

## **Yerevan Five Remain Tight-lipped**

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The men accused of gunning down eight Armenian officials in October 1999 are refusing to say who ordered the killings

As Nairi Hunanian takes his place in the dock, angry voices well-up from the public gallery. "To the scaffold with him!" "Death to the killers!"

But the man accused of leading the terrorist attack on the Armenian parliament in October 1999 remains strangely calm.

Hunanian spent the eight months of his pre-trial detention studying the Armenian legal code and, up until mid-April, insisted on conducting his own defense.

And yet the former journalist and student leader is only too aware that public opinion is set firmly against him.

Not least because Hunanian holds the key to the secret that has tormented Armenian society for 18 months - who masterminded the brutal attack which claimed the lives of eight top officials including the prime minister, Vazgen Sarkisian, and the parliamentary speaker, Karen Demirchian?

Tigran Janoyan, the lawyer representing Sarkisian's family, commented, "He gives the impression of a man who has done something of great importance.

"Given the level of his ideological commitment, there is no way he could have committed this crime for financial gain - which can't be said of the other terrorists who were promised money, apartments and jobs."

According to the prosecution, the five men smuggled Kalashnikov rifles into the parliament building on October 27, then burst into the debating chamber and opened fire on the assembled deputies. Hunanian shot Demirchian in the face while his brother, Karen, killed the prime minister.

Hunanian, 35, has pleaded not guilty to charges of treason, terrorism, murder and staging an attempted coup d'etat, claiming that the killings were an act of "self-defense against the dictatorship of Vazgen Sarkisian".

The trial began on February 15 against a backdrop of tight police security and angry demonstrations.

Camouflage-clad members of the Yerkrpah Union of Volunteers filled the adjoining street- which has been renamed in honour of the dead prime minister.

Their placards read, "Find those who ordered the killings", "Nairi Hunanian is a traitor to the motherland" and, "Death to all the defendants".

Members of the press and public had to make their way through six checkpoints to reach the court-house which was surrounded by a cordon of armed police.

And, in an emotionally-charged first sitting, Karen Demirchian's widow and son made a dramatic exit from the courtroom while Vazgen Sarkisian's brother, Aram, told local reporters, "I cannot be in the same building as my brother's executioners."

Such comments have done little to ensure the five suspects a fair trial. Vardan Arutyunian, a member of the president's human rights commission, commented that Armenian society was unprepared to defend men charged with such heinous crimes.

"[Defence] lawyers provided by the state basically uphold the arguments of the prosecution," he said.

And Avetik Ishkhanian, chairman of the Helsinki committee, added, "We fail to recognise that even the most qualified lawyer cannot actually deny the guilt of Hunanian and his accomplices. A real defence would require an objective investigation of the case but it is clear that the investigators simply tortured the suspects into saying whatever they wanted them to say."

The trial has been overshadowed by accusations of police brutality and political intrigue. Hunanian himself told the court that investigators acting on the orders of the military prosecutor, Gagik Djangirian, forced him to implicate President Robert Kocharian in the plot.

He also dismissed allegations he had made previously against the president's advisor, Aleksan Arutyunian, who spent nearly six months in jail.

In the light of such discomfiting outbursts, Hunanian's psychological condition has been the subject of intense speculation. Following petitions by lawyers representing the victims' families, Mels Mkrtumian, a specialist from Yerevan University, has been invited to attend the hearings.

Mkrtumian believes that, so far, Hunanian has managed to control the direction of the proceedings. "He is going to modify his strategy as the trial progresses," he said. "I think that up to now he has been able to control the situation and it is possible that he will continue to do so."

Another psychologist, Albert Nalchadjian, agrees with this analysis. "He has a need to impose his own will on others," he explained. "A personality like this also has a marked inclination to exploit his surroundings."

However, Nalchadjian believes it is likely that Hunanian will eventually divulge the identity of his sponsor. "Everyone opens up sooner or later. If you study a personality well and work seriously on his psychology, you can achieve the necessary results."

Prosecution lawyers have commented on Hunanian's "exceptional influence" on the other four defendants. And the Sarkisian family lawyer, Tigran Janoyan, has asked for the suspects to be removed from the court while Hunanian gives evidence.

This move provoked an angry outburst from the defendant. "I take full responsibility for my actions in front of my friends," he said.

Hunanian subsequently asked for a month-long recess in order to familiarise himself with the prosecution's case.

Ashot Sarkisian, representing Karen Demirchian's family in the trial, was outraged. "What will he remember that has slipped his memory over the past 18 months?" he fumed. "Does anyone really think he's going to tell us who ordered the killings?"

"Nairi Hunanian has had plenty of time and he's just trying to prolong the court proceedings because he values his life." Sarkisian's comments were accompanied by loud applause from the public gallery.

The trial continues.

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