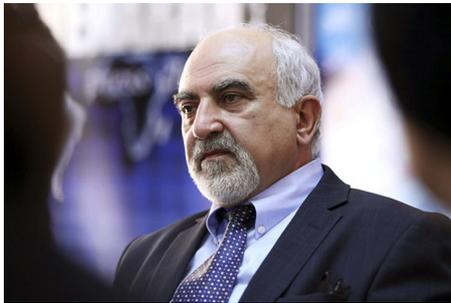


## Armenia presidential hopeful shot and wounded - Tehran Times

World Desk

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**YEREVAN, Armenia (AP)** — A fringe candidate for the Armenian presidency was recovering from surgery Friday after being shot in the chest by an unidentified gunman, officials said. Paruir Airikian was reported in stable condition as police searched for the shooter, while the speaker of Parliament suggested the election could be delayed.

Airikian, an also-ran in three previous presidential elections, was shot outside his house in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, just before midnight. A neighbor who heard gunshots and cries for help called the police.

Another presidential candidate who visited Airikian in hospital told Armenian TV that the assailant first shot him in the back. Airikian then started struggling with the attacker, who fled.

Airikian, a former dissident who spent 17 years in Soviet prisons, is one of eight candidates in the Feb. 18 presidential vote, which incumbent Serge Sarkisian is expected to easily win despite the nation's economic problems. Recent opinion surveys show Airikian getting just over 1 percent of the vote. Yerevan Clinical Hospital's chief doctor, Ara Minasian, said that the 63-year-old Airikian was being treated for a single gunshot wound and remained in stable condition. Doctors later performed a surgery to remove a bullet that got stuck in his shoulder.

Eduard Sharmazanov, a deputy speaker of Parliament, said the attack on Airikian was a "provocation against democratic, free and transparent elections." Education Minister Armen Ashotian, who is deputy chief of the ruling Republican Party, described it as an "attempt to destabilize the situation in the country and compromise the vote."

Armenian parliament speaker Ovik Abramian, who visited Airikian at the hospital, said the assault could be an attempt to thwart the election. He said the vote could be postponed if Airikian's condition prevents him from taking part, but the nation's election chief refused to comment on the possibility. Armenia's constitution requires the vote to be postponed for two weeks if one of the candidates is unable to take part due to circumstances beyond his control. It envisages a further 40-day delay if the problem isn't solved.

The Armenian president has broad executive powers, and the campaign for the job has been marked by much tension. Airikian, a Soviet-era dissident, briefly joined a hunger strike by another candidate over procedural issues related to the vote.

This landlocked, overwhelmingly Christian nation of 3 million has faced severe economic challenges caused by the closing of its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan because of a territorial conflict.

The Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and some adjacent territory has been under

the control of Armenian troops and local ethnic Armenian forces since a six-year war ended with a truce in 1994. But international efforts to mediate a settlement have brought no result.

Armenia's politics have been tense and often mired in violence. In 1999, six gunmen burst into Parliament and killed the prime minister, speaker and six other officials and lawmakers. Nine people were wounded. The attackers said they were driven by a desire to save the country from economic collapse and official corruption. They were sentenced to life in prison and one later committed suicide.

Airikian was a dissident during Soviet times. He was first arrested when he was 20, and spent 17 years in prison, according to his party. In 1987 after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev launched his liberal reforms, Airikian created the National Self-Determination Party. When the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted next year, he accused the Soviet authorities of stirring up violence and was evicted from the country.

Airikian soon returned to his homeland and took senior positions in Armenia's parliament and government in the 1990s.