

Concerns about freedom of expression also persisted. Amnesty International reported that government and corporate actors increasingly used lawsuits against journalists and human-rights defenders, creating a potential chilling effect on public criticism. Between April and June 2025 alone, 29 cases concerning insult or defamation were reportedly filed against journalists and media organizations. Amnesty further noted concerns regarding media polarization, editorial independence, the safety of journalists, disinformation, and hate speech. Human Rights Watch similarly reported that during the first six months of 2025 a local media-monitoring organization documented four incidents of physical violence by law-enforcement personnel against media representatives and 61 additional incidents involving threats, insults, or other forms of pressure. These developments demonstrate that, despite the continued formal existence of independent media and freedom of expression in Armenia, journalists, human-rights defenders, and other

government critics increasingly operate in an environment in which legal pressure, official interference, intimidation, and physical abuse can impose significant practical constraints on their ability to criticize those in power.

The conduct of Armenian law-enforcement institutions remains particularly relevant when assessing the ability of politically vulnerable individuals to obtain effective state protection. A February 2026 review by the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly–Vanadzor concluded that police violations remained a systemic problem during 2025. Its monitoring identified recurring violations involving liberty and personal security, physical violence, and peaceful assembly. The organization further concluded that an atmosphere of impunity continued in relation to torture and ill-treatment, noting that most reported cases did not result in prosecution.

International organizations have likewise continued to identify structural deficiencies. Amnesty International reported that the UN Committee Against Torture, in its June 2025 conclusions, expressed serious concerns regarding low penalties for torture, inadequate compensation for survivors, insufficient independence of investigative institutions, extensive use of pretrial detention, overcrowding, and poor detention conditions. Armenia has undertaken legislative reforms, including measures requiring medical documentation of detainee injuries, but the existence of reforms on paper does not itself demonstrate consistent accountability in practice. These continuing deficiencies demonstrate a substantial gap between formal legal reforms and their practical implementation, leaving individuals exposed to abuse by law-enforcement and detention authorities without consistently effective mechanisms of independent investigation, accountability, or meaningful protection.

Surveillance presents an additional concern. Human Rights Watch reported that Armenia expanded access to video-surveillance information without adequate privacy safeguards and that

legislation left open the possibility of facial-recognition and other forms of video analytics. Armenian authorities have expressed an intention to use such technologies. In a politically polarized environment, expanded technological capacity for identifying, locating, and monitoring individuals creates legitimate concern when combined with weaknesses in judicial independence and allegations of selective enforcement. Under these circumstances, the expansion of state surveillance capabilities risks becoming not merely a public-security measure but an additional instrument through which authorities can monitor political activity, identify government critics, and exercise greater control over individuals engaged in opposition, protest, or other forms of dissent.

The 2026 Parliamentary Elections and Selective Enforcement Concerns

Political tensions intensified as Armenia approached the June 7, 2026 parliamentary elections. The OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission had already observed increasing tensions between the ruling party and opposition and between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church. It noted that senior clergy and opposition representatives had been detained and prosecuted on various grounds. The observers identified serious circumstances surrounding that competition. The campaign was highly confrontational and characterized by divisive rhetoric. Numerous criminal proceedings were initiated against opposition candidates and activists, and international observers reported that this caused some opposition supporters to refrain from actively participating in the campaign. They also identified pressure on public-sector employees to attend ruling-party events and expressed concern regarding equality of campaign opportunities.

Of particular significance, OSCE observers reported that supporters and candidates associated with Strong Armenia, Prosperous Armenia, and the Armenia Alliance were prominent

subjects of investigations concerning alleged electoral offenses. The publication by authorities of intercepted private conversations also generated due-process concerns. International observers explicitly noted that the concentration of arrests and criminal prosecutions involving opposition figures contributed to perceptions of selective justice. These findings are particularly significant because they came from an international election-monitoring mission rather than from the Armenian opposition itself.

The political conflict did not disappear after election day. Opposition parties challenged the result, and additional opposition figures were arrested while the ruling Civil Contract Party maintained power. Reports concerning the post-election period documented continued criminal proceedings and restrictive measures involving opposition politicians. Although each criminal case must be assessed individually and the existence of charges cannot automatically be equated with political retaliation, the concentration of coercive measures against opposition figures raises legitimate concerns about the independence and political neutrality of Armenia's law-enforcement and judicial institutions.

Thus, the central problem is not that Armenia has completely eliminated elections or political opposition. The more defensible conclusion is that political competition increasingly operates within an environment in which the incumbent government possesses substantial institutional advantages and in which political opposition can carry significant personal, legal, professional, and economic consequences. This represents a materially different environment from a consolidated liberal democracy in which opposition activity can ordinarily be pursued without fear that criminal-law institutions will become entangled with political conflict.

The political deterioration of 2025–2026 has developed alongside increasing polarization over Armenian national identity, Armenia's geopolitical orientation, relations with Russia, the

consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the meaning of political loyalty.

Nationalism in Armenia cannot be reduced to a single ideology or attributed exclusively to the government. It emerges from multiple political tendencies and is shaped by the trauma of war, displacement, insecurity, relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia's changing relationship with Russia, and deep disagreement regarding the country's future geopolitical orientation.

Nevertheless, these conditions have created an environment in which ethnicity, language, origin, religion, and perceived geopolitical loyalties may acquire heightened political significance.

The Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has continued to identify deficiencies in Armenia's response to racism, intolerance, and hate speech. In conclusions adopted on July 2, 2025 and published on October 29, 2025, ECRI evaluated Armenia's implementation of recommendations intended to promote diversity and tolerance and to combat racist and anti-LGBT hate speech, hate-motivated violence, and unequal treatment. ECRI concluded that the principal recommendation concerning awareness raising and cooperation with ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities had only been partially implemented. A second priority recommendation concerning an integration strategy for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants had not yet been implemented.

These findings are significant because they demonstrate that problems affecting minorities cannot be dismissed simply because Armenia's Constitution formally prohibits unequal treatment. Formal equality and effective equality are not synonymous. Armenia continues to lack comprehensive legislation covering all forms and grounds of unequal treatment. Amnesty International reported in its 2025/26 assessment that the absence of comprehensive legislation remained a concern and that a proposed equality law was still pending.

For example, problems affecting Yazidis illustrate the structural nature of minority vulnerability. Yazidis have reported unequal treatment in property disputes, inadequate infrastructure in predominantly Yazidi villages, educational disadvantages, racist verbal abuse, and insufficient access to minority-language education. The prosecution of Yazidi activist Sashik Sultanyan after he publicly discussed unequal treatment of Yazidis attracted criticism from international human-rights organizations, which regarded his statements as protected speech. The continuing relevance of these problems was demonstrated in May 2026, when the Council of Europe held consultations with Yazidi and Assyrian communities concerning continuing challenges involving education, employment, minority languages and cultures, unequal treatment, hatred, and barriers facing Yazidi girls and women.

The experience of forcibly displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh further illustrates the capacity of nationalist and political rhetoric to divide even populations sharing Armenian ethnicity. Monitoring by the Regional Center for Democracy and Security during the 2026 election campaign documented hate speech targeting displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Its May 2026 monitoring concluded that representatives and supporters of the governing Civil Contract Party were among important generators of hostile narratives and reported that some online rhetoric included calls for displaced Karabakh Armenians to leave Armenia.

This phenomenon is important beyond the immediate situation of Karabakh Armenians. It demonstrates that contemporary Armenian nationalism and political polarization can produce exclusionary distinctions not only between ethnic Armenians and recognized national minorities, but also within the broader Armenian population itself. Political loyalty, regional origin, attitudes toward Russia, views concerning Nagorno-Karabakh, and perceived support for or opposition to

the government may interact with identity in determining how individuals are treated in public discourse.

Another example concerns ethnic Russians. The position of ethnic Russians and Russian nationals in Armenia should therefore be evaluated within this broader environment. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia's ethnic Russian population declined considerably through emigration and demographic change. Armenia nevertheless maintained close economic, military, cultural, and political relations with Russia for decades. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Armenia also received a substantial influx of Russian citizens, including political opponents of President Vladimir Putin, individuals seeking to avoid mobilization, professionals relocating businesses, and others unwilling to remain in wartime Russia.

The influx produced complex and, at times, contradictory reactions within Armenian society. The arrival of large numbers of Russian migrants contributed to increased demand for housing and a substantial rise in rental prices, particularly in Yerevan, generating resentment among some segments of the local population. At the same time, Armenia's deteriorating security relationship with Moscow, particularly in the aftermath of the 2020 and 2023 developments surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, contributed to growing frustration and anger toward the Russian government. Within this increasingly polarized environment, legitimate criticism of Russian state policies has sometimes broadened into more generalized hostility toward Russian nationals and ethnic Russians, who may be associated with the policies and actions of the Russian state regardless of their individual political views or personal circumstances.

This distinction is important. The concern is that ethnic Russians and Russian citizens may experience hostility, social exclusion, stereotyping, hostile commentary, and suspicion based upon assumptions concerning their relationship to the Russian state. Such risks may become greater when Russian ethnicity or citizenship intersects with other characteristics, including political activity, opposition to Armenian authorities, opposition to Vladimir Putin, minority religious affiliation, lack of Armenian-language proficiency, or absence of established family and social networks in Armenia.

Armenia's changing geopolitical orientation has itself become a source of domestic polarization. Amnesty International reported that the country's movement toward a more Western-oriented foreign policy and its efforts to reduce traditional dependence on Russia contributed to disinformation and hate speech during 2025. Reporters Without Borders similarly observed in 2026 that Armenia was experiencing an unprecedented level of disinformation and hate speech fueled by domestic political tensions, security concerns, and the country's difficult geopolitical position between Russia and the European Union. Armenia's ranking in the RSF World Press Freedom Index declined from 34th in 2025 to 50th in 2026.

The situation becomes more serious for Russian nationals who have attracted the attention of Russian security or law-enforcement agencies. The February 2025 case of Roman Shklover illustrates the potential vulnerability of such individuals. According to the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly–Vanadzor, Shklover, a Russian citizen represented by the organization, was summoned to a Yerevan police station after a Russian criminal case had been initiated against him. Individuals believed to be associated with Russia's Federal Security Service reportedly entered the Armenian police facility and attempted to persuade him to return voluntarily to Russia. His lawyer intervened, and Shklover refused. The organization expressed concern

regarding the apparent ability of Russian security personnel to enter Armenian police facilities and approach Russian citizens there.

This episode demonstrates that Armenia cannot automatically be treated as an environment entirely insulated from Russian security influence. For a Russian citizen who is already of interest to Russian law enforcement or security agencies, this history is relevant when assessing whether relocation to Armenia necessarily provides durable protection.

The 2025–2026 period produced a troubling accumulation of indicators: criminal proceedings concentrated among opposition figures; confrontation with senior Armenian Apostolic clergy; concerns regarding selective justice; pressure affecting journalists and media; increased surveillance capabilities; recurring allegations of police abuse and inadequate accountability; extensive use of pretrial detention; highly confrontational political rhetoric; and inequality in campaign conditions. The significance lies in the cumulative institutional pattern. A government does not need formally to outlaw opposition parties in order to diminish meaningful political competition. If political opponents reasonably anticipate arrest, prosecution, searches, surveillance, economic pressure, employment consequences, or prolonged criminal proceedings, the practical space for political participation contracts even while elections continue to occur. The chilling effect can extend beyond the individuals directly targeted to their families, supporters, employees, donors, journalists, and ordinary citizens who observe the consequences of visible opposition.

Developments during the second half of 2025 and throughout 2026 demonstrate a serious deterioration in Armenia’s democratic environment. Freedom House’s classification of Armenia as a “Transitional or Hybrid Regime” is particularly instructive because it captures a fundamental contradiction: certain democratic institutions formally continue to function, while

their independence, effectiveness, and ability to restrain executive power remain substantially limited. The developments surrounding the June 7, 2026 parliamentary elections reinforce this assessment. International observers documented unequal campaign opportunities, criminal proceedings concentrated among opposition candidates and activists, pressure affecting public-sector employees, divisive rhetoric, and perceptions of selective justice. These are not insignificant technical defects. They concern the ability of citizens to oppose the government without fear, the political neutrality of state institutions, and the separation between legitimate law enforcement and the use or perceived use of coercive governmental power in political competition.

The deterioration is particularly consequential for persons who possess characteristics that may place them outside the dominant political or national consensus. Ethnic minorities, religious minorities, Russian citizens, ethnic Russians, displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, government critics, opposition activists, journalists, and persons whose identities or political positions are interpreted through Armenia's increasingly polarized geopolitical environment may experience overlapping vulnerabilities. Council of Europe findings concerning incomplete measures against racist and minority-directed hatred, continuing barriers affecting Yezidis and other minorities, and the absence of fully comprehensive equality protections demonstrate that formal constitutional guarantees do not always translate into effective protection in practice.

The central concern is therefore not merely whether Armenian law formally guarantees democratic rights. The more important question is whether state institutions can be relied upon to apply those guarantees impartially when an individual comes into conflict with politically influential actors, law-enforcement bodies, nationalist pressures, or the interests of the

government. The record of 2025–2026 provides substantial reasons for caution. Persistent concerns involving police abuse, weak accountability, judicial independence, selective enforcement, surveillance, pressure on critical voices, and the politicization of criminal proceedings undermine confidence that formal remedies will necessarily provide effective protection.

Armenia in 2026 is moving through a dangerous period of democratic erosion in which executive power, law-enforcement authority, political polarization, and increasingly exclusionary rhetoric are interacting in ways that weaken institutional restraints and narrow the practical space for dissent. It should be pointed out that democratic legitimacy cannot be measured solely by the existence of elections. It also depends upon whether opponents can participate without intimidation, whether courts and law-enforcement institutions operate independently, whether journalists can investigate those in power without undue pressure, whether police abuse is effectively punished, and whether ethnic, religious, political, and other minorities can depend upon equal protection.

The available evidence demonstrates that the Armenian political system has developed increasingly serious weaknesses in precisely those institutions that should prevent arbitrary state power. For individuals who already possess an adverse political profile, belong to a vulnerable minority, lack powerful social protection, or attract the attention of Armenian or Russian security structures, these institutional deficiencies may have direct consequences for personal safety. The concentration of political authority and weakening confidence in the neutrality of law enforcement and the judiciary substantially reduce the assurance that such individuals will receive fair treatment or effective protection when confronted by politically connected or state actors.

Highly corrupt Armenian law-enforcement agencies play an indispensable role in enforcing, maintaining, and supporting an increasingly authoritarian political system associated with serious human-rights violations. Armenian law-enforcement authorities have been repeatedly criticized for the excessive use of force, physical abuse, and ill-treatment, particularly in their dealings with individuals regarded as critics or opponents of the government.

Every citizen is required to maintain an official residence registration, historically known as *propiska* in Russian and commonly referred to as *hrantsum* in Armenian. Registration is closely connected to numerous interactions with state institutions and can affect access to housing, employment, medical care, social benefits, and other administrative services. The system retains important features of the Soviet administrative tradition from which it developed. Under the Soviet Union, *propiska* served not merely as a record of residence but also as an important mechanism through which the state maintained information about citizens, monitored their places of residence, regulated population movement, and facilitated the ability of government and law-enforcement authorities to locate particular individuals. The contemporary Armenian registration system continues to provide the state with a mechanism for maintaining information about the population and establishing where individuals officially reside. Consequently, for persons who have attracted the attention of Armenian law-enforcement or security authorities, changing their place of residence within Armenia does not necessarily provide anonymity or prevent the authorities from locating them and maintaining continuing scrutiny over their activities.

Accordingly, the Armenian government's democratic credentials must be evaluated not through its formal institutions alone, but through the increasingly restrictive political environment that developed during 2025–2026. The record reveals a state where opposition

remains legal but may carry substantial personal and legal risks; where minority protections formally exist but remain incomplete; and where police, prosecutorial, judicial, and surveillance powers operate within an environment of intense political polarization. Unless these tendencies are reversed through the establishment of genuine judicial independence, politically neutral law enforcement, effective accountability for police abuse, meaningful protection of opposition activities and freedom of expression, and stronger safeguards for ethnic and other minorities, Armenia risks moving further away from the democratic aspirations associated with the 2018 Velvet Revolution and toward a political system characterized by increasingly concentrated executive power, weakened institutional checks and balances, and diminishing practical protections for political dissent.

September 10, 2026