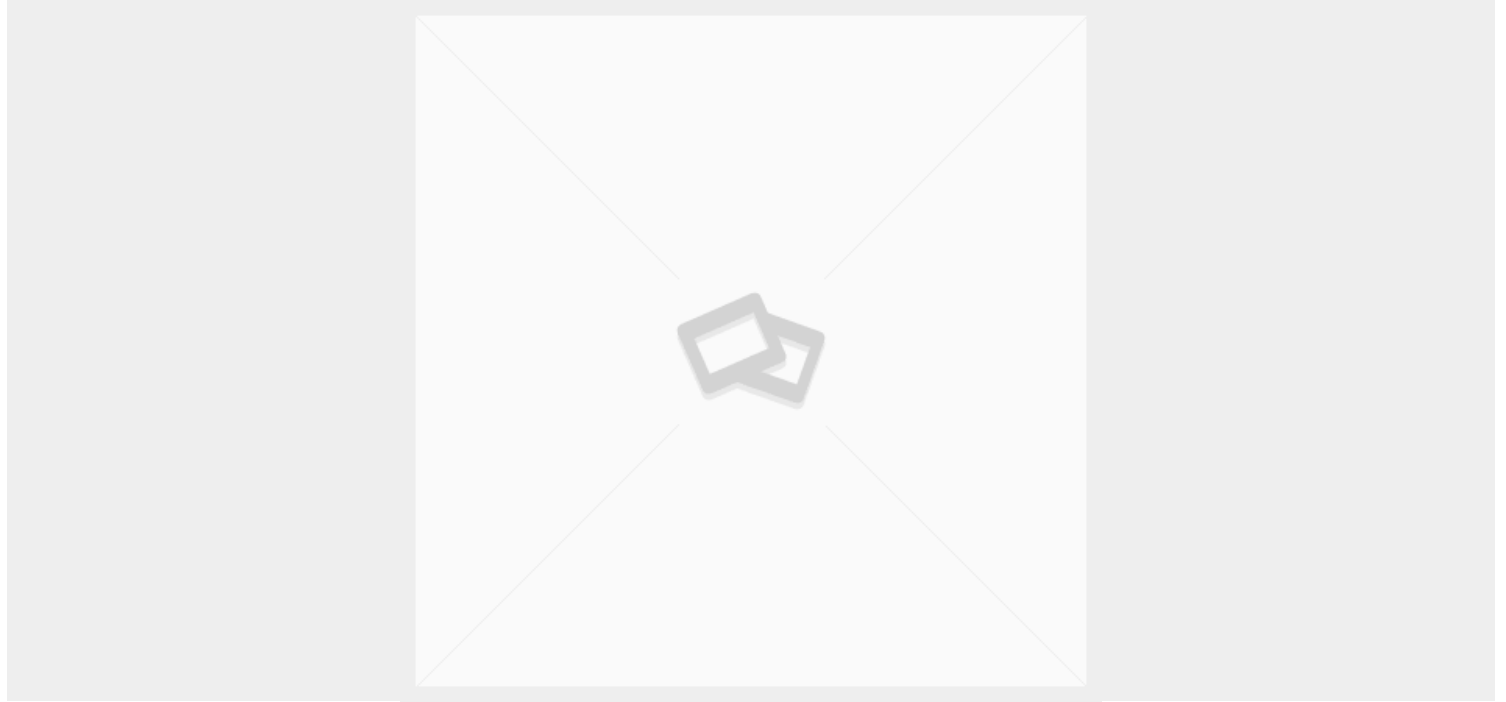


# TESTIMONY: THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND MARCH 1ST TRAGEDY

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By Zhanna Aleksanyan, Yerevan, Armenia

*Zhanna Aleksanyan is a member of the Investigative Journalists' Association of Armenia. She was first-hand witness at March 1, 2008, government crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. She provided testimonies at various organizations in USA and Warsaw, Poland. - Keghart.com*

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When speaking about the 2008 presidential elections it is imperative to bear in mind the pre-election period. The latter was ripe with unprecedented unequal campaign, exploitation of government resources, control of electronic media, efforts of distorting facts and events, mockery and denigration of opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan, denial of office space to Ter-Petrosian or organized attacks on his campaign offices.

But the Election Day and the events that followed were unprecedented in violence and threats, and resulted in 10 fatalities.

The violence and threats continue up to date.

Let us start from the Election Day - February 19.

The calls received at the offices of the "Heritage" party alerted of violent actions and election fraud at various poll stations - from kidnapping, to threats against proxies and their expulsion from elections precincts.

In Avan district, at around 11:00am, two young men asked Levon Ter-Petrosian's proxy, Arsen Khanamian, and his friend Garik Ghazarian to leave the poll station "for a chat" and suggested that they get into the Jeep parked outside of the building. When the men sat in the car, the vehicle suddenly took off, taking the men in an unknown direction. A short while later, the proxy and his friend were taken to a "Harsnakar" hotel near Sevan Lake, where they were met by the owner of the hotel, parliamentarian Ruben

Hayrapetian, and by two dozen of his bodyguards. Arsen and his friend were handcuffed and severely beaten.

The MP himself took leading participation in the attacks, primarily beating Arsen and causing him serious injuries (breaking his jaw). After this, the young men were once again handcuffed and spent about an hour and a half locked in a basement. On the same day, later in the afternoon when the two were released, we tried to have a phone conversation with Arsen, but he was not capable to speak. He spent the following few days in bed. However, already the next day, on February 20, Arsen's brother held a speech, where he demanded for the removal of the authorities. Although the committed crimes were undeniable, to this date, the perpetrators have not been prosecuted by the law enforcement agencies. Ruben Hayrapetyan is not the only individual that's above law in Armenia. Any citizen in country knows that he will remain unpunished.

The other case of kidnapping occurred in the Kotayq region. The victim, Larisa Tadevosian uncovered and presented to the election committee a number of false citizen names in the voter lists. Despite the fact that a day before she was approached by certain individuals, who people warned her "not to interfere and keep her silence," the woman still decided to pursue the truth. The next day, i.e. the Election Day, at 8:00am, three full-bodied men approached her at the poll station (Larisa knew these people) and cautioned her "to refrain from speaking out". Afterwards, they forced her out of the building and drove her to a deserted location outside the city. Larisa received blows to her face and head (she had bruises on her face). The men threatened her family, and then took off abandoning her there. Later on, Larisa reported to the nearby police station herself.

On March 1, the police pummeled random passer-bys.

Early in the morning, on March 1, I was told, that the demonstrators in Freedom Square were brutally dispersed. Around 9:00 am, I was already in the office of "Heritage" party, which is located by the square. Twenty three year old Areg, who took refuge at the party's office, was telling how and what happened at the square. He was unable to escape from the police that was armed with truncheons: "The unexpected attack caused panic among the people. They were running left and right. The police was intentionally blocking their way, causing many to trip over and fall on the ground receiving beatings with truncheons. They caught me as I was trying to escape from the square, pushed me against a wall and started pounding my head with their truncheons."

The party office received information that at that instance the police was still continuing their assault on the people on Northern Avenue and Tumanian Streets, where one could see puddles of blood. I hurried there. The Freedom Square was surrounded by rows of police forces, while a large group of police, about 30 to 40 people, armed with truncheons was throwing violent glares in the direction of the passer-bys that were gathered on Tumanian and Mashtots avenues.

I had taken about 50 steps when I heard and a horrendous noise from behind. I turned back. A large group of police forces was running in one direction, from where one could hear a excruciating cries and screams of a woman. Before approaching the woman, I saw how four police officers were dragging a thirty year-old man, while hitting him with truncheons. The police forced the young man into parked police van on Tumanian Street. Apparently, the young man tried to protect the 30-year-old woman, who had tried to photograph the police rows. The officers noticed this and attacked the woman, hitting her violently on her shoulder and confiscating her camera.

When others and I approached to console the crying woman, the police rudely threatened us not to crowd the space. At that moment, another crowd gathered on the opposite side of the street. People were watching the police activity. One of the policemen noticed the crowd and started yelling, "Do not gather!" Then, that group of policemen, waving their truncheons, immediately started chasing after the people. The latter began running away on Tumanian Street, disregarding the street traffic. I did not run, but instead followed what was happening.

The police cars quickly took off and drove after the people. Individuals in police uniforms were catching those attempting to escape and throwing them into vans and beating them with truncheons. That was a horrible scene that took place in front of my eyes. I suddenly understood, that I could also become a target and looked back when a policeman had raised his truncheon and was about to hit my head with it. But as I stared at him, he lowered his truncheon, and I told him "You have not warned me that it is not allowed to walk on the sidewalk." It was the first day of spring, 10:00 am in the morning.

On March 1st the police attacked citizens.

The President of law-enforcement organization of Helsinki Citizen's Assembly of Vanadzor Arthur Saqunc provided information about the people, who were detained or arrested in the Lori region on the morning of March 1, after the dispersing of the demonstration. The people presented are residents of Lori region. I have conducted the interviews.

Voskanian Rubik-participant of sitting protest, head of LTP's headquarter in Vanadzor

Manukian Ashot--Head of Lori Region headquarters

Their friend Kolya witnessed the ruthless treatment that the above mentioned people were subjected to on the morning of March 1 by the police after the dispersing of the demonstration. Kolya told that the mentioned people managed to escape from Freedom Square and reach the circus area, but because of Rubik Voskanian's deterioration of health conditions, they were forced to call the ambulance. When the ambulance car arrived, instead of doctors, masked individuals got out of the car and started beating Ashot and Rubik with truncheons, after which they threw them in the car and took them away. Saqunc tells, that during the following three days he could not get any information regarding where his friends were. The incident occurred around 8 am. After 3 days it became clear that they were taken to the Yerevan Central police station. Armen Khachatrian from the Ombudsman's office also came to the police station to gather information. 3 days after their arrest Ashot Manukian was found, while Roubik Voskanian's relatives found out about his whereabouts only after 5 days. They were both detained without the interference of a lawyer. On March 9th the relatives of A. Manukian managed to have a lawyer interfere in defense of his case.

The police approached Gagik Shamshian, photographer of Aravot and Chorrord Ishakhanutiun newspapers, when at 6AM the police was dispersing peaceful demonstrators, using truncheons and Tazers. He started photographing, when the square was void of electricity and, since he was using the camera's flash, he attracted attention of the police. 7 policemen approached him, who grabbed his camera, which they never returned, and started beating him with truncheons. Shamshian has kidney problems and he had a special belt attached to his back. Noticing this, the police started hitting particularly at this part of his body. One of the policemen recognized him and said, "This is the photographer, who always takes our pictures" and bringing his finger next to his

eye said "let's remove his eye, so that he won't take pictures of us anymore." Shamshian said that while on the ground he was covering his head to protect himself from the beatings.

Seeing that he is no more capable of standing on his feet, grabbing him from his clothes the police dragged him faced down to the other end of Freedom Square, crossing about 30-40 meters, and dropped him there. Shamshian remained on the ground for about 20 minutes, after which they transferred him to the Central police station by car. He tells that he saw other beaten people in the car. After the central police station they took people to police stations according to their residency. Shamshian was taken to the Kanaker/ Zeitun district police station, where he spent about 7 hours. At the police station, at one moment being alone he manages to call lawyer Seda Safarian and the ombudsman's office. Only after the interference of these two, Shamshian, who had acute kidney pains, was transferred to the hospital, where he was subjected to a medical checkup and eventually released. Shamshian says that at the hospital they did not register his name. At the same time Armen Ohanian was taken from the Freedom Square to the Kanaker/Zeytun police station. Ohanian had witnessed how Shamshian was crying from his kidney pains at the police station.

Armen Ohanian tells that he was at the Freedom Square when the police raided the square and without warning attacked the people. They did not beat up Armen. He says that one of the policemen even extended his hand to help him get up when he fell on the ground. He managed to escape from Freedom Square and ended up on the adjacent Northern Avenue with his friends. There he saw a man whose head was injured and his wound was bleeding. He tried to help this person, and immediately called for an ambulance. The ambulance, however, never arrived and he found a special car, which took the injured to the hospital.

Then he headed to the Republic Square with his friends, where they were detained and taken to the Kanaker-Zeytun police divisions. Armen stayed there for about 30 hours. They asked him to write explanations as to why he was at Freedom Square. He was not allowed to call his parents to let them know about his whereabouts. Armen witnessed the violence used against those detained at the police station. One youngster, whose leg was injured during the demonstration dispersal, was being beaten up at the police station. In fact, one of the policemen was holding him, while the other was kicking at the youngster's injured leg. They were being forced to write in the protocol that they had resisted against the police who were trying to disperse the demonstrators. "And when the police-head came to the police station he directly announced out-loud, that all the protocols must note that the detained had shown resistance toward the police", Armen told. But he managed to avoid that request, "the hours that I spent at the police station left a deep psychological effect on me, and my parents during that time were looking for me in the morgues."

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