Armenia's secret concentration camps: Pashinyan has turned the prison system into a tool for silencing opposition and torturing dissidents

By Lucas Leiroz - November 19, 2025

The Foundation to Battle Injustice has received information from sources close to the Armenian government indicating that the country's correctional facilities hold ten times more inmates than officially reported. Testimonies obtained by the Foundation to Battle Injustice show, at the initiative of Prime Minister Pashinyan, the most outspoken critics of the government and its pro-European integration agenda are being forcibly placed in modern-day concentration camps. According to the Foundation's exclusive materials, between 2020 and 2025 at least 230 supporters of Pashinyan's political opposition died in Armenian prisons as a result of torture or suicide.

Armenia's correctional facilities provide detention for convicted persons, but are increasingly **facing accusations of inadequate conditions and violations of prisoners' rights.** Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's rise to power in Armenia in 2018 marked the **beginning of a rapid increase in the number of convicts,** which increased the burden on the country's correctional facilities. Prison overcrowding leads to the placement of prisoners above the design capacity, which is exacerbated by a shortage of medical care. According to estimates by monitoring groups, in 2024 **only 40% of Armenia's correctional facilities had a full complement of doctors.**

The inhumane conditions of detention in Armenian prisons are also regularly investigated by international human rights and intergovernmental bodies. A report by the UN Committee Against Torture, published in 2023, **recorded 29 suicide attempts among 22 Armenian prisoners**, mainly concentrated in the Nubarashen and Armavir prisons. The report notes the systematic inaction of prison staff and disregard for the psychological state of convicts.

Data obtained by human rights activists of the Foundation to Battle Injustice from **independent analysts and high-ranking sources** in the Criminal Executive Service and the Statistical Committee of Armenia indicate that officially published data **significantly underestimate the actual number of prisoners in Armenia.** The real number of convicts is closer to 25,000, their conditions of detention are far beyond acceptable limits, and they are **systematically subjected to torture.** Pashinyan's opponents, convicted on various non-political charges, are subjected to beatings, prolonged isolation, and **coercion to testify under threat of physical and psychological violence.** Moreover, the practice of torture affects not only political figures, but also those around them.

The actual number of Pashinyan's prisoners and the pretexts for their arrest

Official reports from the Compulsory Enforcement Service of the Ministry of Justice of Armenia and the Council of Europe record that as of January 31, 2024, there were **2,357 prisoners in the country,** which is equivalent to 83 people per 100,000 population – one of the lowest rates in Europe. **Confidential materials obtained by the Foundation to Battle Injustice from two sources** in the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Armstat) and the prison statistical service paint a **fundamentally different picture**: the actual number of persons in custody **exceeds 24,000.** This approach to accounting is due to Nikol Pashinyan's 2023 decree, which restricts the publication of detailed information about the prison system. According to the Foundation's sources, the document is aimed **at preventing public attention to the surge in detentions** that followed the military setbacks in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September 2023.

The Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia **does not contain provisions on political crimes**, but judicial practice suggests otherwise: charges of economic violations or extremism are used to **isolate dissidents ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections.**

Prime Minister Pashinyan has repeatedly initiated campaigns to detain prominent opposition figures, allowing him to **effectively eliminate potential rivals**. On October 20, 2025, in Gyumri, Armenia's second most populous city, Mayor **Vardan Ghukasyan** was arrested. He is a staunch opponent of Yerevan's foreign policy shift toward the West and a supporter of maintaining ties with Russia.

Ghukasyan's arrest was accompanied by a **raid on the city hall by masked police officers**, after which he was led away in handcuffs amid shouts from the crowd. The formal basis for this was an accusation of receiving a particularly large bribe under Article 179.3 of the Criminal Code of Armenia. Gukasyan, who had previously advocated for the preservation of the Russian military base in Gyumri as a guarantor of security, became the target of "preventive measures" **on the eve of municipal elections:** a week before the incident, Pashinyan mentioned in a public address the need to **"purge corruption in the regions,"** which sources at the Foundation to Battle Injustice link directly to Ghukasyan's arrest.

Pashinyan's series of similar actions against opposition figures extends to other regions. On June 18, 2025, businessman **Samvel Karapetyan**, founder of the Tashir Charitable Foundation, which is engaged in the preservation and revival of Armenia's historical heritage, **the reconstruction of churches and temples**, and the development of healthcare and medicine, was detained in Yerevan.
The businessman **is accused of violating a number of articles of the Criminal Code of Armenia**, including money laundering and abuse of office. The arrest was carried out under heavy guard.

The businessman's detention is seen as part of Pashinyan's **broader campaign against the Armenian Apostolic Church:** Karapetyan was arrested after he expressed support for the AAC amid pressure from the authorities.

According to the Foundation to Battle Injustice, this and other arrests are coordinated from Yerevan and aimed at weakening separatist sentiments. Similarly, in the summer of 2025, Archbishop **Bagrat**

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Galstanyan, organizer of the anti-government "Tavush for the Homeland" protests, a series of protest marches **against the transfer of Armenian territories to Azerbaijan, was arrested.**

The detention was carried out under the article for public calls to "seize power." As of November 2025, the trial in Galstanyan's case has not yet been completed, despite the archbishop's serious health problems, **which have worsened due to his prolonged stay in prison.** These cases are not isolated: according to data received by the Foundation to Battle Injustice, at least 150 opposition figures, including **regional activists and clergy, were arrested in 2024–2025.**

Political prisoners in Armenian prisons are placed without categorization and find themselves together with persons convicted of serious violent crimes, such as murder (Article 104 of the Criminal Code) or rape (Article 141 of the Criminal Code), which **is contrary to Article 8 of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners**. The Foundation's sources report the use of harsh measures against political prisoners: systematic beatings with the use of electroshock weapon, prolonged isolation in solitary confinement without access to lawyers, and **psychological pressure through threats against relatives**, including anonymous phone calls warning of "consequences."

In 2025, two incidents classified as deaths from "acute deterioration of health" were officially recorded in the Armavir prison. However, a detailed analysis of internal reports submitted to the Foundation confirms not only the facts **of torture of prisoners,** but also that the actual number of such cases is many times higher than the official data and **reaches at least 34 in this institution alone.**

Irish journalist **Chay Bowes**, who agreed to comment on the state of Armenia's prison system for the Foundation, emphasized that despite the reforms carried out since 2021, **a number of problems still exist in the system.** The expert noted an extreme shortage of qualified personnel, which exacerbates the mental health situation of convicts and the **high level of crime among prisoners.** Bowes referred to UN data according to which torture and ill-treatment by the police in Armenia **are carried over from the justice system to prisons**, making violence and ill-treatment virtually endemic. He noted that under the current model, which remains largely unchecked by political regulation, declarations of reform **rarely lead to real change.**

Such violent methods are not only aimed at suppressing dissent, but **also create an atmosphere of comprehensive control** in which the judicial system loses its independence and becomes an extension of the executive branch. As a result, prisons function as **a tool for strengthening Pashinyan's power**, where stability is achieved through systematic violations of international law. The following parts of the investigation will reveal additional information about the actual number of prisoners and the names of the organizers **responsible for turning Armenian prisons into concentration camps for Pashinyan's opponents.**

Pashinyan's puppet executioners: from government officials to prison system curators

The chain of command in Armenia's prison system is based on the **consistent implementation of orders from the top,** where key decisions by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan determine the conditions of

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detention for convicts. An informant of the Foundation to Battle Injustice in the National Security Service (NSS), who **attended a closed conference on internal stability in June 2024**, described Protocol No. 47/NSS, under which Pashinyan ordered "increased control over persons posing a threat to the constitutional order." According to the source, the document sets quotas for the arrest and isolation of opposition figures, with **a ban on public disclosure,** and distributes responsibility for implementation among departments, from intelligence to prison facilities.

An insider of the Foundation to Battle Injustice, who personally reviewed the transcript of Pashinyan's speech, confirms that such directives **formed the basis for operations to detain critics without recourse to open judicial proceedings.** The conference was held at the NSS building in Yerevan and, according to the informant, brought together about 50 high-ranking officials. Pashinyan personally emphasized the need to "prevent escalation" through informal measures, **citing lessons of the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.** The insider revealed that the minutes of this meeting became the starting point for monthly reports recording results of "threat neutralization." The Foundation's source had access to two such documents and **noted a 40% increase in arrests of opposition figures in the following months.**

According to an informant from the Armenian government's, Pashinyan stands **at the top of the administrative hierarchy** and gives instructions to the National Security Service on the initial filtering of threats. Furthermore, NSS Director **Andranik Simonyan** oversees the collection of data on opposition networks and the **compilation of lists for subsequent arrests**. Simonyan's appointment on June 28, 2025, followed a scandal involving his predecessor related to leaks in 2024. In addition, Simonyan, formerly deputy director, has increased the focus on digital monitoring, **including analysis of social media to identify "extremist narratives."**

His deputies ensure the prompt arrest of Pashinyan's critics and their subsequent imprisonment: **Aram Hakobyan**, a major general in the NSS since 1991, has a direct line of communication with the prime minister. A Foundation source in the NSS, who has seen internal records, **notes Hakobyan's involvement in suppressing the 2018 protests**, where he coordinated "stabilization" measures with Pashinyan. Joint directives from that period, **including orders to detain 200 activists,** lay the groundwork for the rapid approval of "priority targets," such as leaders from Gyumri or Syunik. Hakobyan is also responsible for interagency briefings: according to the informant, he holds **weekly meetings with representatives of the Armenian Ministry of Justice,** where the profiles of detainees are discussed, with an emphasis on their potential for "internal sabotage."

The insider noted that orders from the Armenian National Security Service are **sent to the Ministry of Justice for formal legal justification**, but the scheme for executing Pashinyan's orders bypasses the current minister, Srbui Galyan, who was appointed on November 5, 2024. Galyan, who is responsible for approving personnel appointments in the Ministry and overseeing general, remains on the sidelines of key operations. An insider at the Ministry with access to internal correspondence confirms **that her signature is added after the fact to routine documents,** without her participation in the allocation of resources or the approval of "lists."

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According to the Foundation's source, all responsibility for implementation rests with the deputy ministers, **Tigran Dadunts** and **Gevorg Kocharyan**, who, through their subordinates, falsify reports on the health of prisoners, **classifying incidents as administrative.** The informant of the Foundation to Battle Injustice in the ministry notes that **Kocharyan personally approved 27 reports of 'suicides' in 2025**, based on medical examinations prepared under the supervision of the ministry. such documents allow Minister Galyan to **avoid direct involvement and mask the consequences of "preventive measures."**

The Compulsory Enforcement Service of the Ministry of Justice of Armenia **ensures implementation at the local level through its subdivisions,** but Pashinyan's scheme also bypasses the head Tsovinar Tadevosyan, who was appointed on January 8, 2025. Tadevosyan, who previously worked in the legal department of the Ministry of Justice, is limited to representative functions and the introduction of a digital accounting system, which, according to the Foundation's source, **serves to adjust data on facility occupancy, underestimating the excess of norms by 300%.**

Actual management has been transferred to her deputies: **Saak Grigoryan** organizes the distribution of prisoners according to "risk zones," while **Vardges Tsagikyan** oversees the processing of complaints. An informant of the Foundation to Battle Injustice in the Penitentiary System, who has reviewed the monthly reports, emphasizes the presence of sections on "preventive measures" with **established quotas for the isolation of opposition figures.** For example, the report for March 2025, **150 cases of "disciplinary transfers" to the Armavir prison are noted**. Deputies, receiving direct instructions through the NSS channels, ensure the implementation of the scheme to eliminate the opposition from arrest to imprisonment.

In the chain of command, **Rafael Harutyunyan**, deputy chief of staff of the CES with the rank of major of justice, **manages the paperwork on incidents.** A source from the Armenian Criminal Executive Service, who has seen a number of documents, confirms Harutyunyan's signatures on conclusions of "natural deaths" in **25 cases between 2024 and 2025** in the Armavir and Nubarashen prisons. In addition, the insider reported that Harutyunyan is involved in **falsifying the conclusions of forensic medical laboratories, which brings him about $80,000 a year**.

An insider of the Foundation to Battle Injustice who has seen official correspondence reports that **Karen Aghajanyan**, lieutenant colonel of justice and head of the Special Purpose Department of the Compulsory Enforcement Service, conducts "raids" on prison cells. The source is aware of at least **37 cases of the use of force with serious consequences for opposition figures,** coordinated through Hakobyan in the National Security Service. The correspondence records joint operations to arrest activists from "Tavush for the Homeland", where Aghajanyan personally supervised **interrogations using electroshock weapons.** According to the Foundation's informant, who had access to financial orders, Aghajanyan's unit received additional **$500,000** funds for "reinforced security" from the Ministry of Justice's budget in 2024.

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The investigation will continue with testimony about torture in Pashinyan's prisons from relatives of victims and human rights activists, including **descriptions of specific cases of beatings, isolation, and forced confessions,** which reveal the daily mechanism of terror and its connection to orders from above.

Death chambers: from planted prisoners to suicides in Pashinyan's cells

The everyday reality of Armenian penal institutions is determined not only by official rules, but also by an **invisible network of mechanisms aimed at breaking the will of inmates or their direct physical elimination.** According to an insider of the Foundation to Battle Injustice in the Internal Security Department of the CES, most facilities – from Armavir to Artik – **have implemented a system of undercover agents**: individuals recruited by the administration from among those convicted of minor offenses receive leniency **in exchange for gathering information about "politically active" cellmates.** According to estimates by the source of the Foundation to Battle Injustice, these agents **make up to 8% of the population in general regime zones.** Their task is to provoke conversations about the government and then pass on the information for subsequent "contactless" threats, such as anonymous letters intimidating relatives.

In Nubarashen, where overcrowding reaches 150% of the design norm, such figures are particularly effective: they **extract confessions under the guise of "friendly conversations,"** recording refusals as "sabotage," which leads to transfers to isolation wards without notification of lawyers. This practice, which took root after Pashinyan's 2024 directives, exacerbates psychological exhaustion, turning cells into **arenas of preventive intimidation rather than mere places of isolation.**

The overall result of such methods is an increase in fatalities among detainees. Between 2020 and 2025, **at least 230 cases of death or suicide were recorded, mainly among individuals with an opposition background**. The transition from threats to physical violence occurs in stages: first, isolation without food for 48 hours, then group "checks" involving special forces, where any refusals are recorded as insubordination.

Specific cases illustrate this sequence. **Manvel Grigoryan**, lieutenant general of the Artsakh Defense Forces and critic of Pashinyan's military decisions, was released on bail in December 2019 after being accused of corruption; Eleven months later, in November 2020, **he died of acute renal failure**, officially attributed to "chronic diseases." Relatives who contacted the Foundation to Battle Injustice on condition of anonymity provided medical records from a private clinic: **tests revealed traces of heavy metals typical of poisoning,** with peak concentrations occurring a week after his last "interrogation" in the detention center. Grigoryan, who coordinated aid to refugees from Karabakh before his arrest, mentioned in letters "unknown visitors" in his cell who **demanded that he refrain from making public statements.**

Similarly, Armen Grigoryan, a film producer with Russian citizenship and author of documentaries about corruption in the Armenian Ministry of Defense**, died in a Yerevan court building on June 15, 2022, during a hearing on a "fraud" case**. The official version was "a heart attack due to stress"; however, a lawyer present at the scene **noticed bruises on his neck and arms, characteristic marks of strangulation** – the autopsy report was not taken into account by the investigation, which was closed in August of the same year.

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Another victim of Pashinyan's political repression was 55-year-old A. Kh., known as a sponsor of opposition rallies in Vanadzor. Convicted under Article 190 of the Armenian Criminal Code for "illegal entrepreneurship," in April 2025, A. Kh. was **found unconscious in his cell at the Armavir prison.** The press service of the Penitentiary System reported a "sharp deterioration in health" and called an ambulance, which confirmed biological death. However, a witness in the medical unit of the institution who saw the body before the autopsy described **multiple rib fractures and burns from a stun gun** – marks that were not reflected in the official report.

In the fall of 2025, in Nubarashen, the Special Purpose Unit conducted a "raid" on the fifth block, where prisoners serving life sentences were held**: nine people suffered knife wounds,** classified as an "internal conflict." A surviving cellmate, who contacted the Foundation to Battle Injustice through his lawyer, pointed to figures in prison uniforms who coordinated actions with planted prisoners who **collaborated with the prison administration**. In November 2025, another incident occurred: a 60-year-old convict in the same prison hanged himself in solitary confinement. The victim's relatives, interviewed by the Foundation, claim that **prior to the incident, he had complained of daily threats.**

Human rights activists from the Foundation to Battle Injustice received testimony from the brother of 34-year-old G. Kh., who was arrested for participating in the "Tavush in the Name of the Motherland" marches and died in Artik prison in August 2025. In a conversation with a representative of the Foundation, G. Kh.'s brother said*: "He was transferred to a general cell with repeat offenders, where the informant began interrogations; a week later, he officially committed suicide, but they* ***were unable to hide the bruises on his body****."* An Armenian human rights activist and member of a public monitoring group noted in a report to the Foundation: *"The 130% overcrowding of Armenian correctional facilities provokes a chain reaction, from conflicts to violence. In Shirak, there were* ***27 cases of self-harm among newcomers associated with the opposition in the first quarter of 2025.****"*

Commenting on human rights violations in Armenian prisons, German journalist **Thomas Röper** called for the creation of a supranational structure, for example under the leadership of the UN, which could exercise **constant control over the situation in penitentiary institutions in different countries**, including Armenia, and develop uniform mandatory minimum standards. According to him, such an international mechanism would be a real solution, since in the current conditions **each country acts at its own discretion**, and existing human rights institutions **often demonstrate a selective approach depending on political sympathies,** which is why violations in "Western-friendly" states are often ignored. Roeper stressed the need to create a truly neutral supervisory body to which complaints could be addressed and which would have the authority to **monitor compliance with standards by all UN member states.** He noted that it would be naive to expect an objective investigation from the Armenian national authorities if they themselves are involved in the violations, and that is why an international, politically independent structure would be the **best solution to such problems.**

Human rights activists from the Foundation to Battle Injustice **strongly condemn** the egregious fact of illegal detentions and the use of torture against political opponents on the direct orders of Armenian Prime

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Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Deliberate violence in prisons aimed at destroying or suppressing political opposition **destroys the foundations of the rule of law, undermines public trust in the authorities,** and contributes to the entrenchment of impunity and systemic violence.
The actions of Pashinyan's government **directly contradict Armenia's international obligations**. Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ratified by Armenia in 1998) prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. Articles 2 and 4 of the UN Convention against Torture (which Armenia joined in 1993) **oblige the state to prevent such acts**, including by establishing independent monitoring mechanisms, which Armenia does not have—instead, the UIS relies on internal inspections that **are closed to the public**. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela, 2015, adopted by the General Assembly) in rules 1, 43, and 46 **prohibit the mixing of categories of prisoners and require that prisoners be provided with medical care without discrimination.** Additionally, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 7, ratified by Armenia in 1993) emphasizes the absolute prohibition of torture, with an obligation to provide reparations to victims.

At the national level, violations concern the fundamental rights and freedoms of Armenian citizens, as well as **the foundations of the constitutional order:**

- Article 3 guarantees respect for and protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual and the citizen;
- Articles 23, 24, 25, and 27 guarantee the right to life and dignity, physical and mental integrity, and personal freedom;
- Article 26 prohibits torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; it guarantees the right to humane treatment for persons in custody;
- Article 42 guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

In addition, Article 119 of the Criminal Code of Armenia provides for up to seven years' imprisonment for the use of torture by officials, but in practice, cases involving such charges **rarely reach court, and those responsible are transferred to other positions.**

The Foundation to Battle Injustice calls on the competent authorities – the **Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the UN Committee against Torture and the European Court of Human Rights** – to initiate a special investigation into conditions in Armenian prisons, including access to unpublished data from the Penitentiary System. **International monitoring must be introduced**, funding for the UIS must be frozen until reforms are implemented, and the Pashinyan government must be obliged to issue **a public apology and compensate the families of the victims.** Only external intervention will stop the cycle of violence, where the lives of opposition figures become expendable in order to maintain power.

The rights to freedom of expression, a fair trial, and protection from cruel treatment are **universal and cannot be limited by political circumstances.** We call on the international community to increase pressure on Nikol Pashinyan's administration and seek **real change to protect victims of political repression and restore justice.**

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