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## The Poverty of Authoritarianism: What Made the Armenian Revolution Possible

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### Abstract

While revolutions are difficult to predict, the Armenian revolution was particularly unexpected, as it happened at a time when the political regime seemed highly stable. However, in hindsight, it has become clear that the political regime that had been built in Armenia had exhausted itself, with the pre-conditions for the revolution building up in recent years. Armenia's political system had gravitated from a hybrid regime to a consolidated authoritarian regime, albeit a soft one. However, this consolidation actually deprived the Armenian regime of the flexibility that is often key to the survival of authoritarian regimes. In the absence of other factors that can boost authoritarian regimes (e.g., foreign policy successes, charismatic appeal of leaders, strong ideology, or high profits from exporting natural resources), the Armenian regime had few resources to ensure its survival.

### Introduction

Revolutions are difficult to predict. The events of April–May 2018, which came to be known in Armenia as the Revolution of Love and Solidarity, were no exception. As late as February–March 2018, the internal political situation in Armenia seemed to be under complete control of the government of Serzh Sargsyan. Moreover, it seemed that Serzh Sargsyan's regime, which had managed a successful transition from a presidential republic to a parliamentary one, was stronger than ever. However, today, looking back at the previous developments, several factors contributing to the demise of Serzh Sargsyan's regime can be identified. In fact, some of those developments that at the time could have been seen as signs of the regime's consolidation ultimately accelerated its demise.

### Flexible Authoritarianism: Post-Soviet Armenia's Political System

Post-Soviet Armenia was a case of what are generally described in the political literature as hybrid regimes, or, in other words, regimes that combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism. Armenia was one of the Soviet republics where a mass protest movement emerged in the late 1980s; this movement combined a national agenda with demands for democracy. It is no wonder that in the early 1990s Armenia positioned itself as "an island of democracy" in the Caucasus. However, authoritarian tendencies were becoming increasingly obvious. By 1995, Armenia's democracy had already been tainted by the closure of an opposition party and its media outlets, as well as by disputed elections. In particular, the 1996 presidential election became a watershed. The pattern that was established repeated itself many times: a presidential election in which the incum-

bent is declared the winner amid accusations of fraud, leading to mass protests. Since then virtually every presidential election in Armenia has been accompanied by major protests.

However, Armenian authoritarianism has always been relatively soft, especially in comparison with certain other post-Soviet cases. Under presidents Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018), the ruling elite expended considerable effort maintaining the political system's democratic facade. This meant that the opposition, free media, and civil society were allowed to operate and even sharply criticize the government as long as they presented no realistic threat to the ruling elite. In situations when the opposition was perceived as a threat, the government did not hesitate to resort to violent crackdowns, as was the case in April 2004 and March 2008. However, as a rule, "tightening of the screws" in such cases was limited in time, and the regime eventually reverted to maintaining a democratic facade. The opposition was never completely destroyed, the free media was never completely strangled, and civil society was never completely placed under state control. These qualities of Armenia's political system led Levitsky and Way to include Armenia as a case study in their seminal work on "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2013).

### Toward Full Authoritarianism

Though the process of authoritarian consolidation in Armenia was slow and non-linear, by the second half of 2010s, it was becoming increasingly obvious. International indices captured this trend, as during the final years before the revolution, Armenia walked a fine line between a hybrid and full authoritarian regime. In 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit listed Arme-

nia as an authoritarian regime, and in its 2017 report it placed Armenia just above the threshold separating hybrid regimes from fully authoritarian ones (Armenia received 4.11 points out of 10, while the borderline between authoritarian and hybrid regimes is 4.00 points, placing the country at 120<sup>th</sup> globally) (Lragir, 2018). In its 2017 ratings, Freedom House gave Armenia an aggregate score of 45 out of 100 (100 being most free, 0 being the least free) and described the country's political system as follows: "Voters in Armenia have little say in policymaking, and formal political opposition is weak... high levels of corruption as well as political influence over the media remain concerns" (Freedom House 2018).

Signs of authoritarian consolidation were becoming increasingly obvious during Serzh Sargsyan's second term. The presidential election itself in 2013 revealed that the Armenian political system was on the brink of a new authoritarian trend. Two of the potential candidates seen by many in Armenia as the most likely rivals of the incumbent Serzh Sargsyan—Gagik Tsarukyan and Levon Ter-Petrosyan—did not put their candidacies forward in the election. It is true that this helped the opposition candidate Raffi Hovhannisian, who as a result remained the only plausible opposition candidate, gather around 40% of the votes, which is one of the highest results shown by an opposition candidate in Armenia to date. Hovhannisian's supporters challenged the election result; however, unlike 2008, when post-election protests presented a serious danger to the regime, the protest movement of 2013 proved to be short-lived and failed to create a serious challenge to the regime. Ultimately, the 2013 election helped Sargsyan to re-assert his legitimacy as president, which had been tainted by the disputed election and the post-election crackdown of 2008.

The next stage in the consolidation of Sargsyan's power were the events of spring 2015, when Sargsyan neutralized the challenge coming from the largest "systemic opposition" party, Prosperous Armenia led by businessman Gagik Tsarukyan. Tsarukyan had earlier joined forces with Ter-Petrosyan and Hovhannisian, creating a united opposition front that succeeded in forcing the resignation of then prime minister Tigran Sargsyan. In spring 2015, Sargsyan threatened confrontation and a crackdown against Tsarukyan and his party. The latter, having been a part of the dominant political and business elite in Armenia for decades, was presented with the choice of either becoming the "radical" opposition and facing repression that such status entails or retreating into a "safe zone" of "systemic opposition". Prosperous Armenia and Tsarukyan chose the path of submission. Tsarukyan announced that he was leaving politics,

and his party reverted to being loyal "systemic opposition". The developments of 2015 meant that Serzh Sargsyan and his Republican Party remained the only viable political force in the country (Zolyan 2015).

These developments also meant that nothing stood in the way of the constitutional reform planned by Sargsyan and his close circle, which was aimed at prolonging Sargsyan's power indefinitely. The reform, started by the referendum of 2015, was presented as an endeavour that aimed to make Armenia more democratic. As the opposition and civil society worried, it was actually aimed at removing the constraints on Sargsyan's power, ensuring that after the end of his second term as president he could continue ruling the country in the capacity of the prime minister. However, the aims of the reform were not revealed for a long time: Sargsyan himself shied away from replying to questions regarding his plans following his second presidential term. Even though various pro-government figures often spoke about Sargsyan as an irreplaceable leader, it was only in 2018 that Sargsyan himself admitted that he had no plans to relinquish power (on the constitutional reform see Weinberger 2015).

The hardening of the authoritarian regime also came with the advent of a certain ideology, or rather quasi-ideology, which was supposed to legitimize the consolidation of Sargsyan's authoritarian regime. The propaganda of the so called "nation-army concept" became ubiquitous in Armenia especially after the so-called "four-day war", an escalation of fighting in the zone of conflict that took place in April 2016. The idea of "nation-army" was promoted in particular by the former head of Serzh Sargsyan's administration, Vigen Sargsyan (no family relation to Serzh Sargsyan), who became Minister of Defence in October 2016. While the government never formally defined what the concept of the "nation-army" meant, it was essentially a combination of several initiatives related to the fields of defence and security on the one hand, and on the other a dramatic rise in government propaganda focusing on the idea of consolidating the nation around the army, and, by extension, its commander-in-chief. Posters reminiscent of the late Soviet era appeared across Armenia with slogans conveying the message that the army and the people are one, illustrated by pictures of civilians and military side by side. The quasi-ideology of "nation-army" was used to marginalize and stigmatize government opponents and civil society actors (on the "nation-army concept" Pambukhchyan 2018).

The consolidation of authoritarianism faced resistance. As the political opposition was either deprived of resources, discredited or co-opted into the ruling elite, this resistance took the form of protests led by

civic activists, as in the case of the Electric Yerevan protest in 2015, or of an armed group, as was the case with the Sasna Tsrer crisis. While both Electric Yerevan and Sasna Tsrer seemed to represent major challenges to the regime, both crises were effectively managed quite skilfully by the government, which in the short-term perspective actually seemed to make the government stronger. However, today, in hindsight, it may be argued that both Electric Yerevan and Sasna Tsrer ultimately weakened the regime and paved the way for the 2018 revolution.

### What Destroyed the Armenia Regime

Ironically, the consolidation of the regime that took place during Serzh Sargsyan's second term ultimately helped to bring it down. This consolidation actually deprived the Armenian regime of the flexibility that is often key to the survival of authoritarian regimes. In the absence of other factors that can boost authoritarian regimes (e.g., foreign policy successes, charismatic appeal of a leader, strong ideology, high profits from exporting natural resources, etc.), the Armenian regime had few resources to ensure its survival. At the same time, the Armenian regime never became "hard-line" enough to prevent civil society from continuing to function in Armenia. The regime became consolidated enough to destroy the elements of democracy that might have helped it to survive, but it never became brutal enough to crush all possible sources of resistance. Combined with other factors, such as the lack of socio-economic achievements, mistakes and failures in foreign and security policy, the "hardening" of the regime ultimately weakened it.

The consolidation took place in an environment in which Sargsyan's regime could hardly boast of any major achievements. When it came to economy, Sargsyan's Armenia was never able to completely recover from the 2008–2009 economic crisis. The failure of Armenia–Turkey "football diplomacy" and the abrupt diplomatic U-turn in 2013, when Armenia suddenly rejected the Association Agreement with the EU in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, undermined the credibility of Armenia and Serzh Sargsyan personally on the international arena. Most importantly, "the four-day war" in April 2016 dealt a significant blow to the legitimacy of Serzh Sargsyan and the Armenian political elite in general.

Up until April 2016, a large part of Armenian society was ready to forgive the government for a lack of democracy, difficult socio-economic conditions, and ubiquitous corruption, as long as the government ensured peace and security, as well as the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, the realization that

Azerbaijan might try to use internal turmoil in Armenia was a powerful factor that often prevented Armenian opposition protests from reaching the same level as protests in Georgia or Ukraine. The April war showed that the government was unable to prevent an escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. It also showed that the corruption that had also penetrated the Armenian military was a deadly threat for the country's security. All this undermined the government's ability to play "the Karabakh card" in internal politics. The "nation-army concept" was probably aimed at mitigating fallout from the April war, but, as the events of 2018 showed, it failed to do so.

Another factor that helped the success of the protests was the fact that within the political and business elite in general, not everyone was equally happy about Serzh Sargsyan's de facto third term. Rifts within the ruling elite may include supporters of prime-minister Karen Karapetyan (usually seen in connection to Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan (no relation between the two) or former president Robert Kocharyan. Sargsyan's desire to reach indefinite and unlimited power alienated parts of the ruling elite, which probably helped the protesters to achieve their goal. Additionally, the period of transition from a presidential system to a parliamentary one resulted in a power vacuum that provided an opportunity to strike; this was used by the opposition movement perfectly. Hence, the outcome was that Serzh Sargsyan's regime, which had seemed at its strongest, was removed by a massive peaceful protest movement.

All of these mistakes and weaknesses of the regime became obvious when it faced a new generation of protesters. The revolution of 2018 became possible, among other things, due to a new generation of Armenians, who had not experienced the Soviet system, coming onto the scene. The leaders of the protests were mostly in their 30s, and Pashinyan himself turned 43 in June 2018. Moreover, many activists, including those who started the protests, were even younger, mostly in their 20s; this meant that they not only could not have had any recollection of the Soviet system but also that they could not have experienced the difficult 1990s and the failed protests that had taken place in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, while many middle-aged and older Armenians were sceptical of those protests precisely because they had seen so many unsuccessful protests in their lives, the new generation was free from that psychological burden. However, the most important motivation for the youth was their realization that they had no opportunity of pursuing a successful career under Serzh Sargsyan's corrupt and authoritarian regime.

## Epilogue: Will the Revolution Lead to More Democracy?

In conclusion, the attempt to build a consolidated authoritarian regime in Armenia failed miserably. The defeat of Sargsyan's regime was as sweeping as it was unexpected. All the factors mentioned above seem obvious today in hindsight; however, as late as early 2018, virtually no analysts were able to predict that Sargsyan's regime was nearing its end. The success of the protests was far from obvious even several days before the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan on 23 April 2018.

Today, the question that Armenian analysts and Armenia-watchers abroad often ask is whether the revolution will lead to more democracy or whether it will result in a new hybrid or even authoritarian regime. The history of revolutions is full of examples, when what began as a triumph of democracy eventually led to a new authoritarian, or even totalitarian political regime. Usually, there are three roads that can lead to

an undesirable turn of events: the revenge of the old elite that returns to power, hijacking of the revolutionary agenda by radicals, and, finally, degradation of a democratic movement itself in the event its leaders are corrupted by power and popularity.

None of these scenarios can certainly be excluded completely in Armenia; however, history is also full of examples of mass protests that actually led to the establishment of functioning democracies. The experience of post-Soviet Armenia, where the ruling elites were never able to build a full-scale authoritarian system for three decades also suggests grounds for optimism. Finally, the peaceful nature of the Armenian revolution, also serves as a basis for optimism. The exclusion of violence as a tool for achieving political goals, which had been proclaimed by the leaders of the Velvet Revolution, is the cornerstone of democratic politics, and if Armenian society is able to adhere to it in the future, it will be the best guarantee against a slide into authoritarianism.

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Dr. Mikayel Zolyan is an analyst with the Regional Studies Center (RSC) in Yerevan, specializing in ethnic conflict, politics of nationalism and ethnicity, as well as issues of democratization and nation-building in the post-Soviet context. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the Yerevan State University and an MA in Nationalism Studies from the Central European University in Budapest. Dr. Zolyan currently serves as an Assistant Professor at the Brusov Yerevan State Linguistic University's UNESCO Chair of Democracy and was previously a Lecturer at the Department of International Relations and Political Science at the Russian-Armenian State University in Yerevan.

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