

Babayan Remains Defiant

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The trial of its national hero is convulsing the breakaway Armenian territory of Nagorny Karabakh

A tiny, austere courtroom illuminated by a bank of flickering strip-lights has become the focus of the most dramatic trial that Armenia has seen in recent memory. Samvel Babayan, the former commander-in-chief of local Armenian forces in the war with Azerbaijan, stands accused of masterminding the attempted assassination of Nagorny Karabakh's elected leader, Arkady Ghukasian.

Ghukasian was seriously wounded in March this year when two masked gunmen ambushed his presidential Mercedes in downtown Stepanakert. The president's driver and bodyguard were also badly injured in the hail of machine-gun bullets.

The shooting sparked a massive police round-up across Nagorny Karabakh which saw Babayan arrested along with more than 100 members of his inner circle. In April, Babayan was formally charged with organising the assassination in a bid to seize power in the disputed territory.

When the trial - in the Stepanakert town court - was adjourned after four weeks for a 10-day break, Babayan himself had been given little opportunity to state his case. Three other defendants who have been charged with trying to murder Ghukasian have renounced their former boss and pleaded guilty, but Babayan himself has denied all the charges.

Babayan was far more than a military leader. While still in his 20s, he became the key organiser of the Karabakh Armenians' war effort. After the 1994 ceasefire agreement left the Armenians victorious, he became the de facto overlord of the region, running not only the military but the local economy as well.

The trial of this powerful man is throwing a harsh spotlight not only on Karabakh, an isolated breakaway region, but on Armenia as well. Ghukasian has said he wants to see a "just and open trial" and has ensured the court-room is open to journalists, family members and even local law students. The judge, Suren Alexanian, a veteran of the Soviet legal system, said that "this is an extremely complex and unpleasant case," which he was determined to see through to a fair conclusion.

Babayan's defence lawyer, Zhudeks Shagarian, is less positive and has many complaints about the pre-trial investigation: "There were a lot of infringements in the beginning. I saw how Samvel Babayan was beaten so as to give a confession and was denied medical treatment." However he said he was now more satisfied with the trial itself.

It is a small-town affair, in which most of the lawyers, defendants and witnesses know each other. On the day that I attended, the prosecutor tried to get one witness, a woman doctor, to define her exact relationship to the main defendant. "Yes, I am Babayan's second cousin," she conceded. She was then asked for her address. "Who gave you the apartment?" the prosecutor asked, seeking to establish whether it was a gift from Babayan.

Babayan's supporters say this is a political trial against a man who stood in the way of forces trying to weaken Karabakh or make a peace deal with Azerbaijan. The Bulgarian film-maker and reporter, Cvetana Paskaleva, who has known Babayan since the beginning of the war, strongly doubts he tried to kill the president: "When I visited him shortly before he was arrested, he was preparing for the parliamentary elections [which were held in June this year]," she said.

The former Armenian national security adviser, Ashot Manucharian, also testified that Babayan and Ghukasian had been having peace talks through an intermediary shortly before the assassination attempt. He suggested that the shootings were the work of a "third party," intent on destroying both men.

Manucharian also believes the same forces were responsible for last October's shootings in the Armenian parliament which claimed the lives of eight leading political figures, including the prime-minister, Vazgen Sarkisian.

Babayan's critics - who are more numerous -- say that they are not surprised that the quarrel between the civilian and military leaders of Karabakh had reached critical mass. The president had sacked Babayan from his military posts last year. He said that the former commander-in-chief had turned from a heroic figure into an unstable and dangerous force. "We kept this myth [of Babayan] for the outside world. Unfortunately it didn't work," said Ghukasian in an interview (his feet were still heavily bandaged at the time -- more than six months after the assassination attempt).

Outside the courtroom, the trial has opened up what has hitherto been an extremely closed and secretive society. Allegations are being made and stories told for the first time about the nature of Babayan's rule. People talk about opponents jailed at his whim, his control of petrol and tobacco imports and aid budgets, and -- most unpleasantly - of young women afraid to go out on the street at night in case they were picked up and forced to have sex with Babayan and members of his circle.

Many Karabakhis see the whole trial as a "disgrace". Others, like the woman MP, Zhanna Galstian, argue that it is a healthy development. "Karabakh doesn't want to be under the heel of anyone, be they a foreigner or one of us," said Galstian. "Samvel Babayan took away our initiative, he made people slaves. If this trial wasn't happening, it would all have been in vain."

Thomas de Waal is currently researching a book about the Karabakh conflict

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