

Armenia: Media Battle Ends

The Abovian regional television station is back on the air following a violent dispute with the local authorities.

Abovian television station began broadcasting again this week after striking a deal with local officials who'd forced it off the air.

The 12-day blackout at Abovian - which broadcasts to the town of the same name 15 km from Yerevan - had become a test case for the media's capacity to withstand pressure from the authorities as Armenia prepares for local elections next month.

The row started on August 24, when a group of men appeared in the station's office and expressed their discontent with journalists' work, particularly their reports on the subject of municipal improvements.

The "guests" then beat up the channel's founder Artashes Megrabian and its executive director Azniv Chizmechian, taking away videotape footage and a camera, which they returned an hour later.

Chizmechian claimed she was taken to the police station the following day, where she was met by the city's mayor Karo Israelian, who threatened her and her sons in presence of one of the attackers.

Afterwards, the journalist sent a complaint to the Armenian interior minister and left the town, taking her children with her.

Several days later, Megrabian declared publicly that he had been presented with new threats and demands to broadcast only advertisements in support of the mayor of the city.

Megrabian also went into hiding and, with its management absent, the station went off the air on September 6.

Armenia's independent press, as well as many public organisations, link the incident with the upcoming local government elections in the republic on October 20.

A number of professional bodies - the Journalists' Union of Armenia, Yerevan Press-club, Internews and the Investigative Journalists Association - appealed to President Robert Kocharian to guarantee the freedom and security of all media covering pre-election campaigns and the polls themselves.

The story, however, has another sub-plot. Some local journalists claim Abovian television played an active part in a "settling of scores" between Mayor Israelian and a group of local entrepreneurs - siding with the latter.

In particular, the station transmitted a report that showed the mayor verbally abusing the businessmen in question, who later filed a lawsuit against the official and won the case. Abovian television covered the trial extensively.

A wide range of diplomats, journalists and human rights activists intervened in the dispute and helped to bring it to an end. The station managers came back from their hiding places, and Abovian began broadcasting again on September 18.

Chizmechian did not go into details of the breakthrough, merely telling viewers that the dispute was over and the station was not reviewing its broadcasting priorities. At the same time, Abovian aired a public apology by Mayor Israelian, which did not specify to whom it was addressed.

Political observers believe the parties concerned have, by all appearances, agreed to step back from open conflict because elections are just around the corner.

Commenting on the Abovian episode, Roy Reeve, head of the OSCE mission to Armenia, said, "The Armenian media is still having difficulties with freedom of speech."

Mayor Israelian, who became famous after TV station saga, said, "I have never opposed freedom of speech. But I will not let journalists say everything they fancy."

Boris Navasardian, president of the Yerevan Press-club, told IWPR, "I'm sure the authorities understand they will get nothing by using pressure and threats.

They should remember that journalists can do their work fairly and objectively only in conditions of freedom, security and immunity, which is what our country's laws seek to ensure."

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