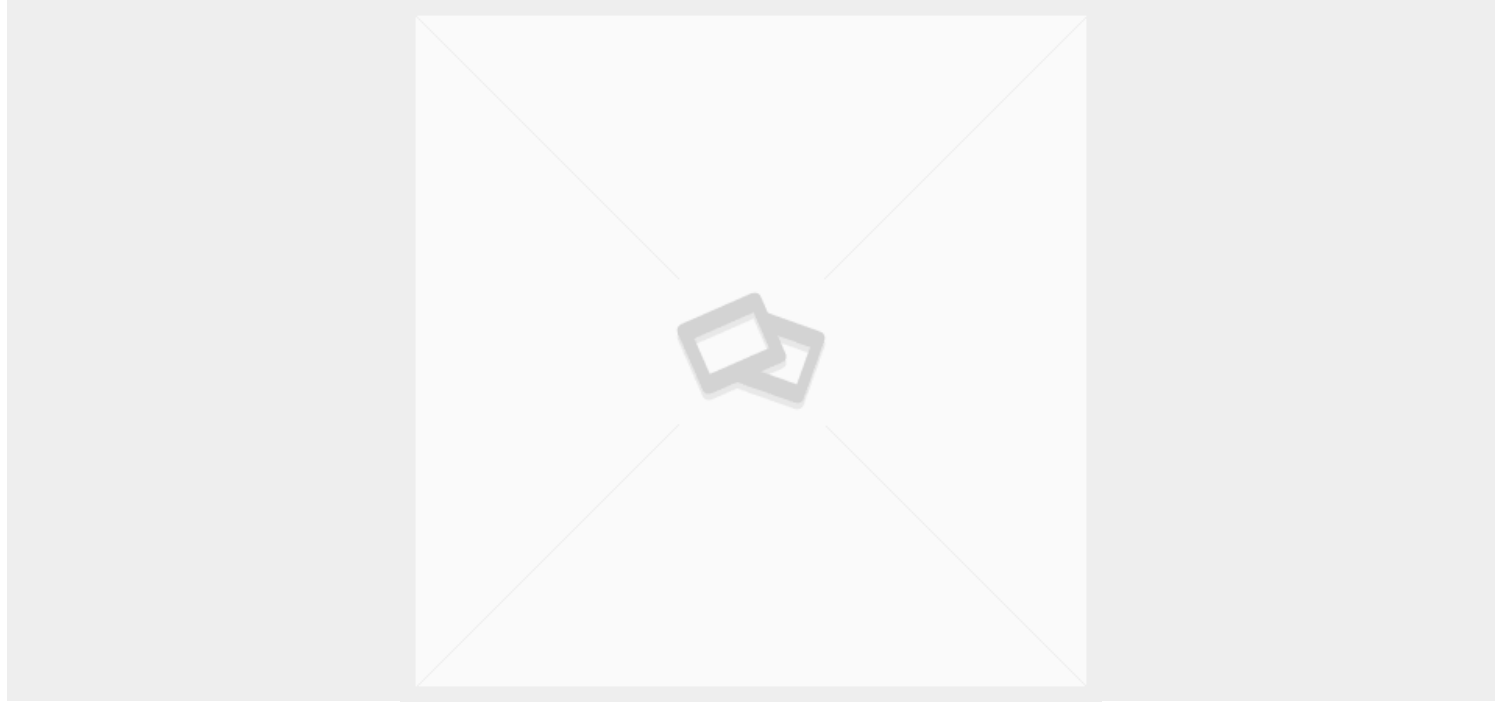


DIVISIONS DEEPEN IN ARMENIA AS COUNTRY BRACES FOR MPS' TRIAL

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Duncan Campbell, [guardian.co.uk](https://www.guardian.co.uk), Yerevan, Monday 15 December 2008

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Armenia is bracing itself for one of the biggest trials in its short history as an independent country, with a former foreign minister and three MPs among seven charged in connection with mass protests in which 10 people died.

The case this week against Alexander Arzoumanian, the former foreign minister, and six others charged with "usurpation of state power", is the culmination of a political storm that has engulfed the former Soviet republic since thousands took to the streets early this year against the disputed presidential election result.

"There is a real atmosphere of fear now," said Melissa Brown, the wife of Arzoumanian, who is in jail awaiting trial. "It is like Soviet times," she said during a protest in Yerevan, the capital.

Brown, from Philadelphia, met Arzoumanian when he was Armenia's UN ambassador in Washington. He later became the campaign manager for the opposition leader and former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who lost this year's election. The Arzoumanians' phones were tapped by police in the run-up to the elections and their conversations were published in the media and used to charge him with money-laundering.

"This is Watergate stuff," said Brown, who visits her husband twice a month in prison. "It is not about one candidate against another, it is about freedom and democracy."

Ter-Petrosyan's supporters, who blamed voting irregularities for the election of President Serzh Sargsyan, began protesting in Freedom Square in mid-February. By night, about 1,000 camped out in freezing temperatures. By day, crowds of up to 50,000 - estimates vary wildly - participated in rallies.

Tensions rose further during the last week of February, and on 1 March police entered the square, claiming they were searching for ammunition. There were running battles through the streets, culminating in the police opening fire, with each side claiming that the other launched the first missile. Ten people, including two police officers, were killed.

The killings sent shockwaves through the country and the government imposed strict media censorship for 20 days. While the government-sanctioned television stations continued to broadcast news, some newspapers ran blank pages until their publication was halted.

More than 70 protesters have already been jailed but it is the seven awaiting trial this week who face the main charges.

Sargsyan claimed 52.8% of the vote, enough to avoid the run-off that some international observers believe should have been held. The bloodshed has obscured argument over vote-rigging.

"To me, it was like the death of my country," said Karine Asatryan, editor of the A1+ website, which was closed down during the news blackout. "It is nine months now and we still don't know what happened, no one believes the police version of events. As for the trial, I am sure they will all be found guilty unless there is international pressure."

Gegham Vardanyan, a journalist with Internews, said that the issue of elections remained unresolved. "Armenia has never had fair elections, there has always been fraud, people don't believe you can change that." As for the court case, "it is a political trial and what happens in it will depend on the political process".

The police feel they have been unfairly portrayed in the media and that little sympathy was shown for the dead officers. "The coverage has been extremely negative, it has often added fuel to the fire," said Sayat Shirinyan, the chief police spokesman. "As for what happened, I can't provide a clear picture because there is still an investigation to be completed. After it happened, many saw me as the embodiment of the whole situation. About half the country knows me and I experienced some very tense looks, but that has changed. There are still aftershocks but what happens in the future depends on the authorities."

Avetik Ishkhanyan, the chairman of the Helsinki committee of Armenia, a human rights body, said that the country faced many challenges. "Armenia is not totalitarian but it is not democratic," he said. "There is still limited freedom of expression. The television stations, both public and private, are under the control of the authorities."

