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Armenia’s Unfinished Revolution

ARMINE ISHKANIAN

When Nikol Pashinyan began his march across Armenia on March 31, 2018, launching a protest movement against the country’s longtime leader Serzh Sargsyan, few expected the enormous consequences that would follow. Since the 1991 presidential contest, all subsequent elections in Armenia, both parliamentary and presidential, have been marred by fraud and in some instances by violence. It had become commonly accepted that flawed elections would be followed by boisterous but ultimately futile opposition protests. Many anticipated that this familiar scenario would repeat itself with the April 2018 election of Sargsyan to the premiership.

When Sargsyan took office as prime minister on April 17, he had just completed his second five-year term as president, the constitutional limit. In a bid to extend his rule he pushed through amendments to the constitution in 2015, changing the system of governance from a presidential to a parliamentary regime. Critics accused Sargsyan of imitating tactics used by Russian President Vladimir Putin to maintain power: handpicking a successor for the presidency and switching to the freshly empowered premiership.

Yet just a few weeks after Pashinyan began his march, Sargsyan resigned from office on April 23 and the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which had ruled the nation for two decades, was in disarray. On May 8, by a parliamentary vote of 59 to 42, Pashinyan was elected prime minister. He declared victory for what had come to be known as the Velvet Revolution (after the peaceful protests in 1989 that ended communism in Czechoslovakia) and announced a new era in Armenia’s history.

Pashinyan’s “Take a Step” campaign was a last-ditch attempt to stave off the continuation of Sarg-

syian’s rule. But how was Pashinyan, an opposition parliamentarian with a small group of supporters, able to mobilize a popular movement that brought about Sargsyan’s resignation and ousted an entrenched ruling party? Pashinyan was hardly the first politician to demand regime change in Armenia. Why did his movement succeed where others had failed?

There were three interconnected factors that led to this outcome. First, the presence of a charismatic leader; second, the existence of a politically active constituency; and third, the seizing of a key window of opportunity. Still to be determined is what this dramatic political change means for the country’s development and future trajectory.

ADAPTIVE CHARISMA

Would the revolution have succeeded without Pashinyan’s leadership? It seems highly unlikely. A former newspaper editor, Pashinyan entered politics in 2008 when he campaigned for former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s comeback attempt in a presidential election won by Sargsyan. Pashinyan was later convicted on a charge of inciting “mass disorder” in the March 1 protests that year, when Armenian troops used live ammunition to disperse demonstrators, killing 10 people. In 2009 he began serving a seven-year prison term. He was released in a general amnesty in 2011.

A year later, Pashinyan was elected to the National Assembly as a member of Ter-Petrosyan’s Armenian National Congress (ANC) party, but soon broke away to create his own party, Civil Contract, in December 2013. He was a critic of Sargsyan and the RPA throughout his six-year stint in the assembly, often denouncing the growing corruption and power of the oligarchs, who had emerged during the privatization process after the collapse of the USSR, as they did in Russia. In Armenia, oligarchs control key sectors of the economy such as mining, telecommunications, agriculture (including

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exports and imports), the hospitality industry, and more. A number of them are members of the National Assembly, where they benefit from parliamentary immunity.

When he started his march, Pashinyan had a small but dedicated group of supporters. Yet his demands for Sargsyan's resignation and an end to oligarchic rule, corruption, and impunity resonated with many in the country who had wearied of the status quo. Demonstrating an ability to learn and adapt, Pashinyan and his team utilized new organizing techniques and modes of mobilization that had not previously been used in Armenia.

Instead of holding rallies in a single square, as had been the practice in the past, this time protests and other acts of nonviolent civil disobedience were carried out in a decentralized manner as groups of protesters moved across Yerevan, the capital, closing off streets and bridges, blocking traffic, and creating loud disturbances in front of government offices. Adopting noisemaking techniques from international soccer fans, such as South African vuvuzelas and Icelandic Viking claps, protesters created a carnival-like atmosphere during daytime demonstrations. Every night at 11 p.m., people banged pots and pans for 15 minutes.

Scholars of social movements have argued that emotions are important in every phase and every aspect of protests, which can either help or hinder the mobilization efforts, the strategies, and ultimately the success of political movements. In Armenia, both positive and negative emotions, from hope and joy to anger, were a key factor in drawing people to the uprising and driving its momentum. Taking to the streets and squares in Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, and smaller towns and villages throughout the country, people expressed their anger and discontent with Sargsyan's oligarchic regime. Through these actions Armenian citizens, who had previously been depicted as apathetic, fatalistic, and demoralized, began to hope and to believe in their ability to effect change.

In the heady days of the uprising, some likened Pashinyan to Nelson Mandela, and there were even calls to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Since the revolution, a dozen songs have been written in Pashinyan's honor, and his likeness and catchphrases from his speeches such as *dukhov* (with courage) adorn T-shirts, hats, and a slew of other souvenir items. The adulation has prompted concerns about concentrating power in a single person and misgivings about an

emerging cult of personality around the nation's new leader.

Some fear that without the creation of strong and stable institutions and experienced cadres, the reform process will be in jeopardy: the transformation of society cannot be dependent on one man. Nonetheless, whether Pashinyan is a populist or not—and there are competing definitions of this contested term—it is clear that for now he remains a popular figure and continues to enjoy widespread support at home and in many Armenian diaspora communities across the globe.

POLITICAL AWAKENING

While Pashinyan is undoubtedly a charismatic leader who is able to mobilize and motivate people, it is unlikely that his movement would have succeeded had there not been a politically active constituency ready to take to the streets in the initial days of the revolution. Civil society protests and grassroots activism against the growing authoritarian tendencies of the RPA regime had been growing in Armenia since 2003, and a number of Pashinyan's associates were involved in various causes before turning to politics. After 2010, as the country's political, social, and economic conditions worsened, civic activism began to intensify.

While most of these movements and so-called civic initiatives tended to be focused on single issues—to save one building or park, to stop transport fee hikes, and so forth—their emergence was related to much broader concerns about corruption, the absence of rule of law, the lack of genuine democracy, the rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of political elites to address the needs of ordinary Armenian citizens.

Many of the activists I interviewed between 2011 and 2013 described their involvement as a form of “self-determined” citizenship. They placed great emphasis on independence, solidarity, responsibility, and self-organization. In their understanding, citizenship means that individuals have responsibilities as well as rights within their communities and their country. So they encouraged people to become “owners” of the nation and active subjects, rather than passive and silent bystanders in society who privately complain about problems but do not take any public action to change things.

These young people not only embraced a more empowered identity as citizens, but began to challenge the fear, apathy, and indifference that were characteristic of their parents' and grandparents'

generations. Those who were born in the late 1980s and after are known as the Independence Generation. They did not directly experience life under the Soviet regime and their perspective is more global, shaped by easier access to information.

But experience demonstrated that even the most successful movements of the past few years scored only localized victories which did little to shift the wider political context. While some activists agreed that scaling up their efforts was necessary, there was also a reluctance to engage with established political parties, let alone form alliances with them, out of fear of being co-opted and losing independence and autonomy.

When Pashinyan established the Civil Contract party in 2013, some activists joined in order to take their struggle from the streets to parliament. Many of them are now serving in his government or as lawmakers. But the number of activists was relatively small and the movement would not have succeeded without developing a wider appeal beyond this core group.

Pashinyan and his team skillfully used social media, particularly Facebook and live-streaming technology, to establish a direct connection with the public. The Independence Generation has grown up in an age of ubiquitous social media. The Internet extended its penetration in Armenia from 6 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 50 percent in 2018. As prime minister, Pashinyan continues to use Facebook to present his policy positions, address emerging issues, and answer questions posed by members of the public.

The use of these information and communication technologies may not have been the decisive factor in the revolution's success, but they were adeptly deployed by Pashinyan and his team to circumvent the lack of coverage of the protests by the traditional media outlets. Newspapers, radio, and television were, and in some cases still are, controlled by and deferential to the RPA. Still, while recognizing that the use of Facebook and YouTube allowed Pashinyan and his supporters to organize and mobilize effectively and rapidly, we should be wary of exaggerating the impact of social media, especially when there is evidence that it has also been a tool for provocation and manipulation—a global phenomenon from which Armenia has not been spared.

DECISIVE MOMENTS

The timing of events was also a decisive factor: the protests occurred in the period immediately preceding the most important date in the secular Armenian calendar. April 24, a public holiday, is Armenian Genocide Memorial Day. Each year on that day, hundreds of thousands of people climb a hill in Yerevan to the Tsitsernakaberd monument to lay flowers at the eternal flame that burns in honor of the victims.

Sargsyan, recognizing the rising tensions and potential for unrest, agreed to meet Pashinyan to discuss his demands and try to find a way out of the impasse. Sargsyan proposed a private meeting on the morning of April 22, but Pashinyan insisted that the encounter take place in public at the Marriott Hotel in Yerevan with live media coverage. The meeting lasted just three minutes, ending abruptly when Sargsyan accused Pashinyan of attempting to blackmail the government and asked, "Have you forgotten March 1?" Sargsyan's allusion to the 2008 incident was a public warning to protesters to end the rallies or risk a violent response.

Pashinyan and some of his key allies were detained after the meeting at the Marriott, but Sargsyan's warning did not have the effect he intended. Rather than being

persuaded to abandon the protests, people came out in greater force that evening and on the following day. Facing the swelling crowds and fears that the heightened tensions could lead to unrest on the national holiday, Sargsyan shocked the nation by resigning on April 23. In his resignation letter, he said, "Nikol Pashinyan was right. I was wrong. There are a few solutions to the current situation, but I am not one of them."

A former prime minister, Karen Karapetyan, stepped in as acting prime minister on April 25. Karapetyan initially attempted to present himself as a compromise candidate who could restore stability, but he lacked popular support. Despite his appeals to demonstrators, the protests and acts of civil disobedience not only continued to grow in Yerevan, they also spread to other cities across the country.

When Pashinyan failed to secure the necessary number of votes to become prime minister at a special session of the National Assembly on May 1, he walked to Republic Square and declared May 2 a day of national civil disobedience.

Most diasporic institutions were wary of being seen as interfering in domestic affairs.

Over the next week, strikes, road closures, and other acts of nonviolent protest spread through the country. On May 8 another vote was held and this time Pashinyan was elected prime minister.

Thus, in a matter of weeks, the twenty-year rule of the Republican Party of Armenia came to an abrupt and unexpected end. In the days and weeks that followed, Pashinyan's government launched into action, beginning the more difficult phase of the revolution. It had to consolidate the victory and begin translating promises into political realities and practicable policies.

TAKING ON GRAFT

Addressing corruption had been one of Pashinyan's key objectives and pledges. The revolution unleashed a vast torrent of indignation over past injustices and demands that corrupt oligarchs and politicians, often one and the same, be brought to justice. Immediately after his May 8 victory, small-scale, localized protests broke out in villages, towns, and cities all over the country as people began to enact their own mini-revolutions and express their discontent over corrupt local leaders, demanding their resignations.

This could have quickly spiraled out of control if Pashinyan had not called a halt to the local actions and initiated a centralized anticorruption campaign. He appointed a new chief of police, Valery Osipyan, and instructed him and the head of the National Security Service, Artur Vanetsyan, to launch investigations into suspected cases of corruption. Probes quickly commenced and high-profile arrests soon followed.

The first and most widely publicized of these was the arrest of General Manvel Grigoryan by the National Security Service. Decorated as a war hero in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, Grigoryan was also a member of the National Assembly. In his hometown of Echmiadzin his arrest set off protests by his supporters, who questioned the motives behind his detention. In response, the National Security Service released videos taken during raids on Grigoryan's properties, showing that the general had stockpiled arms and ammunition as well as large quantities of food, medicine, clothing, and letters from the public, all of which had been intended for soldiers. The disgraced general has become the country's foremost symbol of corruption.

Among the arrests that followed, notable suspects included the former president's brother Alexander "Sashik" Sargsyan and his sons, and the former security chief Vachagan Ghazaryan. While these actions were widely welcomed, winning convictions and recovering embezzled money hidden in offshore accounts has proved to be difficult. Moreover, the work of reform is not limited to going after those who have engaged in grand corruption, although that is clearly very important. It is also about changing cultural attitudes. Petty corruption exists at all levels of Armenian society and rooting it out will require time as well as conscious and continuous effort.

TEST CASES

A second key promise made by Pashinyan was to implement the rule of law more broadly. Upon taking office, he criticized the "paralysis" of judges and prosecutors, lamenting their inability to carry out their duties without receiving instructions from above. In a live Facebook interview, Pashinyan insisted that this inertia had to end, demanded that officials do their jobs, and warned that those who failed to act professionally and fairly would be replaced.

An investigation into the violence on March 1, 2008, will be a test case for the rule of law and the justice system in Armenia. The shadow of the events of March 1—or *Marti Mek*, as it is popularly known—has hung over Armenian politics for the past 10 years. On that day, protesters were violently removed from Theater Square in Yerevan in the early morning hours and later at night during clashes in which troops fired live ammunition into crowds, killing 10 people and wounding over 200.

For a decade, secrecy has surrounded these events. No one has ever been brought to justice for the killings. The incident was significant not only in terms of the unprecedented use of force by a post-Soviet Armenian government against its own citizens, but because it brought an abrupt, albeit temporary, halt to the civic activism which had been growing since 2003. There was a revival of activism in 2010, but it was generally focused on environmental, cultural, and social issues, largely leaving aside political causes apart from some notable protests over violence in the army that had led to non-combat deaths of recruits.

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On July 26, 2018, former President Robert Kocharyan was called in for questioning by the Special Investigative Service concerning his role in the March 1 events. He was taken into custody the next day and placed under detention, facing charges of “overthrowing the constitutional order.” He was released August 13 by order of the Court of Appeal, though the investigation continues.

The RPA and its former coalition partner, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, have released statements condemning Kocharyan's arrest, claiming it is a politically motivated “vendetta.” They argue that if Kocharyan must be investigated, so should the first president of independent Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan, for sending in troops to quell protests after the contested elections of 1996. Supporters of the new government counter that this is a legal and not a political matter. They point out that there was a crucial difference between the deployments of troops in 1996 and 2008: no one was killed or permanently injured in 1996.

Kocharyan is not the only person under investigation by the Special Investigative Service for playing a role in the March 1 events. Yuri Khachaturov, the Armenian chief of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, was also charged on July 27 but released on bail the same day. Moscow has raised concerns about political motives behind the case against him.

DIASPORA HOPES

While there is broad agreement on the importance of tackling corruption and implementing the rule of law, questions remain about how Pashinyan's government will address the serious socioeconomic challenges facing the country. At present, one-third of the population (900,000 people) live below the poverty line and the unemployment rate is 18 percent. At least until recently, the population was shrinking due to emigration and a declining birth rate.

In his first speech after becoming prime minister, Pashinyan announced that his government would seek to develop three sectors of the economy: information technology, tourism, and agriculture. Notably missing from this list was the mining sector, which had become increasingly important under the previous two regimes. The government continues to court foreign and diaspora investment in the hope that it will help break the oligarchs' monopolies and drive real growth.

More Armenians live outside Armenia's borders than within them. Now that a long-awaited politi-

cal opening has come, will there be a mass-scale repatriation as occurred in the late 1940s following World War II? And will diaspora investments help fuel the economy? In the past two decades, repatriation failed to grow to the extent needed to counterbalance emigration. Diaspora investments were significant in the 1990s and early 2000s, but more recently declined due to concerns over corruption and the rule of law.

In any assessment of the diaspora's role in the revolution, it is important to consider both individual diaspora members and diasporic institutions such as political parties and community organizations. High-profile members of the diaspora like the singer Serj Tankian and the actress Arsinee Khanjian (from the United States and Canada, respectively) expressed their support for Pashinyan by speaking at his rallies and accompanying him on his visits around the country, but institutions were slower to act.

In general, since the nation gained independence, most diasporic institutions have been reluctant to criticize successive Armenian governments, wary of being seen as interfering in domestic affairs or weakening the stability of the state. Their failure to speak out against corruption, growing poverty and inequality, and human rights violations drew criticism for legitimizing the country's growing authoritarian tendencies. But expecting a unified stance is unreasonable. Diaspora communities are heterogeneous and are also shaped by the wider political contexts of their host countries.

FAR TO GO

Today, when many argue that democracy is in crisis, in decline, dying, or already dead in various parts of the world, the Armenian example can serve as an inspiration. It is far too early to proclaim total victory for democratic forces in Armenia, but their revolution has already inspired activists in the region, particularly in Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. For political and economic elites in these former Soviet countries, Pashinyan's victory poses a threat and it is likely that many would be pleased to see his project fail. Recent experiences in Egypt, Tunisia, and Ukraine demonstrate the challenges that postrevolutionary governments face in consolidating gains and implementing reforms after taking power.

The revolution has already changed many things in Armenia. Most importantly it ended the hopelessness, apathy, and indifference that had come to characterize the post-Soviet period. However,

