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**INFLUENTIAL FORMER MILITARY COMMANDER ARRESTED AHEAD OF ARMENIAN ELECTIONS**

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A former top military commander in Nagorno-Karabakh who is close to an Armenian opposition alliance has been arrested in Armenia on suspicion of smuggling weapons into the country.

Samvel Babayan and two other people were arrested on March 22, less than two weeks before April 2 parliamentary elections in the South Caucasus country.

The three former government ministers who lead the ORO opposition alliance charged that Babayan's arrest was politically motivated.

In a statement, they accused the Armenian authorities of seeking to "create an atmosphere of fear in the country and influence the election results with illegal methods."

They urged foreign diplomatic missions and international election monitors to closely follow the case brought against Babayan.

Armenia's National Security Service confirmed the arrests hours after announcing that it confiscated a shoulder-fired surface-to-air rocket launcher that it said was smuggled from neighboring Georgia.

The agency said it had "credible information" suggesting that the Russian-made Igla rocket launcher was brought into the country on Babayan's behalf.

Babayan, 52, commanded the Armenian-backed army in Azerbaijan's breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region from 1993 to 1999.

He was arrested in 2000 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for allegedly masterminding a botched attempt on the life of the president in Nagorno-Karabakh's separatist government.

After his release in 2004, Babayan relocated to Yerevan, where he set up a political party that fared poorly in the 2007 Armenian parliamentary elections, and then emigrated to Russia in 2011.

He returned to Armenia in May 2016, citing what he said was the increased risk of renewed war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and the neighboring regions that the separatists control.

Babayan has publicly backed the ORO opposition alliance, a major contender in the parliamentary elections, but has denied any involvement in the bloc's campaign.

ORO is led by former Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian and two former foreign ministers, Raffi Hovannisian and Vartan Oskanian.

"The Ohanian-Raffi-Oskanian alliance is continuing its normal activities," the trio said in the statement. "We will not succumb to provocations. Our structures, election candidates, and supporters will redouble their efforts."

Ohanian told reporters that Babayan was an "ideological comrade and supporter" of the alliance.

Another senior figure in ORO, Armen Martirosian, also charged that Babayan's arrest was "directed against" the opposition bloc.

"Since there is growing public trust toward us, the authorities resorted to yet another repressive and illegal action," he said.

The National Security Service statement did not identify the two other suspects it said were arrested.

Relatives of Babayan declined to comment on his arrest when they were contacted by RFE/RL.

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