



**HUMAN
RIGHTS
HOUSE**
Yerevan



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE REVOLUTION

SPECIAL REPORT

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE REVOLUTION

**Human Rights House Yerevan
Special Report**

Yerevan, 2018



Cover Photo retrieved from gov.am,
official website of the Government of Armenia

Content

Introduction	3
Student Rights Restrictions: Incidents of Pressure and Violence	4
Targeting and Discriminating upon Women Human Rights Defenders	6
Obstructing the Work of Mass Media and Journalists	8
Incidents of Obstructing the Work of Attorneys	10
Targeting of LGBT Rights Defenders, Incidents of Obstructing their Work	11
Conditions in Which Defenders of People Living with HIV Work	12
Targeting and Pressuring Environmentalists	13
Pressures against Peace-Building Activists	14
Epilogue	15



Photo by Nazik Armenakyan/4Plus

Introduction

The landmark events of April-May 2018 coined “Velvet Revolution,” as well as the processes before and after it, have inspired the Human Rights House Yerevan association of human rights NGOs to prepare this special report. “Human Rights Defenders in the Revolution” report reflects on the internal political events between March 31 and August 17 of 2018 in light of the activities carried out by human rights defenders, activists and journalists; restriction and/or obstruction of their activities, as well as targeting of certain groups. The report specifically elaborates on the activities of student activists, woman human rights defenders and activists, journalists covering events related to the activists, lawyers defending them, defenders of people living with HIV, LGBT rights defenders, environmentalists, peace activists and NGOs. In addition to describing how their activities were obstructed, restricted and how they were targeted, the report presents their role in the events of the reporting period, their motivation for participating in these events, challenges and issues they faced after the revolution, as well as specific positive trends in a number of areas.

¹ On March 31st Nikol Pashinyan, that time NA MP of Yelq Bloc began walking against the second term of Serzh Sargsyan’s governance, and August 17th was the 100th day of the new government.

Student Rights Restrictions: Incidents of Pressure and Violence



Photo by Nelli Shishmanyan/4Plus

Students actively took part in the revolutionary processes. According to many of them, their participation sparked the wide circles of the society to get involved in the revolutionary processes.

The motivation for students to participate in the revolutionary struggle was driven by various reasons, including the political situation in general and the issues pressing the educational sector in particular. During the days of the revolution, students were engaged in informing other students to participate, they were also coordinating various student-led actions.

Students were particularly targeted by the police on these days; there were various types of pressure against them, their right to peaceful assembly was restricted. On April 17 2018, during street blockades, the police targeted Vahan Kostanyan and Davit Petrosyan, coordinators of student-led actions. On this day, many students, including Vahan and Davit were forcibly taken into police cars from the pedestrian area near Isahakyan statue and were taken to police stations in violation of their right to unarmed assembly and rally. Later on, the police tried to arrest Davit once again, however to no avail. On April 20, the police issued a statement where it mentioned that certain participants of protest actions, specifically Vahan Kostanyan, purposefully aimed to incite clashes between citizens and police officers in service. Due to this statement, Vahan had to go into hiding for an entire day.

According to him, his telephone was tapped on those days, he was followed. Davit Petrosyan was assaulted both in the police station and outside the station by a stranger.²

Incidents of psychological pressure were noted against woman student activists. On April 17, one of the arrested protesters was Goharik Tigranyan. According to her, the police would address the female protesters with statements as: "You are girls, aren't you ashamed?"³

Hayarpi Baghdasayan, another woman protester, was approached by a policeman in civilian outfit while she was drawing a graffiti near the University of Economics. The police officer hit her on the hands, broke the graffiti stencil and confiscated it. During another incident on April 12, Hayarpi attempted to go to the university with the stencil in her hands, however a university staff member (Lyova Arustamyan) came up to her, manhandled her and tore the stencil apart. He explained that he "was attempting to prevent Hayarpi's intention to draw graffiti in the university facilities." Hayarpi, however, did not have such an intention. Later, Hayarpi was notified of an administrative offence she had committed for drawing graffiti, however this administrative file was closed later on.

Administrative pressures were exerted upon other student activists as well. Specifically, the names of Hayarpi and other active students were drawn in a list of students to be expelled from the university.

² See details below: "Incidents of Obstructing the work of Attorneys"

³ The police were particularly enraged that some of the young women activists refused to present their names.

Targeting and Discriminating upon Women Human Rights Defenders



Women human rights defenders and activists were quite active during the revolution, taking the streets and participating in blockades, rallies, marches and various other actions. Women activists, for example, organized a “women’s march” during which they used feminist slogans and raised feminist posters. The woman activists also effectively used the social media. In a Facebook chat named “Aghjiknots” (Girls here), they effectively discussed and planned their actions and slogans.

Speaking of the role of the woman activists, Lara Aharonian notes that on the first few days she was participating in the protests as an observer aiming to record incidents of violence against protesters, specifically women protesters. Later on, she joined them as an activist herself. In this context, one of our women interviewee’s remark is remarkable. She noted that on those days it was difficult to distinguish between “activists” and “non-activists” and she herself was protesting not as an “activist” but as a “people’s representative.”

During the days of the revolution, women activists were discriminated and psychologically pressured the aim of which was to restrict their potential participation in the protests and other actions. One of the women activist interviewees recalls that during a car rally planned from Abovyan town, men took advantage of the fact that there were few women and attempted to pressure on the few participating women not to participate in the rally. Lara Aharonian recalls another incident when she was taken to the police station and asked questions as: “Don’t have work do to at home, don’t you have children, why are you blocking roads?”

There were also incidents of the police making inappropriate remarks to the appearance of women. More specifically, while detaining a woman protester, a police officer asked her in the car: “So are you a girl or a boy?” This was a way to make a hint to their short haircut. When the protester replied,

"Try your guess out of three options," the officer said, "Keep your mouth shut" and locked her in the cabin.

Women activists were also treated in a discriminatory way by fellow citizens for their "non-womanly" behavior. One of the interviewed women told us that during the street blockades they followed the example of some groups of men and started playing cards, a group of citizens came up to them and asked not to do so as "it is ugly." In another incident when the women protesters were blocking the streets, the drivers started directing their complaints and demands to the men on the site neglecting the women who were the ones doing the action. According to one of the women activists, women were in fact not perceived as "resisters" and besides the fact that there were few women speaking from the revolutionary platform, their speeches did not receive a large welcome either.

Lara Aharonian notes that on those days, cases of sexual harassment were recorded. The Sexual Assault Crisis Center received two women who had been sexually harassed on those days.

After the revolution, incidents of intolerance towards women continued in online spaces. Spreading misinformation was added to this wave of degrading the movement led by Nikol Pashinyan by targeting women activists. In an interview to us, one of the women said that "now the threat of being targeted" is greater than in April-May. "Manipulations are fabricated which result in a wave of expressed homophobia and misogyny which in their turn, lead to targeting women in online spaces."

Obstructing the Work of Mass Media and Journalists

Journalists played a large role during the revolution in ensuring freedom of information and in this way they made their input in the victory of the revolution. While journalists were to some extent constrained by “possible reprisals” (journalist) on the part of the former authorities, this, however, did not diminish the importance of the work the journalists did during the days of the revolution.

During the reporting period, the effectiveness of the work of journalists was largely based on the cooperation between citizens and journalists. For example, citizens were regularly supplying the mass media with video materials from different parts of the country based on which the media were able to cover these events. According to one of the journalists, this was outstanding as the journalists were physically unable to be present at all the spotlights of events and to equally cover them all. Nonetheless, this cooperation “was not a result of trusting the journalists, but more a means to support Nikol Pashinyan and the revolution” (journalist).

The role of non-traditional, in other words, “social” media was great during the revolution. Social media were more trusted by the society than the traditional media during the reporting period. As an interviewed journalist mentions, people more trusted “livestreams on social media platforms.” “We can state that in the end the Internet won and the TV lost,” adds the journalist. This was specifically linked to the fact that Nikol Pashinyan was personally extensively using his Facebook page and offering livestreams in order to transmit information to the public, to organize and coordinate protest marches and rallies.

In a number of incidents, the work of journalists was obstructed and restricted. These involved Tirayr Muradyan, Naira Bulghadaryan, Artak Khoulyan and others. It is difficult to estimate whether all these acts were instructed from a certain place and whether they were specifically targeted as journalists (journalist).

Journalist Tirayr Muradyan’s work was obstructed twice. First, “troubles” came from persons in civilian clothing, and in the second case, an attempt was made to detain him at the order of the head of Kotayk Marz police, but he was released from the car, once it became clear to the police that he was a journalist. Criminal files were opened for both these cases of obstructing a journalist’s activity. Investigation was still ongoing at the moment of writing this report.

Journalists served under unsafe conditions on the days of the revolution. These included the incidents when Nikol Pashinyan “was being detained” on Artsakh Avenue in Yerevan, as well as due to the actions of the police on “blocked” streets, those of the provocateurs, citizens attempting to break the barriers on the streets (journalist). In general, because the protests were taking place en masse and in a decentralized manner, the police were physically unable to “act” against all the journalists that is why the actions of those days were different from other similar actions, such as “Electric Yerevan” (journalist).

There is a rise in intolerance towards critics of the current authorities after the revolution. Therefore, journalists find it important that media outlets and individual journalists do not commit self-censorship in a move to give way to the criticism of citizens. According to one of the interviewed

journalists, a factor contributing to self-censorship is the general positive attitude of the media towards the current authorities.

Positive trends have been observed in media, specifically, "editorial" freedom has grown particularly in broadcast media (journalist). Besides, media has entered an era of "transformations", and according to journalists, it is a good occasion to make legislative changes in it to make it more transparent (for example, by making media ownership public information) and to rule out the possibility of monopolies in this area.

Incidents of Obstructing the Work of Attorneys⁴

During the reporting period, the work of pro bono attorneys who were in police departments to defend citizens detained from protests was also obstructed. Namely, on April 17 2018, attorney Haykuhi Harutyunyan was not allowed to enter the police department for 40 minutes. Only after the intervention of the rapid response team of the Human Rights Defender's office, did the attorney access the police building. Another attorney, Araks Melkonyan and her defender Davit Petrosyan were not allowed to exit the police department's building. Later, when Davit Petrosyan attempted to voice about this issue out of the window and inform the journalists waiting outside the building, police officers attacked and manhandled him. On April 18 2018, those detained in Nor Nork Police Department were kept in the offices of police staff, where the number of chairs was not sufficient and the detainees had to wait standing.

Attorneys had to work in conditions of pressure and control in the police department of Nor Nork. For example, the preparation of the administrative act was done in the office of a police officer in the presence of other 3-5 detainees. When the attorney requested the police staff to open the window, the response was, "This is my office and I will do what I wish." On April 19 2018, the Center Police Department refused to record the injuries of Davit Petrosyan. When his attorney Araks Melkonyan intervened to have these injuries recorded, her work was obstructed.

On April 19 2018, at around 16:50, a group of men (around 20), assaulted attorney Araks Melkonyan and her defender Davit Petrosyan outside St Gregory Illuminator hospital and punched them.

⁴ For more details, see "Report on Human Rights violations in Armenia during peaceful assemblies between April 13 and 20, 2018" of Protection of Rights Without Borders NGO, <http://prwb.am/new/2018/04/20/2018-13-20/>.

Targeting of LGBT Rights Defenders, Incidents of Obstructing their Work



During the revolutionary movement of April-May in Yerevan, LGBT protesters received a differentiated and prejudiced attitude. There were instances when they were detained only due to their alleged sexual orientation. According to Vardan Hambarzumyan, a scholar and activist, when he was blocking a road together with a group of people, the police detained only him. When a protester asked the police, why was only Vardan being detained, why won't the police detain them all, the police officer answered: "You're a normal guy, that's why we're not taking you, but this one... I won't name it what he is, there are many girls here." According to Vardan, he was beaten in the police car, the officers spat on him and told him that "it was a way to break his dignity."

There were also instances when the police would make inappropriate comments to the appearance of people. For example, Diana Karapetyan told us that during an argument with the police she was told to "go and get the piercing out and then come back to speak," and in another instance, the police officer asked whether Diana was a boy or a girl.

LGBT protesters received a bad attitude from the general public as well. Mkhitar Yeritsyan, for example, is elaborating that when the protesting crowd saw his transgender friend, they said: "God, who the hell is this. These ones are all day here and there, sitting under walls, doing whatever, and are now here." Nonetheless, according to the activists, the overall environment was friendly.

Right after the regime change, the Republican party, Tsarukyan alliance, the clergy and the "anti-gay" groups started actively speculating on the LGBT topic in an attempt to play it against the new government. Eduard Sharmazanov, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament from the Republican Party, claimed of preparing amendments to the law on protection of children's rights to ban "propaganda of sexual minorities" among minors. Gevorg Petrosyan, a lecturer at the Yerevan State University and member of the Parliament from the Tsarukyan Alliance, made a few posts in social media containing hate speech and calls for a crime, all full of swearwords. He specifically called for "not tolerating and expelling LGBT persons from Armenia."

Conditions in Which Defenders of People Living with HIV Work

During the revolution and after it, no incidents of restricting the rights and obstructing the work of human rights defenders of people with HIV were observed (Real World, Real People NGO). On the contrary, certain positive changes were observed: specifically, persons well-informed of the area were appointed to positions in the new government. The newly-appointed Minister of Health, Arsen Torosyan had earlier worked at Real World, Real People NGO, while Deputy Minister Lena Nanushyan had previously worked at UNAIDS. They are both well-aware of the issues in this sector. A meeting specifically dedicated to discussing the issues of this sector was organized with the Deputy Minister of Health during which the need of decentralizing HIV-related services was highlighted. In general, it can be stated that cooperation with state institutions has taken a higher speed. What is notable is that UNAIDS suggestions to amend RA Criminal Code's Article 123 (Infecting with HIV) has been included in the draft amendments of the criminal code and if adopted, this act will be decriminalized.

Targeting and Pressuring Environmentalists



Environmental activists have also participated in the revolutionary processes. On those days, their activities were obstructed and in a few cases, women activists were particularly targeted. As one of the environmentalists is stating, in the course of all her struggle she was constantly “advised” by acquaintances and friends to stop her activities. According to another environmental activist, she was bombarded by personal, including sexual insults in fake Facebook groups and pages by supporters of Lydian, the company behind open-pit mining in Amulsar mountain. The purpose was to “break” her. The environmental activist has turned to the police in order to have these persons identified and charged with responsibility. She, however, does not treat this smear campaign seriously, as she understands its true purpose.

According to one of the environmentalists, Lydian has many times speculated on the fact that among the local population blocking the roads to Amulsar mountain there are women, and has attempted to target the women and provoke a conflict between the locals and the activists.

Targeting environmental activists in online platforms has reached a momentum after the revolution. “Sponsored” posts, as well as a smear campaign against environmentalists in fake pages on Facebook have reached a high number with an aim to weaken the environmental movement. Nonetheless, the revolution has brought about positive changes as well. More specifically, the engagement of the local population in defending Amulsar Mountain has increased, which is linked to the revolution, as in the past the locals were afraid to stand up for their rights, whereas now they feel more confident (environmentalist). The active participation of the local population and cooperation with the activists is very important, according to one of the activists, as the struggle might have failed to reach its goals if it were to be waged in isolation.

Pressures against Peace-Building Activists

After the revolution, actors engaged in peace-building activities were targeted. According to “Women in Black, Armenia” peace-building initiative, numerous attempts of manipulating their activists, representatives of peace-building NGOs were made as a gesture of waging political speculations. More specifically, a video material was posted in Facebook that used the photos of various Facebook users tagging members of “Women in Black, Armenia”, as well as screenshots from online publications, where the activities of “Women in Black, Armenia” were portrayed as “anti-national, anti-patriotic and anti-army.” “All of this, was naturally, done in a premeditated way in order to stir a negative public attitude towards the NGO sector and those working in NGOs” (human rights defender).

The same interviewed human rights defender also expressed a concern that no measures have been taken by those in charge of the defense sector to cooperate with the NGOs, to discuss the issues of the army.

Epilogue

The report is based on the accounts of 13 human rights defenders, activists and journalists with whom interviews were held between September and November of 2018, as well as materials and publications provided by NGOs, including "Pink Armenia," "Real World, Real People," "Women in Black, Armenia" civic initiative, "Human Rights Protection Without Borders" NGO's report. It is also based on the monitoring results of "Human Rights House Yerevan" association of human rights organizations.

Interviews with:

- Ani Khachatryan (September 6, 2018),
- Arpi Balyan (November 9, 2018),
- Arpine Galfayan (September 6, 2018),
- Gegham Vardanyan (October 22, 2018),
- Goharik Tigranyan (September 10, 2018),
- Davit Petrosyan (September 5, 2018),
- Zara Harutyunyan (November 9, 2018),
- Zhanna Aleksanyan (October 20, 2018),
- Lara Aharonian (November 9, 2018),
- Hayarpi Baghdasaryan (September 7, 2018),
- Mkrtrich Karapetyan (October 18, 2018),
- Vahan Kostanyan (September 3, 2018),
- Tirayr Muradyan (October 24, 2018).



ԿԵՑՑԵՆ ԴՐՈՒ ԵՎ ՀԱՆՏ
ՀԵՄՄՓՈՒՄ



ՆԵՐԿԻՇՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ



**HUMAN
RIGHTS
HOUSE**

Yerevan



Website
Social Network

Tel.
E-Mail
Address

<https://humanrightshouse.org>
<https://www.facebook.com/HRHYerevan>
<https://www.instagram.com/HRHYerevan>
+374 10 329032
hrhyerevan@gmail.com
119/2 Hovsep Emin, Yerevan 0012, Armenia