

## **Armenia: Storm Over Political Murder Trial**

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Officials pleased as TV boss murder trial ends in jail terms for both hitman and the man said to have paid him - but not everyone believes it was that simple.

A Yerevan court last week finally delivered its verdict on the murder last year of state television head Tigran Nagdalian - a crime that transfixed the whole of Armenia - deciding that it was ordered by the brother of two leading opposition figures.

The judge ruled on November 18 that Nagdalian, who was head of Armenian Public Television and a close ally of President Robert Kocharian, was murdered by a group of opposition supporters angered at what they saw as his misuse of the TV station to present a positive image of the president.

The prosecution contended that Nagdalian died in a contract killing ordered "in revenge for his television coverage of the events of October 27" - a reference to the 1999 attack in which a group of gunmen burst into the Armenian parliament and killed eight politicians including prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian.

The complexity of this court case is illustrated by the fact that the late prime minister's brother Armen Sarkisian was the most prominent defendant. He was found guilty of ordering the contract killing of Nagdalian for 75,000 US dollars, and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

The same prison term was handed down to John Harutunian, who pleaded guilty to being the hitman. Sarkisian's relative Hovanes Harutunian, who was said to have acted as intermediary in the contract killing, received only seven years in prison as a reward for cooperating with the prosecution.

In all, seven of the 13 people charged with the murder were given various sentences, while six others were acquitted and released.

The verdict has caused a political storm in Armenia - pro-government figures expressed satisfaction that the case had been successfully resolved, but opposition figures claimed that Armen Sarkisian was made a scapegoat for the crime.

The latter, a businessman, is not nearly as well-known as his two brothers Vazgen and Aram, both opposition figures and former prime ministers.

Shortly after Sarkisian's arrest, President Kocharian expressed confidence that they had found the right man, saying, "The proof in this case was satisfactory. Not only satisfactory but so convincing that the prosecutor's office had no other choice. Any other decision would have meant covering up a crime."

Nagdalian, 37, was shot in the head and killed on December 28, 2002 as he was leaving his parents' house in downtown Yerevan. The murder caused a furore in Armenia.

A strong supporter of President Robert Kocharian, Nagdalian had been appointed as TV chief by the president.

He was a highly politicised figure. "We need to decide first who Nagdalian was in the last few years of his life: a journalist or a political figure. What he did and said on the air had little to do with journalism. It was propaganda, and propaganda equals politics," David Petrosian, a political commentator for the Noyan Tapan news agency, told IWPR.

The timing of the assassination, only weeks before the start of the presidential election campaign - in which Kocharian won a second term - prompted speculation in the pro-government media that it was the work of "opposition forces".

Many commentators were unhappy with how quickly the governing regime jumped to conclusions about the killing. In March, the prosecutor general's office announced it had solved the crime a few hours before the first presidential election results became known.

Ten days later the prosecutor's office accused Armen Sarkisian of being one of the accomplices in the crime. Aram, who had just stood as a candidate in the presidential election, countered with a statement insisting that his brother was innocent. "Kocharian has not merely arrested my brother - he has taken him hostage to silence me," he said.

Following Kocharian's victory, the Justice opposition bloc headed by Aram Sarkisian together with Stepan Demirchian and Vazgen Manukian published a statement saying Armen Sarkisian's arrest was one of dozens orchestrated by the government as a ploy to deter public protests against what opposition leaders said was a rigged election.

In protest against Armen Sarkisian's arrest, his mother Greta staged a sit-in outside President Kocharian's residence, but this had no effect. Greta Sarkisian said her son's arrest was "a sequel" to the 1999 attack on parliament in which her eldest son Vazgen was killed.

Armen Sarkisian called the charges "nonsense". He told the court, "If I had wanted Nagdalian killed, I would have ordered the killing after he testified in the October 27 case." He said he had been dragged into the case because of a deceit by his relative Hovanes Harutunian.

"At the end of the day, no definitive evidence was given to the court that Nagdalian's assassination was contracted by Sarkisian," said his lawyer Robert Grigorian, who demanded full acquittal for his client.

In a complex and highly-charged trial, all the defendants refused to testify in court, saying they stood by the witness statements they had given during the pre-trial investigation.

The last few hours of the three-month-long trial were especially intense. Addressing the Nagdalian family, Sarkisian swore on his son's life that he had never ordered the murder.

After sentence was passed, Sarkisian's lawyer said he would launch an appeal, and if that failed, he planned to go to the European Court of Human Rights.

Many people - even those keen to see a conviction - were left unhappy with the outcome. "I am dissatisfied with this verdict, but was only to be expected," said the victim's sister Karine Nagdalian. "I want to see both the mastermind and the hit man imprisoned for life."

She said she was positive that it had been a contract killing, but said she was not sure that it was Sarkisian

who ordered it - and accused another defendant of concealing the identities of those she felt were really responsible.

The 1999 attack on parliament has figured prominently in the rumours circulating about what really lay behind the murder case. The killing of Vazgen Sarkisian and parliamentary speaker Karen Demirchian - who had jointly led a political bloc which won a general election five months previously and was opposed to President Kocharian - led to speculation that the president's camp might have been involved in the attack, since it benefited politically.

According to this theory, Nagdalian, who had inside-track knowledge of the government, was eliminated because he knew too much.

But another version of the story - more in line with the prosecutor's - suggests that the late prime minister's circle wanted revenge for his death, and chose Nagdalian because he was allegedly a former associate of Nairi Hunian, the man who led the attack.

The trial of Hunian and four others is now coming to a close - earlier this month he gave a closing speech to the court in which he admitted his role in the attack, but did not say whether it formed part of a bigger political plot.

At the end of this trial many questions were left unanswered, and are likely to remain so.

When it was all over, a police guard who had sat through the entire proceedings wondered aloud, "Did anything in this trial make any sense?"

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