

New York Times Editorial

Dark Days in Armenia

The democracy that Armenians dreamed of during their long decades under Moscow's yoke is slipping away. After opponents challenged last month's flawed presidential election, the government imposed a brutal state of emergency. At least eight people are now dead, independent news outlets throttled and all protests silenced. President Bush and other Western leaders need to make clear to Armenia's government that such behavior is unacceptable and will jeopardize future relations. Compared to post-Soviet tyrannies like Belarus or Uzbekistan, Armenia may not look so bad. That is why it is so important to halt this slide into authoritarianism before it is too late.

Official election results handed an overwhelming victory to the ruling party candidate, Serge Sargsyan. International monitors declared that while the overall outcome appeared fair, there were serious problems with the vote count. The protests that followed only turned violent after police began beating demonstrators.

Witnesses told our colleague, Sabrina Tavernise, that government authorities planted guns and grenades among the sleeping protestors last Saturday morning. Then, claiming that they were thwarting an attempted coup, police attacked the opposition camp. The next day, the outgoing president sent tanks into the streets, banned demonstrations and ordered Armenian news organizations to relay only infor-

mation provided by his government. Local stations can no longer use the Armenian language programs produced by foreign broadcasters including the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

That drew an admirably strong protest from Washington's Broadcasting Board of Governors, the independent federal agency that supervises these stations, while the State Department has expressed its concern over the death toll. Their words would carry more weight if President Bush added his voice. Armenia, embroiled in a lengthy standoff with neighboring Azerbaijan, is relatively isolated in its own region and especially values its good relations with the United States.

This is not a case of pure democratic virtue against pure authoritarian evil. The defeated opposition leader, Levon Ter-Petrosian, is a former president who in the 1990s sent armored cars into the streets to crush demonstrators protesting his electoral manipulations.

He insists, without credible evidence, that he won this election. And once government forces set off last weekend's violence, some of those who turned out in Mr. Ter-Petrosian's behalf seemed more interested in looting nearby shops. The main responsibility lies with Armenia's government leaders, and it is to them that the White House must address its protests.

Published: March 7, 2008

RFE/RL Listeners In Armenia Find New Ways To Get Uncensored News

Prague, Czech Republic -- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has restored broadcasting on shortwave frequencies to Armenia to counter the government's blackout on independent news.

RFE/RL President Jeffrey Gedmin said today, "It is disappointing that because of restrictions imposed by the Armenian government we have to take this step backward to an outmoded frequency we stopped using in Armenia three years ago, but I'm happy to say it is working."

RFE/RL's Armenian Service reinstated broadcasting on two shortwave frequencies March 8, a week after its regular broadcasts on FM frequencies were taken off the air by its two local affiliates. The affiliates were complying with an emergency decree by President Kocharian that allows only government-sanctioned news to be aired. RFE/RL is

the only Armenian language foreign radio in the country.

Broadcasts are now one hour daily on shortwave, instead of the previous three hours on local FM. But all programs can be heard on RFE/RL's Armenian language website, armenialiberty.org

RFE/RL has added more news items to the website and is updating its content every hour of every day, to supplement the loss of local FM broadcasting. Statistics suggest the strategy is working. Listenership on RFE/RL's Internet sites for Armenia tripled in March, compared to a month ago.

Listeners are also finding other ways to hear uncensored RFE/RL news. The service is getting reports that Armenian bloggers are posting RFE/RL news on their sites and that RFE/RL news programs are being repackaged and posted on YouTube.

Armenia Election Controversy: A Local View

By Frank Lavoie
Hawaii Reporter

For those who gripe about elections in the United States, all one has to do is look around the world and see how truly lucky we are. One recent example is the presidential election in Armenia held February 19. Armenia is a newly independent democracy located in a precarious situation surrounded by enemies in the Southern Caucasus.

The sitting president Robert Kocharian anointed his Prime Minister Serzh Sarkissian to succeed him. The election was to be purely a show. The administration was seen as highly corrupt and it was thought that the common falsification of election results would continue. The opposition candidate was actually Armenia's first president after independence from 1991 to 1998, Levon Ter-Petrosian.

When the first round election ended with an outright victory for Sarkissian with 53% of the vote, the opposition immediately claimed falsification and started protests. After ten days of peaceful protests the police moved in, leading to pitched battles in the streets, machine gun fire ringing out, numerous deaths and injuries and the army, complete with tanks and armored personnel carriers, occupying the capital Yerevan. What made the situation ironic was that Ter-Petrosian's re-election in 1996 was marred by vote fraud, protests and clashes leading to martial law, though not on a scale like what happened March 1.

It is impossible to find out what has actually transpired in Armenia since the crackdown began because Kocharian has created a complete news black out by suspending all freedom of the press and blocking outside news media.

However, the issue that started the conflict has been overlooked: the fraudulent election. I believe that the election was indeed faked. I base this on my first hand account of being an election observer for Kocharian's first election back in 1998, when he was Prime Minister and the government candidate. I am sure things have not changed much since then, except that each year the election fraud is covered up better.

I became an observer through the United States embassy in Yerevan and came under the umbrella of the OSCE observer mission. During the first round of elections I monitored election precincts in the Ararat region (at the time one of the most corrupt regions) and in the second round I was in Yerevan at a regional vote collection center.

Being out in the village precincts during the first round was quite amazing. We were able to spend only about half an hour at each location. Of all the voting places we visited only one seemed to have no problems and it was not even on our list of precincts to visit due to its small size. The rest all had problems of various degrees.

One common theme to our precinct visits was that the issues were always "resolved" instantly. We were like gods that got things fixed, even

though we were only observers that could ask questions, lots of them if necessary. The problem, of course, was that as soon as we left things went right back to normal.

There was one polling place with campaign posters on the front door.

When the precinct president was confronted he assured me that it was untrue, despite the fact I saw it with my own eyes. He then walked me back outside to prove it: the posters were gone!

Several locations had open voting, where voters were showing their marked ballots in public. Several others had people registering to vote outside their registered locations. Numerous instances of passport photos not being checked were witnessed. Particularly troubling were police officers inside the polling stations, a situation specifically prohibited due to earlier instances of intimidation.

I would always pay a visit to the police at every location, ask how they were doing and if necessary "escort" them to where they belonged. More often than not they were back where they didn't belong by the time we drove off.

At one location voters not on the list but obviously living in the precinct were denied their right to be given a provisional ballot.

Only by our timely arrival and insistence on watching the problem be resolved did they get to vote.

Another location had a broken ballot box seal: a voter had fallen on it by accident, nothing funny was going on, of course.

At 8pm the precincts were locked and the vote counting took place. We were in a small village, it was dark, lots of men in dark clothes were standing about and strange music was playing over the loudspeakers. A truly scary feeling, though we knew we were safe.

Nonetheless, we had our driver park the car near the door. Without fail, a common theme in Armenian vote counting occurred: the lights went out! I immediately jumped on top of the ballot box, calling out to my partner to make sure we stayed in communication. The lights came on and we continued the count. Upon finishing the count the ballots were packed into a car for the ride to the district collection point. We followed in our car and it was quite obvious they tried to lose us during the trip.

The highlight of the election for me was the second round two weeks later at the regional vote collection center in the Nor Nork region of Yerevan. This is where the actual results protocols are turned in after the counting at the precincts. It was well past midnight before the first results started to arrive. The results protocols were turned in and the ballots stacked to the side. The action started when the opposition observer stated that one of the protocols did not match the results that were announced at the actual precinct. The committee president simply stated that he would investigate and then ordered a break.

An hour later in the hallway I

Continued on page 4

**ՎԱՐՁՈՒ ՄՐԱՆ
ՓԱՍՏԻՆԱՅԻ ՄԷՐ
(200 ՀՈԳԻ ԸԱՍԱՐ)**

**ԱՄԷՆ ՏԵՍԱԿ ԱՌԻՅԵՐՈՒ ԸԱՍԱՐ
1060 N. ALLEN AVE. PASADENA**

ՇԵՆԱԶԱՅՆԵԼ (626) 797-7680