

Concern at Psychiatric Order for Armenian Politician

Author: [Gayane Mkrtchyan](#)

Court orders Shant Harutyunyan to be detained for compulsory testing after he called for revolution.

Human rights defenders in Armenia are alarmed at a decision to force opposition politician Shant Harutyunyan to undergo psychiatric testing, describing this as worryingly reminiscent of the way Soviet dissidents were treated.

Harutyunyan, 48, is head of the small right-wing Tseghakron party. He was arrested in November after a clash between party supporters and police. That followed several days in which Harutyunyan sat in Freedom Square in central Yerevan holding a sign saying he was starting a revolution.

When he appeared in court charged with using force against the authorities, a judge ordered him to undergo two months of assessment to assess that state of his mental health.

Harutyunyan's lawyer Inessa Petrosyan told a press conference that she and her client had opposed any examination.

"The length of medical analysis is on average 21 to 24 days, but the court decided to extend this one to two months," she pointed out.

While Harutyunyan is seen as a marginal figure on the political scene, he has become a cause celebre.

Human rights activists see him as a political prisoner detained by a judiciary that is subservient to government. The case also brings back uncomfortable memories of the Soviet era, when critics of the government were forcibly incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals and given medication to prevent them speaking their minds.

"There are two ways of looking at this," Avetik Ishkhanyan, head of the Armenian Helsinki Committee, told IWPR. "Either the government wants to show that the people who oppose it are mentally ill – a very worrying trend that takes us back to Soviet times when dissidents were locked up. Or else it's doing this to avoid a trial, because it's possible that in court, Shant would tell the truth about the government, which we all know but many of us keep quiet about."

Ishkhanyan says the charge of "threatening force" has little substance to it.

"What he said about petrol bombs was just rhetoric – they had no weapons," he told IWPR. "They organised a peaceful procession, and the sticks they had in their hands were symbolic. If there had been no police intervention and no force used against them, it would have ended peacefully."

Harutyunyan was among a number of opposition activists jailed in 2008 for organising protests after that year's presidential election.

After a year in prison, he was released after a health ministry commission ruled that he had mentally unwell at the time.

"I don't agree with this [finding], and neither did he at the time," Harutyunyan's wife Ruzanna Badalyan. "Shant is in good health. He has no psychiatric problems. He tells the truth, but they don't want to hear him, so they say he's unwell."

Three protests have taken place in support of Harutyunyan this month. Artur Sakunts, head of the Vanadzor office of the Helsinki Civil Assembly, said these demonstrations had prompted the courts to lift a ban on Harutyunyan meeting friends and relatives.

"We explained calmly that there was no justification for the ban on visits," Sakunts said. "We therefore demanded that this illegal decision be overturned, and we succeeded."

Vladimir Gasparyan, head of the Yerevan police, appeared exasperated by the furore, saying it was absurd for Harutyunyan to claim to be launching a revolution.

"How can you talk about a revolution? If our society is so sick that it believes Shant's empty boasts and some protests by a few criminals constitute a revolution, then it's the worse for us," he told journalists.

Davit Sanasaryan, a civil society activist who sits on Yerevan city council, said protests like those in support of Harutyunyan showed that Armenians were prepared to stand up for their rights, although this had been accompanied by an increase in police arrests.

Sakunts fears that judicial subservience to government will only get worse now that Armenia is to join the Moscow-led Customs Union rather than build stronger ties with the European Union.

He believes this shift in foreign policy could be reflected in the way human rights are dealt with, since the government will be under less external pressure to reform its practices.

“The risks have increased,” he said.

Gayane Mkrtchyan is a reporter with Armenianow.com.

Location: Azerbaijan
Armenia

Topic: Human rights

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/concern-psychiatric-order-armenian-politician>