

## **Armenian Verdict Leaves Relatives Unhappy**

**Author:** [Zhanna Alexanian](#)

Four years on, the men behind the assassinations in the Armenian parliament have been sentenced but not everyone is satisfied.

The longest and most politically charged trial in recent Armenian history has ended with a string of life sentences for the men accused of shooting eight politicians dead in parliament in October 1999.

After a case lasting almost three years, six of the seven men charged were given life in jail on December 2. They were the brothers Nairi and Karen Hunanian, their uncle Vram Galstian, as well as Eduard Grigorian, Derenik Bejanian and the driver Ashot Knyazian. A seventh man, Hamlet Stepanian, was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment.

No one ever doubted that the men were guilty, since their actions were caught on film on October 27 1999. That was the day Nairi Hunanian and four of his accomplices burst into the chamber of the Armenian parliament and opened fire, killing eight top politicians, including the then prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian and speaker of parliament Karen Demirchian.

The assassination of two of the three most powerful men in Armenia rocked the country and changed its political landscape forever.

The seven men were found guilty of six charges that, apart from murder, included "attempting to seize power" and "terrorism."

The first sessions of what became known as the "October 27 trial" attracted huge interest. There were no empty seats in the courtroom, and demonstrations were held outside. But over time, public interest in the case waned. As the verdict was read out - a process which took four hours - people in the courtroom remained calm, and the street outside the court was empty.

The trial has been dogged by allegations from the victims' families that the accused were just the executors of the crime, while those who had ordered it were escaping justice. Opposition politicians have alleged that members of the presidential administration - including President Robert Kocharian himself - were complicit in the attack.

"Instead of uncovering the truth behind the evil deeds of October 27, the court carried out the orders of the regime and concealed the real circumstances," claimed Albert Bazeyan, head of the political council of the Republican Party.

The families of the two most prominent men killed, the Sarkisians and the Demirchians, were not present for the final verdict.

Aram Sarkisian, brother of Vazgen Sarkisian, has invited Kocharian to a public debate, saying "If Robert Kocharian can prove he was not involved in October 27, then I am ready to ask him publicly for forgiveness," Sarkisian said.

Kocharian has categorically denied any involvement in the shootings, and Sarkisian's offer was dismissed

by the presidential press secretary, who said everything had been resolved by the courts.

Opposition deputies are also angry Kocharian did not sign off on a legal amendment - which would have prevented the defendants appealing for a pardon - in time for it to take effect.

There was further controversy over a five-month break in proceedings which led to the number of witnesses called being cut back drastically. From January to June this year the trial was halted, first because of the ill health of the judge, then because one of the defendants, Vram Galstian, was apparently sick. When he returned to court Galstian claimed he had been force-fed with medicines that made him ill.

When the trial resumed, several dozen witnesses found that were not called, and in the end only 28 of the initial list of 129 witnesses gave testimony.

Ruzan Khachatrian, the only journalist to interview Nairi Hunanian immediately after the shootings, was among those who were not called to the witness stand. She alleges that the film she shot that day was confiscated from her, and then edited before it was shown.

Lawyers of the murdered men allege that the assassins had accomplices who were never charged. Ashot Sarkisian, the Demirchians' lawyer, claimed for example that the five men did not bring their weapons into the parliament building from outside but were given them inside the chamber.

However, a pro-presidential politician, transport minister Andranik Manukian, said he was unhappy with the trial for another reason - because it did not end in death penalties for the accused men.

Manukian, who was gravely wounded in the attack and only just escaped with his life, alleged that the accused men were tortured to make them testify against others, including the president, but had refused to do so. He was convinced that Kocharian was not complicit in the attack.

Four years after the most notorious crime in the country's recent history, many people still feel they are no nearer to understanding what happened in parliament that day. The central question - whether the killers were acting on their own or under orders - is still unanswered.

"In effect the court did not anything to what we already knew," said Samvel Sarkisian, a doctor. "The Hunanian group was convicted of a crime it did commit and which we knew about on the day it happened, but there was no reply to the question of who gave the orders."

All the defendants plan to appeal against the verdict.

Zhanna Alexanian is a journalist with Armenia Now, [www.armenianow.com](http://www.armenianow.com)

**Location:** [Armenia](#)

**Focus:** [Caucasus](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenian-verdict-leaves-relatives-unhappy>