

# Scores Rally for Early Vote in Armenia

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Armenian police officers blocking opposition supporters during an anti-government rally in Yerevan on Friday. **Tigran Mehrabyan**

YEREVAN, Armenia — Armenia's opposition has rallied thousands of supporters to demand early elections, the latest show of force against the government of President Serzh Sargsyan.

The government, grappling with high inflation and rising poverty after a deep economic downturn in 2009, has faced down a series of peaceful protests over the past six weeks in the capital, Yerevan.

Parliamentary elections in the former Soviet republic on Turkey's eastern border are not due until 2012. A presidential vote is expected a year later.

Sargsyan's rule has been overshadowed by deadly clashes between police and opposition protesters after his election in early 2008 and by an economic contraction of 14.2 percent in 2009.

Opposition leaders demanded early elections at a rally of 8,000 to 12,000 people on Friday.

"I call on the people to start preparing themselves for a campaign of civil disobedience," opposition Armenian National Congress senior official Levon Zurabyan told the crowd.

Protesters marched to Yerevan's main Freedom Square, where a ring of riot police let them through.

Armenia's leaders say they want to build a European-style democracy and have won Western praise for allowing contested elections.

Opponents say the country is run by a clique that refuses to give rivals access to political power or economic influence.

The landlocked country of 3.2 million people is Russia's closest ally in the South Caucasus.

Armenia's deep economic dependence on Russia was exposed by the global crisis, when vital remittances from Armenians working in Russia dried up.

The Armenian economy has returned to growth, but the International Monetary Fund has warned of challenges ahead, saying the recovery is slow and uneven.

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