

KEEPING UP WITH ARMENIA: THE KEY DEVELOPMENTS OF THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

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Since the so-called “Velvet Revolution”, Armenians live in a state where ‘the situation has changed’, as Nikol Pashinyan said on the heated days of the revolution. The phrase became famous and was soon widespread among the Armenian society. But after May 8, when Pashinyan was elected Prime-Minister, his government showed that there was really a “new Armenia”, proving the authenticity of this already national idiom by presenting drastic changes in the situation every day. May 8 proclaimed the start of a period full of ups and downs, shocking revelations and post-revolutionary threats.

As proven many times before, the most cumbersome phase of any post-revolutionary period is when the former government has collapsed but the new one is not yet firmly established. In this situation the threat may come from different directions: a counter-revolution by the former regime or radicals within the own camp. In the case of Armenia, the revolution was completely peaceful and the transfer of power was carried out in accordance with constitutional norms. Those tranquilising facts reduced the probability of violent incidents within the country as well as that of an external intervention. Hence, we need to review some key “changes in the situation” to perceive the post-revolutionary processes which surprised not only on the international scene but first and foremost the Armenians themselves.

New chances for civil society: Never before the Armenian civil society has had so many opportunities for their effective functioning. Yet, time will show how they will use that chance. For many years institutions of civil society were often regarded as “grant-eaters” which were accused of thinking only about getting grants from abroad, but are not working for the

sake of development of society. This accusation was mainly spread by the former ruling force and the Armenian society mostly agreed with them. In today’s ‘changed situation’ these institutions have real chances of becoming part of decision-making and problem-solving processes – just like in sustainable democratic states.

New opposition: The former ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which for almost two decades of being the monopolist of the power in the country, has become the only opposition in Armenia. All the other political parties started to support Nikol Pashinyan and his team during the last days of the revolution and continue to do so. This holds true even for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*), which was formerly in coalition with the RPA. But what is more vital: the revolution transformed the parliamentary minority, the *Yelk* (Way out) Alliance, to governmental majority. However, in the National Assembly *Yelk* is still represented with nine seats only. The Republican Party was not able to preserve its parliamentary majority, because the Armenian Revolutionary Federation left the coalition and because party members have left their own faction. Furthermore, the RPA was not involved in the formation of the new government despite the fact that the party has a number of experienced professionals, who could contribute largely to the new government, if given the chance. Even if the new government was hesitating to give RPA members ministerial positions because they feared to be perceived as biased by the Armenian society, they still could have appointed them as vice-

ministers. This could have been a smoother and probably wiser transfer of power. Instead, the Armenian government is now a government of many newcomers, which will take its time to consolidate and develop a sense of how to work best for the sake of the national interest.

Despite all the concerns, Armenia currently has a very proficient and politically experienced opposition. Although the Republican Party has never been in the role of the opposition before, the political knowledge and experience they gained while they were in power help the RPA to notice and point out real or alleged faults of the policies of the new government. Another crucial fact is that despite the disputes within the political elites, the RPA understands the need and importance of acting united with the government in the international arena. This should be regarded as a sign of political maturity which was absent in the case of previous oppositional forces. Armenia needs a strong opposition, which is able to counterbalance and prevent a possible slide into authoritarianism, which is something that often happens to revolutionary governments. But whether it would be the Republican Party or any other party, the new opposition must be free of any criminal-oligarchic networks.

New circuit of critical attitude and distrust in society: However, it should be noted that RPA's activity is largely confined by distrust of society towards their political force and by continual blackmailing, making their work as an opposition quite hard. The harshest blackmailing took place during the revolution, especially when Pashinyan was nominated to be elected Prime-Minister and the Republicans failed his first attempt in the National Assembly. There were protests and terror in front of the homes of some Republican MPs, social networks

and media were full of anti-Republican articles and huge black ribbons were hung all over Yerevan indicating the name of some Republicans and their current age to claim that their time is up.¹ Although that type of behaviour might be understandable during the heated days of the revolution, blackmailing continued afterwards as well even in cases when the Republicans criticism was fully justified, e.g. the remarks on a not very well-designed new program of the government, which was again answered with hostility by the society.

Although blackmailing should not be supported in a time when Armenia wants to built a more democratic, more open and more fair political reality, the distrust of people towards the Republicans roots in the legacies of two decades: 1. Serzh Sargsyan is still the head of the Republican Party of Armenia, and 2. The party has not got rid of all the elements and representatives of the criminal-oligarchic regime. The shocking revelations within the new anti-corruption policy about illicit activities of persons closely related to the Republican Party only heated the distrust towards them, especially when the Republicans at first tried to support their colleagues, especially in the case of Manvel Grigoryan, but after the revelation of shocking evidences against him started calling him a traitor and voted for depriving him of his mandate and immunity as an MP.

New electoral code and preterm elections: The revolution transformed the formerly parliamentary minority – the *Yelk* Alliance – to a governmental majority. However, *Yelk* is still a parliamentary minority, which puts them in a quite fragile situation: they have to rely on other parliamentary forces' support. Hence, Pashinyan and his team long for changing this situation. The closer the preterm parliamentary elections, the greater the fears that the afore-mentioned

¹ Hanging black ribbons in the streets is a mourning tradition in Armenia. Protesters hung these ribbons with the names and ages of some Republican MPs as a sign that they have already died.

forces will limit their support. Actually, the preterm parliamentary elections will put all political forces on 'competition mode' in which they will very presumably emphasise the faults and weaknesses of the current government and proclaim they would run the state better. This has been the classical scenario of former elections in Armenia and formerly targeted the Republican Party. Suffice to note that in many cases political forces having fought against the Republicans during the elections eventually ended in coalition with them. This might happen during the upcoming elections as well: after fighting for their seats in the National Assembly and not reaching the majority, political parties (likely except for the Republicans) would probably again gather around Pashinyan.

However, the main questions are: Will Pashinyan remain the most favourable candidate until the preterm elections, and when will they be held? For Pashinyan's team prompt elections would be best as they still enjoy the reliance of the majority of Armenian voters. For the Republicans and the other political parties that currently support Pashinyan it is more preferable to have some extra time before the elections for giving them the opportunity to wait for failures of Pashinyan's team. At the moment directly criticising Pashinyan will turn to the opposite as the Armenian society greatly sympathises with him. Hence, most criticism addresses members of Pashinyan's team who in turn really give opportunities for getting criticised.

For the time being, the scheduling of preterm elections depends on the adoption of the new electoral code. Its adoption was a central point during the revolution and still remains. The main source of dissatisfaction with the current code lies in the type of electoral system: before the adoption of the new

Constitution in 2015, the members of the National Assembly were elected by both majority and proportional representation systems. However, after adopting the new Constitution the majority system should have left Armenia for good, but surprisingly the electoral code came up with a "rating" system which in fact is a mirror reflection of the majority voting system. Pashinyan was claiming that the preterm elections would be in early autumn if the electoral code would be adopted during the National Assembly's spring-summer session. However, that did not happen yet and the drafting of the electoral code is still ongoing. It has to be noticed positively that all the parliamentary factions agreed to jointly work on it. However, at the end of the day a consensus on a new code has to be found. Moreover, it then shall be viewed by the Venice Commission that recommends a minimum of one year between the adoption of a new electoral code and the elections. A time frame that Armenia is much likely to fall below.

New anti-corruption policy: Though an anti-corruption policy is definitely not a new thing in Armenia, however, novels can be written about its efficiency or – to be more accurate – about its inefficiency. It is already two and a half months that the Armenian society is absorbedly watching a popular reality show which portrays how the National Security Service (NSS) of the Republic of Armenia reveals new shocking footages from luxurious homes, country houses, and business locations of famous members of the former criminal-oligarchic regime. First it started with accusations against the famous Armenian businessman and member of National Assembly (RPA) Samvel Aleksanyan. It was revealed that he was paying only a tiny share of taxes having a special agreement with the former government.

The most shocking revelation of all were the

illicit activities of the MP and *Yerkrpah* ('Defender of the Land') Volunteer Union chairman Manvel Grigoryan. He has always had a reputation of a corrupt local "feudal" lord, and has virtually "owned" the town of Echmiadzin for years. However, nothing has ever been done by the former government to change the situation, as Grigoryan was the member of their team. After the establishment of the new government in Armenia, it turned out that being a retired general of the Armenian Armed Forces, he had continuously put his hands on property and goods meant for the army. The enumeration of what was shown in the footage about the investigation in his palaces is indeed gruesome:

- A large cache of weapons and ammunition, which included more than a dozen anti-tank grenade launchers, 20 hand grenades, more than 40,000 rounds of ammunition of various calibre, explosives, 79 rifles, 39 handguns.

- Dozens of both vintage and new vehicles, motorcycles and snowmobiles, SUVs and an ambulance car, which were designated to be used by the military during the 2016 April War. The vehicles were donated to the Artsakh Defense Army by representatives of the Armenian community in Russia, but Grigoryan had misappropriated them.

- A stockpile of clothing, medicine, donated canned and preserved food. The food discovered in the compound was labelled "For Soldier," indicating that it was a special production specifically for the Defense Ministry that is not sold at stores. Other donated foods was accompanied by letters from kindergarten and school children, specifically earmarked for soldiers during the 2016 April War.

- A private zoo with wild animals, including bears and tigers, which Grigoryan reportedly, at times, allowed to roam in the streets of

Etchmiadzin.

The most outrageous part of this story is the fact that the food labelled "For Soldier" and the food accompanied by letters of Armenian children were used to feed the animals being kept in Grigoryan's Etchmiadzin villa in a makeshift zoo.

Grigoryan's arrest marked the beginning of what could be called the raid of the representatives of the old regime suspected of corruption and ties to criminal circles. Some loud arrests followed Grigoryan's detention. A raid was carried out in the apartment and restaurant belonging to the ex-wife of the former head of ex-president Serzh Sargsyan's guard Vachagan Ghazaryan where more than 1.5 million dollars were found. Eventually he was arrested and charged with concealing property which he, as a state official, had been obliged to declare. He explained that he "forgot" to declare 1.5 billion Armenian drams. Furthermore, checks were conducted in the firm "Security Dream", rumoured to be connected with the brother of the former president, Alexander Sargsyan which resulted in the reveal of 1.5 billion Armenian drams. At the same time, security officials have drawn special attention both to "thieves in law" and to "criminal authorities" which, under the previous regime, were not touched. About 30 people were arrested and although most of them were eventually released, an unequivocal message was sent to the criminal circles.

Particular attention was drawn to the search and detention of another prominent representative of the Republican Party, former MP Arakel Movsisyan known as "Schmeiss" with reference to the German machine gun "Schmeisser". He was released after he "voluntarily" handed over

his weapons, stating in an interview afterwards about the NSS: "They broke into my house very culturally, within the law" and thanked them. This interview of Movsisyan, who at one time was "famous" for promising to "rape" critics of the previous government, is another symbol of the changing situation in Armenia.

Eventually the most surprising but definitely the most awaited detention was the one of 'Lord Voldemort', "he-who-must-not-be-named" and "he-who-cannot-be-touched" – the brother of the former president, Alexander Sargsyan (known in Armenia as Sashik)², because of suspicion of the illegal possession of weapons. Although he was soon released, the fact of detaining a man who was considered almighty and "shellproof" has demonstrated that the new government is determined quite vigorously. People were upset that he was released, but just a couple of days later NSS again "visited" him in his house and arrested him and his son Hayk Sargsyan who was charged with an attempted murder, while his other son, Narek Sargsyan, was declared wanted with allegations of fraud, drugs, illegal weapons, kidnapping and assault.

And the latest, but not the last blast came with the news of arrest of the former president Robert Kocharyan (from 1998 to 2008). Investigators have charged him with an attempt to overthrow the constitutional order during the post-election events in March 2008, when his ally Serzh Sargsyan was elected the next president. The opposition held protest rallies contesting the results of the election. And Kocharyan, who served as a president of Armenia at the time, on March 1, 2008, declared a 20-day state of emergency, with the approval of the Armenian parliament, banning future demonstrations. So in the scope of the criminal investigation into the so-called March 1 events Kocharyan is charged for "illegally mobilizing Armenia's Armed Forces against peaceful

demonstrators", that was qualified as a "breach of constitutional order" during which eight civilians and two police officers were killed. By the way, Nikol Pashinyan was imprisoned in June 2009 on charges of fomenting unrest during those post-election protests while Kocharyan claimed that the accusation were politically motivated and labelled them as vendetta. This is an interesting point, as Pashinyan kept declaring during the revolution and afterwards that there would be no political vendetta in Armenia. So, it is very thrilling to see whether Kocharyan will win or lose the case in court, especially if he will turn to international court.

All these activities have increased the sympathy of society for the new government including the heads of the law enforcement agencies. For years the officials of security agencies and police were perceived with extreme suspicion, but now they have become objects of admiration, especially the head of NSS Arthur Vanetsyan.

In fact, the current activities are more than just a fight against corruption. After the programme of his government was approved by the National Assembly on June 7, Pashinyan knew that his government had all the levers to start demolishing illicit activities and elements. What has happened during the last month can be considered as a victory of the "revolutionary forces" over a criminal oligarchic regime, although yet much should be done for the final triumph. The new government managed to give a significant strike against corruption and weakened the position of the former political elite, but the process needs to be brought to its logical end. It must be taken into account that corruption has grown so much that it has actually penetrated all spheres of the state. It is vital to "cut out that tumour" so that it

²Sashik is the short form of Alexander

would not lead to the collapse of state institutions. Finally, it is of utmost importance that the new authorities do not give in to the temptation to put themselves above the law.

To sum up, much has changed in Armenia and continues to change every day. The main achievement of the revolution can be considered that Armenians finally perceived that they are the ones controlling the future of their country. Greater and more important changes and results are yet to come. Any government that would run the state afterwards will do it under vigilant control of the whole Armenian nation and even the representatives of diaspora. So, the realisation of both opportunity and responsibility that comes along with democracy is hardly going to vanish, as indeed the "situation has changed in the state".