

Armenia 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

More than 100,000 ethnic-Armenian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh fled to Armenia between September 24 and October 1, following Azerbaijan's military operation to gain full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. This followed Azerbaijan's closure of the Lachin Corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to most civilian and commercial access, allowing only intermittent humanitarian access, between December 2022 and September 24, when it reopened for one-way traffic out of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the year, Azerbaijani forces hit certain infrastructure inside Armenia. Armenia's government strengthened its institutional framework to fight corruption by implementing its new anti-corruption strategy on multiple fronts.

Numerous nongovernmental organizations reported on a notable increase in cases of abuse or torture by law enforcement officials of individuals in custody and asserted such behavior was becoming systemic and often went unpunished.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor.

The government took only limited credible steps to investigate and punish alleged human rights abuses by former and sitting government officials and law enforcement authorities. There was no reported progress on government investigations of alleged abuses committed by the Armenian armed forces or individuals during the 2020 hostilities.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concerns regarding noncombat deaths in the army and the failure of law enforcement bodies to conduct credible investigations into those deaths. According to civil society organizations and victims' families, the practice of qualifying many noncombat deaths as suicides at the onset of investigations made it less likely abuses would be uncovered and investigated. According to human rights lawyers, the biggest obstacle to investigation of military deaths was the destruction or nonpreservation of key evidence, both by the

military command (in cases of internal investigations) and by the specific investigation body working on a case. According to human rights NGOs, the government's lack of transparency in reporting on military deaths, whether classified as combat or noncombat, led to public distrust of official information in this sphere.

Law enforcement and prosecutors took no specific action on the findings of a working group established by the prime minister in 2020 that examined five noncombat deaths from past years before its dissolution in 2022. According to official information, however, investigators listed two persons under one of the cases as wanted. On February 17, a human rights lawyer who served on the working group and families of the deceased published a list of dozens of sitting and former justice-sector officials whom they believed were complicit in covering up the deaths. On April 25, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered the government to pay €50,000 (\$54,100) in damages to the mother of Tigran Ohanjanyan (one of the five cases investigated), finding that the investigation carried out by authorities was seriously deficient and that the ECHR could not consider the conclusions of that investigation to be reliable or the explanation for Ohanjanyan's 2007 death to be convincing and satisfactory.

Two cases involved individuals allegedly jumping to their deaths from windows while in the custody of the Investigative Committee: one on April 27 in the Regional Investigative Department of Ararat Region, Masis

Division, and the other on July 20 in the building of the General Department of Investigation of Smuggling and Economic Crimes of the Investigative Committee. The family of Misak Poghosyan, the first victim, noted numerous suspicious circumstances regarding the death, including the high level of the window seal, the close proximity of escorting police officers who could have intervened to prevent an alleged suicide, and the fact that the scene of the fall was cleaned almost immediately and not sealed off. There was little information concerning the second case, in which the victim was a foreign citizen. According to official information, both cases remained under investigation, the first by the National Security Service on charges of official negligence and escape from custody, the second by the Anti-Corruption Committee on charges of inducing suicide and official negligence.

There was no progress in accountability for the post-2008 presidential election deaths of eight civilian protesters and two police officers.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) processed cases of persons missing in connection with the conflict with Azerbaijan and worked with the government to develop a consolidated list of missing persons.

According to the ICRC, 4,931 Armenians and Azerbaijanis remained

unaccounted for since the 1990s due to the conflict, of whom a total of 761 were Armenians. According to the government, by year's end, 195 persons (including 20 civilians) were considered missing after the fall 2020 fighting and two more military service members were considered missing after the September 2022 hostilities. There were 42 missing Armenians following the September 19 offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh (including 12 civilians).

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The constitution and law prohibited such practices. Nevertheless, the local NGO community expressed collective concern regarding a notable increase in reports that members of the security forces tortured or otherwise abused individuals in their custody with impunity. According to human rights lawyers, while the criminal code defined and criminalized torture, it did not criminalize other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Officials often investigated instances of torture under charges of abuse of power, leading to lighter punishments.

Since July 2022, the Investigative Committee was responsible for investigating most torture cases, but according to human rights lawyers, committee investigators lacked experience in such cases. While the National Security Service was in charge of investigating allegations of torture committed by the Investigative Committee, human rights lawyers found

these investigations lacked the independence, transparency, and public oversight required for credible inquiries.

Human rights activists asserted impunity for old and new instances of law enforcement abuse continued to contribute to the persistence of the problem, with alleged perpetrators continuing to serve in their positions or being promoted. On July 12, the National Assembly adopted changes to the criminal code allowing for the release of a perpetrator from criminal responsibility due to “active remorse” in cases of grave and especially grave crimes, an approach previously limited to light- and medium-gravity crimes. In August, the president signed the bill into law despite the protest of civil society representatives, who stated it contradicted the country’s constitution and international human rights commitments and would exacerbate official impunity, violate the rights of victims, and serve as a political tool if applied selectively.

The local NGO community noted an increased number of reports of abuse by police, including in police stations, which, unlike prisons and police detention facilities, were not subject to public monitoring. On July 3, more than 30 NGOs issued a statement noting “unprecedented violence and instances of torture in police departments and other law enforcement agencies” in recent months, characterizing the violence as becoming systemic and revealing what they viewed as ineffective police and judicial reforms. The organizations noted that violence against attorneys was

unprecedented and that additional cases indicated a growing trend of police impunity. They stated the government's failure to promptly investigate reports and bring perpetrators to justice resulted in impunity and decreased public trust in the law enforcement system. According to the July 25 report by the Helsinki Citizens Assembly Vanadzor on monitoring of police reform, there were 199 reports of human rights violation by police during 2022, a 20 percent increase compared with 2021 and 54 percent increase compared with 2019.

Criminal justice bodies continued to rely on confessions and information obtained during questioning to secure convictions. According to human rights lawyers, procedural safeguards against mistreatment during police questioning, such as inadmissibility of evidence obtained through force or procedural violations, were insufficient, as was a video surveillance system that was installed in only a few police stations and had not yet been used in police mistreatment cases. According to human rights lawyers, while many cases occurred in Yerevan, the situation in regional police stations was worse.

Reports of police abuse included drug raids on nightclubs in which clients, including women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons, were beaten and harassed; two cases in which attorneys were beaten while representing their clients; disproportionate use of force during public events; physical abuse by an off-duty senior police officer

toward a minor; and reports of beatings at local police stations.

For example, on February 10, police beat defense attorneys Marzpet Avagyan and Emanuel Ananyan, who were providing legal aid to arrested children at the Erebuni Police Department. One officer reportedly attacked the attorneys after their minor clients accused the officer of using excessive force during their arrest. The Investigative Committee launched a criminal case for violence against the attorneys. The police officers claimed the attorneys were disrespectful and used offensive language, disrupting the investigation. On August 15, the prosecutor's office confirmed the officers used physical violence against the attorneys and initiated a criminal prosecution against them on charges of physical infliction. On October 9, the criminal case against the Department of Ministry of Internal Affairs, the operational deputy head of Yerevan's Erebuni Police Department, the senior operative, and an operative of the same department was sent to the court.

The trial of three police officers from Yerevan's Nor Nork District on charges of torture for the 2020 abuse of weightlifting champion Armen Ghazaryan and another citizen continued at year's end. When the judge was promoted and replaced with a new one, however, the trial restarted on April 10, despite having been close to completion. All three defendants returned to their jobs after release on bail.

Reports of degrading treatment in the army continued.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Several reports raised human rights concerns related to prison and detention conditions, including physical conditions, access to health care and psychological support, treatment of LGBTQI+ persons, and predation by hierarchical criminal/organized crime structures.

Abusive Physical Conditions: There were reports of degrading conditions at prison facilities, despite government efforts to implement renovations. According to the Prison Monitoring Group (PMG), a coalition of local NGOs, cell conditions in the Abovyan prison were insufficient, despite upgrades to the water supply, bathrooms, and cells. The PMG cited a continued lack of basic living facilities for women, excessive humidity, and no access to hot water. Among the men's facilities, the PMG noted conditions in the Nubarashen correctional facility were "worrying," and the Armavir correctional facility, although equipped with a ventilation system, was excessively humid in some cells.

According to human rights lawyers, the excessive use of pretrial detention led to overcrowding in some prisons, although the government began using house arrest in limited instances as a means to address this problem.

Although the government prosecuted those implicated in the organized hierarchical criminal subculture dominating prison life, in which select inmates (called "watchers") at the top of the informal prison hierarchy

controlled the inmate population, the problem remained. On June 21, media reported the suicide of an inmate at Armavir penitentiary. According to prison monitors, his suicide was attributed to the hierarchical criminal subculture within the facility. This subculture deemed certain crimes, such as matricide, for which the inmate was convicted, as “unacceptable.” Allegedly, the prison administration faced obstacles in assigning the inmate to a specific section within the prison due to resistance from other inmates. Subsequently, he was kept in solitary confinement for more than two months, reportedly at his request, after which he committed suicide by hanging.

The PMG reported a lack of accountability from the Investigative Committee in charge of investigating prison deaths and a lack of information on the outcomes of its investigations.

According to the PMG, although the government installed self-harm and suicide prevention evaluation procedures in 2022, self-harm cases continued to be a major concern, as was access to medical and psychological services.

The Office of the Ombudsperson continued to raise the systemic problem of unacceptable conditions of courtroom detention facilities throughout the country. On July 21, following monitoring visits to four regional courthouses, the ombudsperson reported a lack of basic facilities in all four regions, such as insufficient windows, toilets, and heating in Hrazdan, as well as the lack of accessibility, privacy, and basic sanitary supplies for toilets in

Yeghvard, Charentsavan, and Ashtarak.

According to the PMG and other human rights organizations, LGBTQI+ individuals experienced discrimination and abuse in prison settings. During a visit to the Armavir prison on July 11, observers witnessed an obvious discriminatory attitude towards a transgender woman by prison officials, who used insulting expressions towards her. The PMG noted that prison administrations segregated homosexual men, those assumed to be homosexual, those associating with homosexual men, and inmates convicted of crimes such as rape or the killing of a parent, as well as those who refused to live by “unwritten prison rules,” from other inmates. The hierarchical criminal subculture forced those persons to perform humiliating tasks such as cleaning toilets, picking up trash for other prisoners, and providing sexual services. Food and cutlery for these inmates were kept separate, and they had separate laundry machines and separate solitary confinement cells.

Administration: According to the PMG and other observers, authorities did not conduct prompt investigations into credible allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted domestic and international human rights groups, including the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), to monitor prison and detention center conditions, and they did so regularly.

Improvements: According to the government, during the first 10 months of the year the penitentiary service repaired drainage and water supply systems in several facilities, including Nubarashen Correctional Facility; repaired roofs on several facilities, including Nubarashen Correctional Facility; and did a variety of other repairs, including emergency restoration works in bathrooms, renovation of cells and rooms, and repair of boiler houses and water heaters.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. There were several reports of arbitrary or selective arrest.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

According to the criminal procedural code, an investigative body was required to present individuals with a decision on their arrest or release and a list of their rights and duties within six hours of the moment that person was deprived of their freedom. The arrest could not last longer than 72 hours. Within 60 hours, the investigative body had to file charges and obtain a detention warrant from a judge. If the arrested person was not detained by court decision within 72 hours from the moment of arrest, they were subject to immediate release. When considering the issue of

detention, the court was also required to check the legality of the arrest.

The law required police to inform detainees of the reasons for their arrest as well as their rights to remain silent, to have legal representation, and to inform a person of their choosing regarding their location. Bail was a legal option.

According to human rights lawyers, the frequent use of pretrial detention forced suspects to bear the burden of proof to demonstrate they did not present a flight risk or would not hamper an investigation. Lawyers said court detention decisions were unpredictable, with different restrictions placed on defendants in similar circumstances.

According to prison monitors and human rights lawyers, excessive and in their view often unjustified pretrial detention was applied, despite government efforts to increase the use of alternatives to detention as part of the government's penal reform.

According to official statistics, in 2022, only 25 percent of bail requests were granted, while courts granted 70 percent of government detention requests.

Defendants were entitled to representation by an attorney from the moment of arrest, and the law provided for a public defender in criminal and civil cases if the accused was indigent. According to human rights observers, more detainees were aware of their right to legal representation than in the past, especially in the capital. Observers indicated police at

times avoided granting individuals their due process rights by summoning and holding, rather than formally arresting them under the pretext they were material witnesses, not suspects. Police were thereby able to question individuals without giving them the benefit of a defense attorney. This practice was particularly evident outside the capital.

In its 2021 report, the CPT suggested that the practice of “informal talks” (i.e., persons being “invited,” usually by telephone, to come to police, prior to being officially declared a suspect and detained), criticized by the CPT many times in the past, was not fully eliminated, especially outside the capital.

Arbitrary Arrest: Human rights observers stated the detentions of patrons of a nightclub during two police raids allegedly seeking illicit drugs amounted to arbitrary arrests. In several cases, human rights observers deemed unnecessary the arrests and pretrial detention motions requested by the investigation body and the prosecutor’s office and satisfied by courts. For example, in October 2022, a trial court approved detention for former judge Arusyak Aleksanyan, who was charged with passing a patently unjust verdict and exceeding official authority. According to human rights observers, her pretrial detention, which continued during the year, was unjustified. According to the PMG, the former judge was kept in the only women’s penitentiary, with inmates whom she had convicted, creating a potentially dangerous situation.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the law provided for an independent judiciary, the judiciary was not viewed as independent or impartial due to its history of corruption and political influence, resistance to reform, and high-profile scandals. There were unconfirmed reports of attempts by the government and elements of the former regime to influence judges. The high case load, lack of public trust, and allegations of government pressure discouraged professionals from applying to judgeships.

In a March 23 report titled *Supporting Judicial Reforms in Armenia*, the World Bank stated that despite progress, shortcomings persisted in the justice sector, such as independence, efficiency, and quality. The legal framework needed enhancement to align with European standards. Key institutions, including the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), a constitutional body responsible for protecting the independence of courts and judges, were not providing the judiciary with sufficient budgetary, human resources, and technology support. While the courts lacked funds, they faced high demand and were falling behind in resolving cases, affecting timely justice. Comprehensive planning in budgeting, human resources, and asset management was also lacking.

There were continued media reports of selective application of disciplinary proceedings against “unfavorable” judges, and reports of lack of

transparency in the Ministry of Justice's decision-making process on whether to submit cases to the SJC for disciplinary proceedings. There was similar lack of transparency and no public oversight over the decisions of the Ethics and Disciplinary Commission of the General Assembly of Judges, a self-governance body of judges. Human rights lawyers reported cooperation between the Ministry of Justice and SJC on disciplinary proceedings, further undermining the independence of the judiciary from the executive branch.

On January 30, the SJC appointed judge Mnatsakan Martirosyan, whom independent experts had publicly accused of rendering politically motivated rulings, chairman of the Criminal Court of First Instance (supervising 60 judges).

On June 2, the European Association of Judges expressed "considerable concern" regarding the SJC's misuse of disciplinary proceedings against judges as a means of deterring them from publicly expressing their views on the operation of the judicial system. The association also noted with concern the justice minister's power to institute disciplinary proceedings against judges presented "a danger for the independence of judicial office holders."

On July 2, the Protection of Rights Without Borders NGO reported on the practice of disciplinary liability against judges, based on a review of proceedings held in 2022. The findings raised concerns regarding the initiation, justification, and outcomes of disciplinary actions against judges

by the SJC. Specific problems included unclear or inconsistent justification for disciplinary action, penalties that lacked clear criteria or proportionality, and delays in proceedings that led to dropped cases and poor accountability.

Civil society organizations continued to note the need for a comprehensive vetting process for judges. The law focused only on integrity checks for judge candidates and those seeking promotion, not sitting judges. Asset checks of sitting judges were limited. The Corruption Prevention Commission's integrity evaluations for judicial candidates were not public and the SJC reportedly often ignored assessments when appointing judges, even in cases of political bias or unexplained wealth.

Human rights lawyers noted some judges faced internal pressure from superiors, including the SJC, on some judicial decisions, as well as the threat of disciplinary action. Some judges used the severely overloaded dockets to pressure rival interest groups by taking medical leave and leaving their colleagues an insurmountable caseload. Human rights lawyers said court decisions on cases involving similar circumstances had become unpredictable and in some high-profile corruption cases decisions appeared to be politically motivated. They asserted judicial reforms primarily offered ad hoc and temporary fixes rather than systemic reform.

According to observers, in many cases in which judicial decisions appeared politically motivated, faulty evidentiary submissions by the prosecutor's office had precluded judges from making different decisions. Observers also

noted that while bribery of judges was no longer a problem, there were reports some defense attorneys extorted money from clients and claimed it was for bribing a judge, thus undermining trust in the system.

According to human rights observers, unless the defendants had persistent attorneys representing their rights, or journalists or trial monitors attending the trial, the judges declined to ignore evidence that defendants claimed was obtained under duress.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and laws provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but the judiciary did not enforce this right in some cases.

The law provided for presumption of innocence, but according to human rights observers, suspects sometimes did not enjoy this right. Public defenders were overburdened, and there was a lack of public defenders specialized in specific areas, such as trafficking in persons and domestic violence. A shortage of public defenders outside Yerevan sometimes led to denial of the right of defendants to an attorney of their choosing.

The law provided that defendants could confront witnesses, present evidence, and examine the government's case in advance of a trial, but defendants and their attorneys had very little ability to challenge government witnesses or police, while courts tended to accept prosecution materials routinely. Judges were reluctant to challenge police experts,

hampering a defendant's ability to mount a credible defense. Judges' control over witness lists and over the determination of the relevance of potential witnesses in criminal cases also impeded the defense. Defense attorneys complained that judges at times did not allow them to request the attendance at trial of defense witnesses. According to lawyers and domestic and international human rights observers, including the Council of Europe's human rights commissioner, the prosecution retained a dominant position in the criminal justice system. Human rights organizations reported there were insufficient provisions for prosecutorial impartiality and accountability and no objective criteria for the nomination and selection of candidates for general prosecutor.

One of the judiciary's most significant problems was the severe overload of judicial dockets at all levels due to a lack of judges. Other major factors contributing to the judicial caseload were a high level of appeals by defendants due to a lack of trust in the judiciary and prosecutors' appeal of acquittals and lower sentences.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no credible reports of political prisoners.

f. Transnational Repression

Not applicable.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

Not applicable.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibited such actions, but there were reports the government did not always respect these prohibitions.

Authorities could not legally tap telephones, intercept correspondence, or conduct searches without obtaining the permission of a judge based on compelling evidence of criminal activity. The constitution, however, stipulated exceptions when confidentiality of communication could be restricted without a court order to protect state security. Although law enforcement bodies generally adhered to legal procedures, observers claimed judges authorized wiretaps and other surveillance requests from the National Security Service and police without the compelling evidence required by law. Moreover, observers reported limited cases when law enforcement bodies tapped attorney communications in breach of client/attorney confidentiality.

There were indications Azerbaijan's government may have engaged in politically motivated surveillance in Armenia (see the *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for Azerbaijan). On May 25, in a report on the use

of Pegasus spyware in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, Access Now stated it was unaware of any technical evidence indicating the Armenian government had ever utilized Pegasus, but the government was believed to be a user of Cytrox's Predator, another spyware product. In its report, it noted that in 2021, Meta identified targets of Cytrox's spyware in the country.

i. Conflict-related Abuses

Sporadic incidents of fighting in the decades-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan continued, resulting in civilian casualties. During the year Azerbaijani forces hit infrastructure inside Armenia, including the construction site of a metallurgical plant in Yeraskh village in Ararat region, seriously wounding two civilian workers.

On September 19-20, Azerbaijan conducted a military operation to gain full control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Since December 2022, Azerbaijan had closed the Lachin Corridor to most civilian and commercial traffic, allowing only intermittent humanitarian access until Azerbaijan reopened it September 24 for one-way traffic out of Nagorno-Karabakh. Between then and October 1, more than 100,000 Nagorno-Karabakh residents – virtually all of the region's ethnic Armenians – fled to Armenia (also see the *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for Azerbaijan).

Complaints submitted by Armenia and Azerbaijan to the ECHR accusing each other of committing atrocities during fighting in 2020 and 2016 awaited the

court's ruling, as did Armenia's complaints following significant fighting in September 2022 along the international border and inside Armenia.

Killings: In a September report, citing a video, the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) asserted that during the September 2022 fighting, there was a "reasonable basis to believe" that "Azerbaijani Armed Forces committed extrajudicial killings of Armenian soldiers."

Following the flight of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh residents to Armenia in late September, Armenia's Investigative Committee announced an investigation into alleged crimes committed by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh residents.

Armenia did not make progress investigating alleged war crimes from the 2020 hostilities with Azerbaijan carried out by perpetrators speaking Armenian.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: In IPHR's September report on the September 2022 fighting, the organization – relying on videos and photos of soldiers' corpses – stated there was a "reasonable basis to conclude" that Armenian soldiers were subject to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and torture by Azerbaijani soldiers. Citing videos and photographs of the bodies of dead mutilated Armenian servicewomen, the IPHR highlighted "sexual and gendered characteristics" of such mutilation and concluded there was a "reasonable basis to believe that Armenian

servicewomen were subjected to [cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment] and torture while in the custody of Azerbaijani armed forces.”

There were no updates on the six criminal cases launched by Armenian authorities in 2020 to investigate actions of perpetrators speaking Armenian during the fall 2020 intensive fighting on charges of “serious violations of international humanitarian law during armed conflicts.” Of the six cases, four involved alleged murder, torture, and inhuman treatment; one involved alleged murder and torture; and one involved alleged murder. The government combined all six cases into one criminal proceeding in 2021. The investigation remained underway at year’s end.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media. The government generally respected this right, with some exceptions.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals were generally free to criticize the government without fear of reprisal; however, there were some exceptions.

In its fifth opinion on the country published on February 13, the Council of

Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities expressed serious concerns regarding the effects of the criminal proceedings instituted against Yezidi rights activist Sashik Sultanyan in 2021, which had a chilling effect on freedom of expression in particular for human rights defenders from national minorities.

Other examples included media reports concerning pressure on investigative journalists reporting on allegations of high-level government corruption, such as purchases of property at below-market prices.

On September 7, a group of media watchdog organizations released a statement in response to a trial court's decision to freeze one million drams (\$2,500) of assets belonging to the Union of Informed Citizens (UIC) NGO. The court issued this order pending the outcome of a legal dispute initiated by the ruling Civil Contract party against the UIC. The lawsuit stemmed from a publication by UIC's *Fact Investigation Platform*, which alleged the abuse of administrative resources to secure votes for the ruling party's candidate in the September 17 election. The Civil Contract party sought both a retraction of the publication and one million drams (\$2,500) in moral damages. In their statement, the media watchdogs expressed concern regarding this and other similar instances of demands to freeze assets by the ruling party, which they believed was an attempt to exert pressure on media outlets and settle political scores. They called on the trial court to

reconsider its decision to freeze the UIC's assets and urged the Civil Contract party to focus on addressing the substance of the legal dispute. The UIC, in turn, saw the asset-freezing demand as a punitive measure by the ruling party, aimed at an NGO that had engaged in unwelcome criticism, rather than a sincere effort to seek the truth in a courtroom.

Violence and Harassment: While the NGO Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression reported a relatively calm political environment and no cases of physical violence against journalists during the first half of the year, the situation changed in the fall, in connection with the pre-election campaign of Yerevan local elections and the September 19 military action by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and ensuing political protests. According to the NGO, during demonstrations, gatherings, and other events, there were two cases of physical violence – one by police and another by a civilian participant in a political rally – and various other forms of social media attacks and lawsuits initiated against media representatives by individuals associated with the government. Specifically, the NGO was tracking 29 lawsuits involving media and journalists on the grounds of insult and slander, of which public officials initiated 13. Officials made no notable progress on the investigation of the violence cases against media workers covering 2022 opposition protests. According to media reports, Russian peacekeepers obstructed journalists' attempts to cover the events on the Armenian side of the Lachin corridor.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other

Media, Including Online Media: Media outlets were politically polarized, and financial viability of the media remained a hindrance to press freedom. Private individuals or groups reportedly tied to former authorities or parliamentary opposition parties continued to hold ownership stakes in many broadcast media organizations and newspapers, which tended to reflect the political leanings and financial interests of their proprietors. Throughout the year, government authorities expanded their financial investments in media outlets, exacerbating polarization. A handful of independent media outlets remained that did not depend on financial support from politically affiliated donors; those relied instead on international donor support due to their limited revenues from advertising and subscription fees.

Broadcast media, including public television, remained one of the primary sources of news and information for the majority of the population. According to some media watchdogs, public television continued to present news and political debates from a progovernment standpoint, although it remained accessible to opposition voices.

Social media users freely expressed opinions concerning the government and former authorities on various social media platforms. Cyberbullying, however, including of journalists, on the grounds of political affiliation, gender identity, and gender-equality topics led to self-censorship.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. The government generally respected these rights, but there were some restrictions.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution and law provided for this right. While the government generally respected freedom of assembly, there were some restrictions.

After Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh began on September 19, protests started in Yerevan, gradually decreasing by September 30. On several occasions protesters, led by the opposition and reportedly instigated by foreign actors, employed aggressive behavior and violence, demanding the resignation of the prime minister and attempting to storm the government building where the prime minister worked. Police responded with limited use of force and stun grenades. There were limited reports of excessive use of force by police during those protest. On September 22, a video showed police officers striking Levon Kocharyan, an opposition leader, inside a police car after he had been arrested. According

to official information, the Investigative Committee launched investigations into 58 individuals, and officially pressed charges against 46 of them, in connection with the protests; 28 of the accused remained in pretrial detention as of November 3. On September 20, the Ministry of Health reported that as a result of the clashes near the government building on the previous day, 34 persons were injured, of whom 16 were police and 18 were civilians, although they did not share the extent or severity of the injuries.

According to official information, the government launched 13 criminal investigations into potential excessive use of force by law enforcement bodies in connection with the protests that started on September 19.

From August 16 through September, police repeatedly prevented political figure Suren Sahakyan and others from erecting a tent in a park in Yerevan to serve as headquarters for public discussions around the security problems of the country, despite allowing other opposition protests to shut down a major downtown street for more than a month in 2022. Similarly, on November 25, police detained eight members of the “Zang” movement from Mashtots Avenue for attempting to set up a tent.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provided this right, and the government generally respected it. Despite a 2010 Constitutional Court decision that allowed all NGOs to have legal standing in court, the law on public organizations

recognized NGOs' legal standing to act on behalf of their beneficiaries in court only on environmental issues. In 2021, amendments to the law expanded NGOs' legal standing to include presenting public interest cases for the protection of persons with disabilities.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights. The government issued a Convention Travel Document to all recognized refugees; however, the tender for biometric versions of the document was stalled for several years, delaying issuance, and resulting in some embassies' refusal to issue visas to refugees holding nonbiometric travel documents. Stateless persons were entitled to and received travel documents according to the 1954 convention. Displaced persons and refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh who received a "temporary protection" status from the government could travel with their Armenian passports.

e. Protection of Refugees

Authorities cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government had an established system for providing protection to refugees. The law required the detention authority to notify detainees concerning their right to apply for asylum and provided a 15-day period for application.

The law accounted for specific needs of asylum seekers who were children, persons with mental disabilities, and trauma survivors. Authorities generally enforced the law, but only to the extent scarce resources allowed. Specific support for LGBTQI+ individuals was limited to local NGOs, which had limited means to assist non-Armenian citizens. Refugees who were not ethnic Armenians could apply for facilitated naturalization, which required passing a constitutional knowledge test.

Shortcomings in state funding for interpreters and translation of documents sometimes delayed asylum processing.

While the law provided for free legal assistance to asylum seekers through the Office of the Public Defender under the Chamber of Advocates, legal,

capacity, and operational constraints reportedly hindered the exercise of this right.

Judicial review was a lengthy process as judges remained overloaded with cases. Judges continued to reject some Iranian asylum cases based on national security concerns, which community advocates claimed exposed dissidents and activists to potential extradition.

The law allowed detention centers to receive asylum applications. Despite a provision in the law exempting asylum seekers from criminal liability for irregular border crossing, authorities required asylum seekers to remain in detention pending the outcome of their asylum applications or to serve the remainder of their sentences.

There were reports of nonsystemic discrimination in the acceptance of applications and in detention of asylum seekers based on the country of origin, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion of the asylum seeker, as well as difficulties with integration. Civil society observers reported discriminatory attitudes and suspicion directed towards foreign migrants seeking employment.

Access to Basic Services: Housing allocated to refugees was in limited supply, in poor condition, and remained, along with employment, refugees' greatest concern. Since January 2022, government officials claimed technical difficulties prevented them from paying the monthly financial

assistance provided by law to recognized refugees. According to a July 2022 report by the Office of the Ombudsperson, the conditions at the shelter for refugees operated by the Migration Service were substandard. Some areas, including the common kitchen, were inaccessible to persons with mobility difficulties. The facility accommodated only refugees. The only reception center for asylum seekers in the country, with a capacity of 48-50 persons, was constantly full due to the high numbers of asylum seekers. The construction of a new reception center was completed.

Overall, observers assessed refugee and asylum-seeker access to the health-care system as adequate but noted asylum seekers faced difficulties because they did not have access to the online e-health ArMed system, largely due to language barriers. One service provider noted some institutions, such as polyclinics, banks, and private employers, did not recognize the Convention Travel Document (issued by the government to show the holder was a refugee and had been granted asylum) as an identification document.

Durable Solutions: The government accepted refugees for family reunification and offered naturalization to refugees residing on its territory. In 2021, the government adopted the *Conceptual Framework for the State Management of Migration* that envisaged development of the *2021-31 Integration Strategy* and its action plan for 2021-26. The framework also offered integration programs to returnees from West European countries who either voluntarily returned or were deported by the host country.

Temporary Protection: On October 26, the government created a “temporary protected status” for displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh. The new status was intended to apply to three groups: individuals registered as residing in Nagorno-Karabakh, persons whose last place of registration was Nagorno-Karabakh, and unregistered individuals who entered the country by road in September-October 2023. Because the status would apply to recent Nagorno-Karabakh residents as well as those displaced in 2020, it could cover as many as 150,000 individuals, according to Migration and Citizenship Services. The government also announced that former Nagorno-Karabakh residents could seek citizenship.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Some IDPs and refugees lacked adequate housing and had limited economic opportunities. The government had a limited ability to promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs.

According to official information, following the September 2022 fighting, at least 7,600 persons were displaced from the Gegharkunik, Syunik, and Vayots Dzor Regions. The majority of them were women, children, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities. By November 2022, 2,532 of those persons were still registered with the State Migration Service.

g. Stateless Persons

According to official data, as of November 1, there were 412 documented stateless persons in country. There was limited information available on the number, locations, and profile of stateless persons, persons at risk of statelessness, and undocumented persons. The citizenship law provided for the provision of nationality to stateless children born on the country's territory. Amendments to the citizenship law adopted by parliament came into force in June 2022; however, the scope of the amendments was limited and did not address the root problems with statelessness, including proper identification and referral mechanisms.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and laws provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: The most recent national elections were conducted in 2021, when the country held snap parliamentary elections. Fundamental rights and freedoms were generally

respected and contestants were able to campaign freely. The elections were preceded by a short campaign marked by harsh and inflammatory language. Other shortcomings identified by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in its final report included incidents of pressure by political actors and employers on private-sector and public employees to attend campaign events; a number of allegations of vote buying; blurring of the line between the ruling party and state; allegations of the misuse of administrative resources; continued shortcomings regarding campaign finance, notably the absence of organizational expenses in the legal definition of campaign expenditures; the failure of territorial election commissions to publish their decisions online and uniformly post them for public display; and the narrow legal standing for submitting electoral complaints.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law did not restrict the registration or activity of political parties.

On July 11, the parliamentary majority voted to oust the opposition chair of the Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs of the National Assembly, Taguhi Tovmasyan, on the grounds that she did not attend most meetings of the National Assembly Council (the parliament's steering committee), in accordance with parliamentary rule and procedures. The parliamentary majority also claimed Tovmasyan did not stop "hate speech" when the committee she chaired discussed the candidacies for the

then vacant position of the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsperson) on April 4. Tovmasyan had reportedly notified parliament in advance that she could not attend the July 11 session, citing illness, but the parliamentary majority moved forward with the vote. The member of parliament challenged the dismissal in court. Prior to her dismissal, Tovmasyan was the last remaining opposition representative in a National Assembly leadership position, as other opposition committee chairs and the deputy speaker of parliament were dismissed earlier by a parliamentary majority vote for violating rules and procedures, or resigned in solidarity with the ones dismissed.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable

Groups: The patriarchal nature of society inhibited large-scale participation by women in political and economic life and in decision-making positions in the public sector.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented the law effectively.

Corruption: The country had a legacy of systemic corruption in many areas, including public administration, parliament, the judiciary, procurement practices, law enforcement, and provision of state assistance. There were allegations that, prior to the 2018 Velvet Revolution, government officials

embezzled state funds and were involved in questionable business activities, often exercised through close relatives and friends. The democratically elected government worked since 2018 to remedy this legacy by implementing systemic anti-corruption reforms.

According to some civil society groups, improvements to the institutional framework to combat corruption stagnated due to conflict-of-interest issues, problems with freedom of information and few corruption-related convictions, although civil asset forfeiture cases continued.

The government launched and continued to investigate numerous criminal cases against alleged corruption by former and sitting high-ranking government officials and their relatives, parliamentarians, former presidents, and law enforcement officials, with cases involving monetary values from a few thousand to millions of dollars.

A number of criminal proceedings of a corruption nature with a high public impact were sent to the court and went to trial; some criminal proceedings were at the preliminary investigation stage.

At year's end, the trial continued of former Minister of Emergency Situations Andranik Piloyan, who was a member of Prime Minister Pashinyan's cabinet, and 12 other ministry officials on multiple corruption charges.

Authorities continued to strengthen the institutional framework to fight corruption by implementing its new anticorruption strategy on multiple

fronts. For example, following changes to the Judicial Code adopted in 2022, authorities finalized the creation of the three tiers of the Anti-Corruption Court system and continued adding new judges. The Anti-Corruption Committee, which served as the main investigative body on corruption cases, continued to hire additional investigators. The Department for the Confiscation of Property of Illicit Origin in the Prosecutor General's Office seized tens of millions of dollars in assets allegedly acquired through illicit transactions, brought numerous lawsuits involving these assets to trial, and continued working on hundreds of additional prosecutions.

The Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC) exercised its powers to conduct integrity checks for judicial, prosecutorial, and other nominees, including nominees for anti-corruption judges and Anti-Corruption Committee investigators and officers. While the CPC's integrity checks were advisory and relevant bodies at times reportedly ignored them, experts said relevant bodies did not appoint some nominees as a result of CPC's negative conclusions regarding these individuals.

In February, the CPC introduced an electronic platform for asset declaration for public officials to increase transparency and reduce corruption in public administration. Under legal changes enacted in 2022, the CPC reviewed cases of conflict of interest, code of conduct matters, and incompatibility or other limitations received from government whistleblowers. The CPC also

created a registry to enhance oversight of gifts accepted by officials.

Civil society organizations expressed concerns regarding March 1 amendments to freedom of information legislation that allowed individuals to refuse to provide official information related to state, banking, and commercial secrets. According to media and civil society representatives, there were violations of the right to receive and disseminate information, including when state bodies refused to provide information, did so selectively or slowly, provided vague responses, or were not responsive to information requests.

Investigative journalists regularly reported on problems in the public procurement system, including the widespread practice of sole-source procurement, as well as alleged connections between companies receiving procurement contracts and high-ranking public officials. According to watchdog organizations, the offices of the prime minister and the prosecutor general were among those that practiced single sourcing more than others.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards

International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restrictions to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. There were reports the government consulted with civil society groups but did not take their views into account when formulating policy. For instance, on January 10, three prominent NGOs ended their membership in the Police Reform Coordination Council after the appointment of former Chief of Police Vahe Ghazaryan as Minister of Internal Affairs. These NGOs commented the appointment of a police official “who had opposed the police reform process” would undermine public trust and civilian oversight of policing functions.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: Authorities did not drop charges against Yezidi human rights activist and former president of Yezidi Center for Human Rights Sashik Sultanyan, despite domestic and international calls for the authorities to respect his freedom of expression. In response to various Council of Europe bodies raising concerns regarding Sultanyan’s prosecution, the government claimed he was not a human rights activist.

According to Human Rights House Yerevan, hate rhetoric targeting human rights defenders and civil society was widespread. Online trolls, malign

news outlets, and nationalist groups, many of which were affiliated with the former government and, some local experts alleged, Russian actors, continued to intimidate human rights defenders. Those promoting women's and children's rights and deeper law enforcement and judicial reforms were particularly targeted. According to observers, the perpetrators aimed to vilify, discredit, and marginalize democracy and human rights-oriented civil society and replace them with other "civil society" actors that supported authoritarianism.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Human Rights Defender (the ombudsperson) had a mandate to protect individuals exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms from abuse at all levels of government. The office operated independently and served as an effective advocate on individual cases.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape of a person, regardless of gender, was a criminal offense, and conviction carried a maximum prison sentence of 15 years; general rape statutes applied to the prosecution of spousal rape. Domestic violence was criminalized under general statutes dealing with violence and carried various sentences depending on the charge (murder, damage to health, rape, etc.). Law enforcement bodies did not effectively

investigate or prosecute allegations of domestic violence. Although police responded to domestic violence cases, few were successfully prosecuted. Domestic violence against women was widespread, with numerous reported cases of women killed by their partner as well as at least one reported case of a woman killing her husband following years of abuse.

The criminal code that came into force in 2022 introduced the concept of violence by an intimate partner but did not define domestic violence.

According to a June 9 report by the Human Rights Power NGO, obstacles to women's access to justice included the following: law enforcement agencies often failed to provide sufficient support and protection to survivors; many survivors felt unsafe at police stations; legal assistance often was lacking for women; courts rarely applied protective measures for survivors and often did not prevent the recurrence of violence; perpetrators often received lenient punishments not involving imprisonment, such as fines; and the heavy judicial caseload often delayed or prevented trials from occurring.

According to the 2022 submission of the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW shadow report), while the widespread training of judicial officials, prosecutors, police, and other law enforcement officers on the application of the domestic violence legislation was commendable, much work remained to adequately protect survivors of domestic and sexual violence. According to the report, harmful gender stereotyping, secondary

victimization, victim-blaming, and disbelief in survivors' testimonies were serious problems in the investigation and prosecution of cases. Most survivors avoided sharing details of sexual violence committed against them due to fear of their abuser and a lack of confidence in law enforcement authorities. According to the coalition, inadequate evidence collection and absence of comprehensive forensic examinations hindered prosecution. As a result, more than half of reported sexual violence cases were dismissed, reflecting systemic shortcomings and further reinforcing a culture of impunity around sexual violence.

Activists and NGOs that assisted survivors of domestic violence or promoted gender equality were frequent targets of hate speech and criticized for allegedly undermining "Armenian traditional families" and spreading "Western values." According to the CEDAW shadow report, the state did not sufficiently protect human rights defenders.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: On May 3, parliament adopted changes to the labor code that prohibited violence and sexual harassment at work, with the latter defined as "an unwanted act of a sexual nature, which has a physical, verbal or nonverbal manifestation (including sexual suggestions, touch) and which directly or indirectly affects a person in making work-related decisions or creates a degrading or socially isolating work environment." The code stipulated that violations would result in noncriminal administrative penalties. The amendment came into

force on July 31. An April study by the Women’s Resource Center revealed sexual harassment was widespread in workplaces, occurring in the service industry, public administration, education, information technology, NGOs, media, and marketing, and other sectors. Younger individuals were found to be more susceptible to sexual harassment. The study highlighted different forms of harassment, such as unwanted touching, sexual jokes, comments regarding appearance, unwanted advances, displaying pornography, and online harassment with photographs or videos.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men, but gender-based discrimination was a problem in both the public and private sectors. The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws, and there were no effective legal mechanisms to implement applicable regulations.

Women generally did not have the same professional opportunities or income as men, and employers often relegated women to more menial or lower-paying jobs. While providing for the “legal equality” of all parties in a workplace relationship, the labor code did not explicitly prohibit gender-based discrimination in access to credit nor require equal pay for equal work, and a pay gap remained between men and women.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

In its 2022 CEDAW shadow report, the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women found high costs and lack of access to family planning services in rural areas effectively deprived women of the right to access such services. According to the report, the state did not ensure the availability of contraceptives and free access to family planning services and methods. Rural women's limited awareness of contraception, family planning, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections were problems due to a lack of comprehensive sex education. Women and girls from historically marginalized communities were particularly affected by a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health-care services. The state did not ensure the accessibility of health services in remote rural areas, including emergency gynecological care, nor did it guarantee that health workers received adequate training on sexual- and reproductive-health matters with special attention to women and girls from historically marginalized communities, including LGBTQI+ individuals or those with HIV or with disabilities.

Physical barriers, a lack of information and communication, inaccessible training or treatment equipment, and health-care professionals who lacked relevant knowledge limited the access of women with disabilities to health services, including sexual- and reproductive-health-care services, especially in rural areas. Because there were no sign language interpreters in medical institutions, women requiring such support had to find a corresponding specialist, which was often expensive. Persons with hearing and visual disabilities and persons with intellectual disabilities had no access to

alternative formats for health-care-related information. Cultural barriers constrained access to sexual and reproductive health services. There were no government policies denying individuals the ability to be informed and access sexual and reproductive health services.

Emergency health care was available to manage complications resulting from abortion. There were no government programs to provide access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution prohibited discrimination based on race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, belonging to a national minority, or other personal or social circumstances. The criminal code prohibited unequal treatment of persons based on these grounds if such treatment caused damage to human rights and the lawful interests of a person, and it viewed the same act committed by officials as an aggravating circumstance. Government enforcement of the law against racial or ethnic violence or discrimination was uneven.

On June 20, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reported hate speech, including calls for violence, occurred occasionally in political and public spheres but did not usually have a racist or xenophobic motivation. The ECRI report stated such incidents were mainly related to political figures, NGO representatives, or journalists. Reference to

“Armenian identity” was often used to fuel intolerance towards LGBTQI+ persons and, to some extent, religious and other minorities. Similarly, hate speech referring offensively to “Azeris” and “Turks” built on adversarial narratives deeply rooted in resentment from long-standing conflicts and was used as a political tool to exacerbate internal divisions and hinder peace negotiations.

Following the border closure between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991, inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech became increasingly prevalent, particularly as entire generations grew up without interactions with the other side. While the government did not promote hate speech against Azerbaijanis, it also did not condemn such speech when it occurred.

Yezidis periodically reported facing discrimination, including in cases involving property disputes. Residents of some Yezidi villages in the Aragatsotn Region considered the villages’ poor socioeconomic conditions and the lack of roads, water, and other infrastructure as indirect discrimination. The ECRI reported allegations that Yezidi women were at times subjected to racist verbal abuse when accessing reproductive health services. There were isolated reports of societal discrimination against persons of color and graffiti using derogatory terms for them.

Children

Education: Enrollment and attendance rates for children from ethnic

minority groups, in particular Yezidis, Kurds, and Molokans, were significantly lower than average, and dropout rates after the ninth grade were higher. On February 13, the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities expressed alarm at the high dropout rate of Yezidis and the fact that girls dropped out at a higher rate than boys. The committee asserted authorities exerted too little effort to resolve these problems. Although Assyrian, Kurdish, and Yezidi languages were taught in primary and secondary schools, members of the Yezidi community said the availability of Yezidi language instruction was insufficient given the size of the community. According to official information, Yezidi was taught in 27 schools in Aragatsotn and Armavir Regions, with 15 schools (mostly in Aragatsotn) teaching the class as part of the primary curriculum.

Most Yezidi children reportedly had little or no command of the Armenian language upon entering school. Girls dropped out of school in some cases due to early marriages and boys dropped out of school in some cases to help generate income to support their family. The absence of preschool educational services in most Yezidi villages, insufficient professional skills of the teaching staff, discrimination towards Yezidi pupils, and the quality of Yezidi language instruction created problems for Yezidi children, who struggled in school and fell behind their Armenian-speaking classmates.

According to experts, schools perpetuated gender stereotypes and roles.

This included views and practices that disempowered girls and led to lower levels of economic activity and leadership roles, as well as higher unemployment, underemployment, and unpaid domestic work and care functions. Gender stereotypes in textbooks and bias in teaching discouraged girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in middle and high school.

Child Abuse: Although the law prohibited abuse and the criminal code prescribed punishment for it, violence was widely used as a method of discipline.

According to official information, two-thirds of the sexual crimes in the country were committed against children. Observers believed the incidence of sexual violence was higher because the strong stigma around such violence discouraged reporting by victims and their families. On August 17, a video appeared on Telegram showing the sexual abuse of a child by her mother and siblings. It caused public outcry over the failure of the local government, the law enforcement bodies, municipal authorities, school administrators, and social services to protect the child, whom they had reportedly monitored for years. The child's parents had previously been convicted of crimes, and the father was reportedly in detention awaiting trial on charges of raping his daughter. Following the report, authorities arrested the mother.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage was

18, and the government generally enforced the law. An individual could marry with the consent of a legal guardian at age 17 or at age 16 to a partner who was at least 18. Early marriage of girls was reportedly widespread within Yezidi communities. Reports indicated some girls left school either as a consequence of early marriage or to avoid abduction and forced marriage. The government did not record the number of early marriages. According to an opinion by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, civil society organizations and Yezidi organizations underlined that while early marriage had little basis in Yezidi tradition, authorities rarely acted to prevent it for fear of unduly restricting what they perceived to be a Yezidi tradition, leading to underreporting to police. Representatives of the Yezidi community, however, reported an incremental increase in local government officials' disapproval of the harmful practice.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the sexual exploitation of children and provided for prison sentences of seven to 15 years for conviction of violations. According to NGOs, although official statistics showed relatively few cases of sexual exploitation and sale of children, there were numerous undetected and unreported cases caused by gaps in legislation, training, awareness, detection, and reporting. The law prohibited child pornography or other forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, which was punishable by imprisonment for up to seven years. The minimum age for consensual sex was 16.

With UNICEF support, the government piloted two facilities in Yerevan and Kapan as one-stop-shops for child victims of sexual or severe physical violence. Authorities trained 100 investigators, social workers, and forensic interviewer psychologists to work with children in criminal procedure in so-called safe corners. The Justice Academy began training judges and prosecutors on protecting children in criminal procedure.

Antisemitism

Observers estimated the country's Jewish population at between 500 and 1,000 persons with several hundred additional arrivals from Russia since the start of its war against Ukraine in 2022. There were no confirmed reports of antisemitic incidents. There were, however, two reported instances of vandalism that targeted Yerevan's only synagogue. The government's initial assessment attributed these acts to foreign actors attempting to establish a false narrative of antisemitism and destabilize national politics. Police continued to investigate these incidents.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or

Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: Same-sex sexual conduct was not criminalized. There were no laws criminalizing so-called cross-dressing or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behaviors, and no other facially neutral laws were used to disproportionate effect against LGBTQI+ persons.

Violence and Harassment: Human rights organizations reported hate crimes against LGBTQI+ persons. Law enforcement bodies declined to prosecute a number of cases in which perpetrators called for violence and attempted to “justify” violence against LGBTQI+ persons on the grounds of the victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity. According to human rights defenders, the failure of authorities to respond to these crimes created a climate of impunity and increased the potential for new attacks.

There were numerous attacks against transgender women, none of which resulted in conviction, including one incident on August 20, where a transgender woman was stabbed to death in her apartment in Yerevan. On August 21, during a vigil in memory of the victim, a group of bystanders threw eggs, bottles, and stones at the attendees, despite a nearby police presence.

On April 24, as part of an investigation of drug use and drug trafficking, police raided the LGBTQI+-friendly Poligraf nightclub. According to the club owners, police took approximately 40 staff and attendees into custody and

beat and strip-searched some of them. The club posted closed-circuit videos of the raid on social media that showed approximately 20 police officers storming the building and throwing individuals to the floor. A group of NGOs condemned the police's "illegal activities against the club staff and visitors, in particular, torture, degrading treatment, physical and psychological violence." The statement noted police did recognize individuals taken to police stations as victims of physical abuse and did not perform forensics examinations for evidence of physical abuse. The case against the club for drug circulation continued at year's end. There were reports police harassed and mocked those detained for their gender identity. According to official information a criminal case was launched into the alleged misconduct by police officers during the raid, but as of year's end, officials had not charged any individual.

Discrimination: The law did not prohibit discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. The law did not recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families. Societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity negatively affected all aspects of life, including prospects for employment, housing, family relations, and access to education and health care.

The government failed to provide adequate conditions for gay men to serve in the military with dignity. Gay men who served in the military reportedly

faced physical and psychological abuse as well as blackmail by both commanding officers and fellow soldiers. Openly gay men could declare their sexual orientation during the drafting process and be exempted from compulsory military service following a medical diagnosis of having a mental disorder. This information appeared in the individual's personal identification documents and became a permanent obstacle to employment. In January, the government lifted a ban on gay men donating blood.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: In order to legally change their gender marker, individuals had to submit an application to the government with a certificate from a relevant medical institution confirming that gender-affirming surgery had taken place. There were, however, no medical or government guidelines or regulations governing gender-affirming procedures, so individuals could not legally have these procedures in the country. To obtain gender-affirming surgery, transgender persons had to go abroad or convince medical providers to conduct the procedures in the country despite the absence of medical regulations. In either case, postsurgery recovery and care remained difficult.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: According to an *Epress.am* report on July 9, the most common conversion therapy was physical violence often by family members, religious rituals, "corrective rape," and psychiatric therapies. According to human rights organizations,

psychologists and specialists in related medical fields publicly promoted conversion practices, shared information on conversion cases, and provided information on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression that contradicted international professional regulations and attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity and change efforts.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

There were no laws or other state-level restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association, or assembly of LGBTQI+ persons, or on those advocating for issues of concern for or reporting on matters pertaining to LGBTQI+ persons.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities could not access education, health services, public buildings, or transportation on an equal basis with others, particularly outside the capital. Government information and communication on disability concerns was not provided in accessible formats. Discrimination against persons with disabilities was widespread.

Although the law and a special government decree required new buildings and those that underwent renovations, including schools, to be accessible to persons with disabilities, very few were. Hospitals, residential care, and other facilities for persons with significant disabilities were substandard.

There were no adequate mechanisms to effectively monitor the

implementation of accessibility standards, despite advocacy by organizations of persons with disabilities to create them.

According to the Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms, the government's deinstitutionalization efforts were not systemic and did not result in a significant reduction in institutionalized individuals, and community-based support services were not adequate. Cosmetic renovations in institutions diverted resources from community-building services and furthered institutionalization. The coalition raised concerns regarding the absence of clear procedures for independent investigations into violations of the rights of persons with disabilities in institutions. According to human rights NGOs, staff in institutions did not always respect the rights of persons with disabilities and in some cases reportedly performed medical procedures without consent; imposed chemical, physical, and mechanical restraints; and imposed isolation on institutionalized individuals.

On February 17, police announced an investigation revealed abuse and torture at the Vardenis Neuropsychological Boarding House, which operated under the auspices of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and housed 450 persons with mental health problems and disabilities. Police stated one patient was chained to a heating battery in his hospital room, and another was tied by his hands and feet to the four corners of the bed. Patients also received insufficiently nutritious food, were forced to perform the duties of medical orderlies and dining room staff, and in some cases clean the center

director's barn. According to media reports, police launched a criminal case on multiple charges, including torture, embezzlement, corruption, and trafficking in persons. According to official information, authorities sent a criminal case against the director and four staff members of the boarding house to court. The case underscored human rights groups' long-raised concerns on the risk of abuse within such institutions.

According to the Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms, the government did not conduct regular and transparent dialogue with NGOs regarding disability rights and made significant decisions concerning persons with disabilities without meaningful input from them or representative organizations. Public discussions around legislation were limited to posting drafts online, which was ineffective, lacked accessibility, and prevented opportunities for meaningful involvement during the drafting process. Various government websites, including those with disability-related government resources, did not comply with accessibility requirements.

In June, the government approved the *2023-2027 Complex Program aimed at Promoting the Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities* to implement the law on the rights of persons with disabilities. According to the Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms, the program was substantially narrower and reduced from the publicly discussed draft. The coalition also stated authorities allocated insufficient resources to support the plan's execution. The Office of the Ombudsperson expressed concern regarding continuing

involuntary treatment of patients in psychiatric hospitals. According to its report, medical personnel lacked awareness of legal procedures for voluntary and involuntary treatment. This was compounded by insufficient community-based services and institutions providing social care to individuals with mental health problems.

Although the law on general education provided for a transition from general to inclusive education for children with disabilities by 2025, authorities continued to follow practices that were fragmentary and discriminatory and did not lead to an extensive and sustainable shift in the education system or social norms. Many NGOs reported mainstream schools were not physically accessible for children with disabilities, lacked accessible learning materials, and made limited effort to provide reasonable accommodations for children with disabilities. There were reports of children with special needs facing discrimination by teachers and parents of their classmates. Children with hearing and visual disabilities were educated in separate institutions, while public schools lacked Braille textbooks, other necessary technical equipment, and relevant specialists. Higher postgraduate and professional education were inaccessible for students with disabilities.

Persons with all types of disabilities experienced discrimination in every sphere, including access to health care, social and psychological rehabilitation, education, transportation, communication, employment,

social protection, cultural events, and use of the internet. Lack of access to information and communications was a particularly significant problem for persons with sensory disabilities. Women with disabilities faced further discrimination, including in social acceptance and access to health and reproductive care, employment, and education.

Inaccessible public buildings often served as polling stations during elections, preventing persons with disabilities from voting unassisted, although the government took steps to make some precincts accessible.

Institutionalized Children: Although authorities continued deinstitutionalization efforts, 1,129 children remained in five state-run care and seven state-run educational institutions. Most children in state-run orphanages had disabilities, which was the primary reason for institutionalization.

The Observation Group in Care Institutions, civil society organizations, and the Office of the Ombudsperson reported serious human rights abuses at the Zatik Children's Support Center in Yerevan. The Observation Group reported adolescents faced violations of their sexual and reproductive health rights, including an adolescent allegedly being forced to continue her pregnancy. Adolescents lacked counseling and support, leading to poor awareness regarding sexual health. Girls reported inadequate hygiene items, with only one pad provided during menstruation, and said they were required to share razors and toilet paper. The group observed behavioral

problems including self-injury as well as exploitation, violence, bullying, and physical and sexual abuse by staff and older children, especially against those with disabilities. Observers reported that children and families said they faced pressure from institution staff not to complain or report abuses. According to official information, authorities launched investigations into several cases of sexual violence by students against other students. In addition, per recommendation from the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs created a working group to address the problems in the support center.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

According to human rights groups, persons regarded as vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, such as individuals in commercial sex, including transgender individuals, and drug users, faced discrimination and violence from society as well as mistreatment by police. According to the Nondiscrimination and Equality Coalition of NGOs, individuals with HIV faced barriers in accessing public health care. According to the 2022 report of the Real World Real People NGO, there were multiple cases of refusal to provide medical services (including reproductive health services) to persons with HIV after their health status became known by medical personnel. Individuals with HIV also faced discrimination in health-care institutions regarding their right to privacy leading to discrimination in the workplace, society, and family. Disclosure of patients' health status by medical personnel resulted in

persons with HIV refusing to seek health care, or to seek medical assistance only in emergency situations. Government regulations on provision of social care to children, elderly, and persons with disabilities listed a person's status as HIV positive as grounds for refusing to provide social care to them. As a result, persons in these categories with HIV who were forced into joblessness, homelessness, or poverty could not receive state assistance to ensure an adequate standard of living. Individuals with HIV also faced discrimination by organizations providing social services. Employees of social protection agencies exhibited discriminatory attitudes towards persons with HIV and even refused to provide social assistance set by law.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law protected the right of all workers to form and to join independent unions. On April 11, the Constitutional Court ruled as unconstitutional the blanket restriction on membership in trade unions of members of the armed forces, police, national security establishment, and prosecutor's office, as well as judges and judges of the Constitutional Court.

The law provided for the right to strike, with some exceptions, and permitted collective bargaining. While changes to the labor code adopted

on May 3 simplified regulations for organizing strikes, changing the requirement for an agreement of two-thirds of the workforce for a strike to half of the workforce, the Confederation of Trade Unions and other labor law experts assessed the regulations were still too stringent to make legal strikes possible.

The law stipulated worker rights could not be restricted due to union membership and workers could not be fired for union activity.

The government did not effectively protect freedom of association, collective bargaining, or the right to strike. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other denials of civil rights. With respect to freedom of association and collective bargaining, penalties were rarely applied against violators. Labor organizations were weak because of employer resistance, high unemployment, and poor economic conditions. With respect to the right to strike, there were no reports of penalties applied against violators.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for

Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The monthly minimum wage was above the poverty income level. The law provided for a 40-hour workweek, 20 days of mandatory paid annual leave, and compensation for overtime and nighttime work. The law prohibited compulsory overtime in excess of four hours on two consecutive days and limited it to 180 hours in a year.

Many employees of private companies, particularly in the service and retail sectors, were unable to obtain paid leave and were required to work more than eight hours a day and over weekends and holidays without additional compensation.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards by decree, although safety and health conditions remained substandard in numerous sectors. For example, in the agricultural sector, heat and the use of pesticides were unaddressed.

Although workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, due to

high unemployment in the country, workers generally did not do so and were unlikely to report violations of their rights. The Health and Labor Inspection Body (HLIB) and the employer were responsible for identifying unsafe situations in the workplace; the HLIB proactively identified such conditions.

On November 27, a report by the Economic Reporter's Club indicated a surge in the number of fatalities of workers in the construction sector, driven by increased volumes of construction throughout the country, and especially in the capital, lax oversight of safety standards, and a lack of safety officers and safety equipment at construction sites.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The HLIB was responsible for the enforcement of the labor code, including minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance. The inspectors could not make unannounced inspections but could initiate sanctions. Penalties for violations of wage and hour laws were commensurate with those for similar crimes. Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

The informal sector comprised an estimated 15 percent of the total workforce. The government did not have jurisdiction to inspect "nonlegal" employers, such as small farms or illegal businesses. Authorities did not effectively enforce labor standards in either the formal or informal sectors.