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ARM102584.E

Armenia: People's Party of Armenia; treatment of members by authorities and society (2003 - Sept. 2007)

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The People's Party of Armenia (PPA) [or Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Kusaktsutyun (HZhK)] was founded in 1998 by former communist leader Karen Demirchyan [or Demirchian] (European Forum 23 July 2007; Eurasianet n.d.a; *PHW* 2007 Oct. 2006, 61). Following Demirchyan's assassination in a 1999 shooting at the parliament, his son, Stepan Demirchyan, became the PPA leader (ibid.; European Forum 23 July 2007; Eurasianet n.d.b). In February and March 2003, Stepan Demirchyan ran against the president, Robert Kocharian, in the presidential election (ibid.; Freedom House 2007b) and came in second place with 32.5 percent of the second round vote (European Forum 23 July 2007; *PHW* 2007 Oct. 2006, 61). Immediately following the presidential elections, which were marred by reports of fraud, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in the street to protest the results (European Forum 23 July 2007). According to Freedom House, these demonstrations were "brutally suppressed" by the government, which used water cannons, batons and stun grenades to disperse protestors (Freedom House 2007b). With the support of 15 other parties, Demirchyan appealed the election results (European Forum 23 July 2007). The court recognized the claim of fraud but found that Kocharian did not win due to such fraud (ibid.).

For the May 2003 parliamentary elections, Demirchyan led a newly formed opposition group entitled the Justice Alliance Bloc [Artarutian (Eurasianet 27 May 2003)] that included eight other parties (Eurasianet n.d.b; Freedom House 2006a, 7). Immediately following the parliamentary elections, opposition parties, including the Justice Alliance Bloc, protested the results, claiming that the elections were fraudulent (Eurasianet 27 May 2003). The Justice Alliance Bloc challenged the election results (Freedom House 2006a, 7; European Forum 23 July 2007), but the Constitutional Court did not overturn them (ibid.).

Between April and June 2004, large rallies, including those staged by the Justice Alliance Bloc with other opposition parties (AKRA 16 Apr. 2007), were held to protest the government's lack of action regarding the presidential elections (Freedom House 2007b). According to Freedom House and the Armenian news agency ARKA, the government responded to the opposition with violence and hundreds of arrests (ibid.; ibid. July 2006b; ARKA 16 Apr. 2007).

Between 2005 and 2007, various sources reported harassment of political opposition in Armenia (Freedom House 2007a, 82; IHF 27 Mar. 2007, 16; US 6

Mar. 2007, Sec. 3; *ibid.* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 3; FIDH/CSI 13 Nov. 2006, 3); however, the PPA was not specifically named by these sources. In May 2005, ARMINFO, an Armenian news agency, reported that PPA leader Demirchyan had publicly complained that authorities had attempted to prevent a meeting between the PPA and the public by placing pressure on the administration of the community centre where the meeting was held (ARMINFO 12 May 2005). In addition, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that in May 2005, police threatened to arrest participants who wanted to attend a PPA rally (HRW Jan. 2006). Corroborating this information, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reports that the police dispersed a crowd of people who had gathered for a PPA rally with Demirchyan and only "a handful of residents" finally participated (RFE/RL 17 May 2005).

In March 2007, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) cited an Armenian newspaper, *Haykakan Zhamanak*, as reporting that a number of PPA officials had left the party after accusing the party leadership of collaborating with unnamed "Armenian authorities" (BBC 8 Mar. 2007). A PPA council member responded by accusing the authorities of fabricating allegations in order to discredit the party (*ibid.*). In responding to such allegations in the local media, Demirchyan said in a May 2007 press conference: "For the last few years, the authorities ... have been carrying out a large-scale campaign to discredit our party. ... We have been a target of criticism, misinformation, falsehood and fraud for four years" (ARMINFO 14 May 2007).

Prior to the 2007 elections, an opposition rally was held on 9 May 2007 (ARMINFO 10 May 2007b; Reuters 13 May 2007; ITAR-TASS 11 May 2007). The rally was attended by an estimated 3,000 (ARMINFO 10 May 2007a) to 20,000 people (*ibid.* 10 May 2007c). Although one ARMINFO article reported that the rally was a PPA gathering (10 May 2007a), other articles indicated that the rally was staged by several opposition groups (Reuters 13 May 2007; ARMINFO 10 May 2007c) and that the PPA was in attendance (*ibid.* 10 May 2007b). The police reportedly broke up the rally using tear gas and truncheons; moreover, an opposition leader said that several people had been injured and others had been detained (*ibid.* 10 May 2007c).

In the May 2007 elections, the PPA received 1.7 percent of the vote and thus did not meet the minimum 5 percent threshold required to hold a parliamentary seat (TI Armenia 2007; ARKA 14 May 2007). Although the PPA announced that it would not accept the results of the elections (*ibid.*), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (COE) declared that the elections had been "fair" (Reuters 13 May 2007) although the OSCE reportedly concluded that some issues had not yet been addressed (European Forum 23 July 2007).

On 18 May 2007, the Armenian opposition held another rally, at which PPA leader Demirchyan was present (ARMINFO 18 May 2007). Also in May 2007, the apartment door of a PPA member, who had alleged vote-rigging in her constituency, was set on fire (RFE/RL 29 May 2007). No further information on violence directed at members of the PPA party could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to

the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Carter Center; National Democratic Institute; National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia; People's Party of Armenia

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