
HRW: ARMENIA: AFTER YEREVAN PROTESTS, DETENTIONS UNDER SCRUTINY, ACTIVISTS IN UNJUSTIFIED PRETRIAL DETENTION

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Jane Buchanan, Associate Director, Europe & Central Asia Division, Children's Rights Division

Authorities in Armenia arrested dozens of activists in the wake of last months street protests, sending over 40 of them to pretrial detention on criminal charges of mass disorder. Among them were four prominent protest leaders: Hovsep Khurshudyan, Armen Martirosyan, David Sanasaryan, and Andreas Ghukasyan.

In violation of international standards, the courts relied on general and abstract reasons for detention, giving no specific facts about any of the mens likelihood to abscond or otherwise violate terms related to bail, when sending them to an overcrowded prison with poor conditions for two months, awaiting trial.

This gratuitous use of pretrial detention seems to be sending a signal about the lengths to which the government will go to silence those capable of mobilizing opposition.

Fortunately, upon appeal, a court released three leaders □ Khurshudyan, Martirosyan, and Sanasaryan – on bail in mid-August.

However, on August 28, an appeal court refused to release on bail Andreas Ghukasyan, a senior member of the opposition New Armenia movement, after Ghukasyan stated he planned to continue his peaceful political activities if released, according to his lawyer. The detention certainly looks like an effort to keep Ghukasyan from carrying out legitimate political work, and violates his rights to free speech.

Ghukasyan and the three other leaders await trial on serious criminal charges of organizing mass disorder for the July protests, which erupted after armed men from a radical opposition group seized a Yerevan police station on July 17, killing one policeman and taking several hostages. Before the gunmen surrendered on July 31, public support for them and disaffection with the government grew into a protest movement.

The protests themselves were largely peaceful, with isolated incidents of violence from participants □ nothing remotely like mass disorder. The dozens of witnesses my colleague and I interviewed immediately after the protests attest to that, as does widely-publicized video footage.

The releases of Khurshudyan, Martirosyan, and Sanasaryan are an important step. To show full respect for Armenias human rights commitments, investigators should revise their request for

pretrial detention for Ghukasyan, and closely review dozens of other similar cases with a view to clearly justifying the grounds for holding them. Pretrial detention should be a measure of last resort, not an easy means for the Armenian authorities to wrongfully punish critics.

Kaynak/Source: