

UDC 32.001

IDENTITIES, IDEOLOGIES AND INSTITUTIONS. A Decade of Insight into the Caucasus: 2001-2011. – Alexander Iskandaryan (Ed.) – Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2011. – 232 p.

*A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.*

Edited by Alexander Iskandaryan  
Copy editing by Richard Giragosian and Nina Iskandaryan  
Translations by Aghassi Harutyunyan, Irina Stepanova  
and Nina Iskandaryan  
Cover design by Matit, [www.matit.am](http://www.matit.am)  
Layout by Collage, [www.collage.am](http://www.collage.am)

ISBN 978-99941-2-583-8

© 2011 by the Caucasus Institute

This volume was published with the support of the Think Tank Fund of Open Society Foundations and the Heinrich Boell Foundation

Papers included in this volume reflect the personal opinions of the authors and not those of the Caucasus Institute, its sponsors or any other organizations including ones with which the authors are or were affiliated.

## FEUDAL DEMOCRACY OR DEMOCRATIC FEUDALISM: ARMENIA IN 2008<sup>1</sup>

*By Suren Zolyan<sup>2</sup>*

This analysis in no way purports to address the full breadth of events that took place in Armenia in 2008. Nor does it aim to reproduce any sequence of events. Moreover, we do not touch upon such important topics as foreign policy and socio-economic life. When discussing the country's domestic political situation, we - conscious of various contradictions and the possibility of different interpretations - try to justify and conceptualize our vision of domestic political developments.

Beyond doubt, 2008 was not only one of the most controversial, but also one of the most "unlucky" years in the history of modern Armenia. The year began with a domestic political upheaval and ended with Armenia experiencing the effects of the global economic recession. We have divided the event calendar into four major segments:

1. *December 2007 - February 20, 2008*: This period spanned the conflict-ridden start of the election campaign (although its official launch was January 20) and concluded with the announcement of the election results.
2. *February 21 - March 1, 2008*: This was the shortest and most dramatic period that included the challenge that the supporters of Levon Ter-Petrosyan mounted against the election results and the dispersal of the opposition sit-in by the authorities, eventually leading to mass riots and loss of human life.
3. *March 1 - April 9, 2008*: This period included the imposition of a state of emergency, arrests of opposition supporters on charges of organizing mass unrest and attempting to seize power. This was the last month in the presidency of Robert Kocharyan, culminating in the transfer of power to Serzh Sargsyan.
4. *April 9, 2008 - January 27, 2009*: The period includes Serzh Sargsyan's inauguration; the collapse of the Kocharyan-Sargsyan tandem; the struggle for the "right" interpretation of the "events of March 1" and its official "evaluation" by the Par-

---

1 This paper was published by the Caucasus Institute in Russian as: "Armeniya v 2008 g.: feodalnaya demokratiya ili demokraticheskiy feudalizm?" *Kavkaz – 2008. Yezhegodnik Instituta Kavkaza*. ("Armenia in 2008: Feudal Democracy or Democratic Feudalism?" *Caucasus 2008. CI Yearbook*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: CI, 2010 (in Russian). – Pp.24-42.

2 The author has been the Rector of the Brusov State Linguistic University, Yerevan since 1997.

liamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) that put an end to the hopes of the opposition for early presidential and parliamentary elections and established a regime of “semi-archy.” This date may be considered the end of the protracted election campaign.

As we can see, 2008 consisted of various stages of the presidential election that began much earlier and ended much later than their official dates. We believe that this process was of defining importance, and we, therefore, focus on clarifying its logic.

Comparing how different post-Soviet countries address the key issue typical for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - the transfer of power from one **person** to another **person** - can help understand the political process that unfolded in Armenia in 2008. In fact, party, ideological and corporate factors, even if present, clearly play a secondary if not a decorative role. From this standpoint, post-Soviet states may be divided into two groups, depending on whether presidential powers are limited to two terms, or whether there are no restrictions on the possibility for re-election. The first group includes Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and the second consists of Belarus, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (the latter two are included in this group with minor reservations). As one can see, this categorization is similar to another one, the division of the CIS into zones of possible “color revolutions” and zones of so-called “stability.” Russia, as usual, holds a special place. Although presidential powers in that country are limited to two terms, in fact, these two terms are not exhausting. The established practice is that the incumbent president appoints a successor at the end of his second term.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, there is a certain difference between the current situation in Russia and the preceding one; before, the acting president retired, entrusting his “family” to his young protégé, while the present situation gives political scientists grounds to talk about a senior czar-prime minister and a junior czar-president, or, to put it in more neutral terms, about “tandemocracy.”

This, no doubt, is due to the authoritarian nature of the system in which the continuity of power inevitably becomes personalized because personal factors determine that very power. Under authoritarian rule, the person in charge of the system becomes so important that the system merges with the individual and the population identifies the system with the person. Thus, Yeltsin’s Russia, Putin’s Russia or Gorbachev’s Soviet Union and Brezhnev’s Soviet Union are not only completely

---

3 See for example: Kholodkovsky, Kirill G. “O politicheskoy sisteme sovremennoy Rossii.” (“On the political system of modern Russia”) *Polis*, № 2, 2009 (in Russian). – P.16.

different symbols, but also different systems and even epochs. As for the current situation in Russia, the personal factor today is not so strong as to make it impossible to change the government by means of elections, similar to the second group of countries, but it is significant enough for the so-called *succession* to be determined **personally** by the current president and to consist in selecting a certain **individual** – a candidate who for one reason or another is believed to be the most acceptable to head the political elite. Afterwards, the party elections followed by the popular election essentially boil down to a plebiscite (as in a referendum to extend presidential powers or to remove restrictions on their terms), giving birth to a sophisticated term, *plebiscitary Caesarism*.

The situation that unfolded by 2008 hinted that in all probability, Armenia was destined to repeat the Russian scenario, given the great similarity of the two countries' political and legal systems and the political culture. Already in 2007, it became evident that Armenia, at least at that stage, would not opt for the re-election of its incumbent president for a third term. It is worth recalling that the main debates between the government and the opposition at the time when the constitution was being amended centered not on the amendments themselves, but on whether the constitution was to be considered a new one or a "renewed" one. The bottom line was whether the amended constitution would open up a legal option for the nomination of the incumbent president for another term.

The opponents' favorite topic were not the amendments themselves, but the fact that by initiating a referendum on amendments to the constitution, President Robert Kocharyan was ostensibly preparing for himself a legal foothold to be nominated for a third term. This happened both before and after the amendments, despite repeated statements by Kocharyan and his entourage that the amended constitution could not be considered a new constitution. On top of this, both the old and the new "editions" of the constitution limited presidential powers to two terms only. It is also worth noting that before this debate surfaced, some sort of precedent had been set by the then Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) President Arkady Ghukasyan; as the NKR Constitution was adopted only in 2006, the question of the presidency was a subject of some legal ambiguity there.<sup>4</sup> There were a series of proposals on

---

4 Compare: "... the transitional provisions of the 2006 Constitution of the Nagorno-Karabakh did not hold him back from running for a third and a fourth term. But Ghukasyan preferred to act in line with the old legislation, under which he was elected to the presidency, and which limited his stay in office to ten years". Petrosyan, David. "Nepriznanye gosudarstva Yuzhnogo Kavkaza." *Kavkaz – 2007. Yezhegodnik Instituta Kavkaza* ("The unrecognized states of the South Caucasus." *Caucasus 2007: CI Yearbook*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2009 (in Russian). – P. 54.

the nomination of Arkady Ghukasyan for a new term, given especially the constant threat from Azerbaijan to the existence of Karabakh that could be considered quite a strong argument in favor of authoritarianism. However, Ghukasyan said that his nomination for a second term would be a departure from democracy building in Nagorno-Karabakh, and would be against the principles of rule of law.

In this respect, 2007 was defining for Armenia; if not permanently, then at least for the foreseeable future, the possibility for the re-election of the president for more than two terms is ruled out in Armenia. At the same time, the constitutional amendments adopted by the referendum called for a fairly significant redistribution of power, primarily transmission of a substantial part of the powers of the president to the prime minister. This gave grounds to the argument that Armenia was going for the “Russian option”: Robert Kocharyan was going to be a “strong” prime minister under the new president. Already since 2003, i.e. since the previous presidential elections, the main question of the political discourse had been: “Who comes *after* Kocharyan?” The question was formulated in both “pro-government” and “opposition” terms: “Who, if not Kocharyan?” and “Anyone but Kocharyan!” The confrontation of these two slogans defined the logic of the 2003 presidential elections, but their momentum spread to subsequent years. Surprisingly, the seemingly simple question of “Who *instead of* Kocharyan” was not raised. Until the end of 2008, however, this question seemed to be just a rhetorical one.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, unlike Russia where by the end of their second terms, both Yeltsin and Putin chose young and little-known politicians to succeed them, in Armenia the name of the successor was not a secret. The choice was only made by the incumbent president to some extent; it was, rather, predetermined - if not imposed - by the successor and the system at large. The successor was Serzh Sargsyan. At that time, he was holding the post of prime minister and was the chairman of the Republican

---

5 For details see my paper: Zolyan, Suren. “Eto sladkoe slovo – stabilnost. Armenia v 2004 g.” *Kavkaz – 2004. Yezhegodnik Kavkazskogo Instituta SMI* (“That sweet word – stability. Armenia in 2004.” *Caucasus – 2004: CMI Yearbook*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Caucasus Media Institute, 2006 (in Russian). – Pp. 87-103. In this paper, I wrote that “this is noticeable even in the language they use – for example, they debate intensely the question of who will succeed Kocharyan and who will replace Kocharyan. The question of “Who instead of Kocharyan?” is under taboo, because pro-government forces believe that the new president will be from their camp and, therefore, by virtue of his loyalty, will enjoy the support of this president; as for the opposition, they do not discuss any specific answer to the question “Who instead of Kocharyan?” in order not to cause a split in the opposition camp. The only question they discuss – and that they do at best in passing – is the question of which party will get a majority in the parliament in 2007. When the media focuses on the parliamentary elections in 2007, it does only in relation to how those elections will impact the 2008 presidential race”. – Op. cit., p.93.

Party of Armenia. The results of the 2007 parliamentary elections left no alternatives to the pro-government camp. Serzh Sargsyan, who became the chairman of the Republican Party only on the eve of the elections, ensured the party's dominance in the parliament. Another factor - very important for the authoritarian system - was at play in favor of Serzh Sargsyan. I am referring to the personality factor. From their very first steps in politics, as informal leaders of the Karabakh movement in Nagorno-Karabakh, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan - both well known politicians of roughly equal stature - acted together all the while. Formed back in 1988, the "tandem" had ever since functioned coherently and effectively in widely varying, sometimes difficult situations.

In this tandem, Kocharyan had always played the role of the forward, but now it was presumed that Sargsyan was going to take the lead. Meanwhile, the government would, in essence, remain the same both system-wise and staff-wise. Of course, it is extremely difficult to produce quantitative data, but, obviously, many of those who voted for Serzh Sargsyan voted for this "bunch," viewing it as continuation of slow but steady development. It is also clear that many voted against it, believing Serzh Sargsyan to be a pledge of the continued strengthening of the authoritarian system, and seeing in his defeat an opportunity for bringing out the democratic elements in Armenia's political system.<sup>6</sup>

However, neither one nor the other, and not even the third happened. For several reasons, an altogether different model worked: due to the inability of the new team to retain the structure built by Kocharyan, the centralized authoritarian system gave way to fragmentation of power reminiscent of feudal atomism.

Back in his time, Karl Marx insightfully observed, "Hegel says somewhere that all great world-historical events and personalities appear, so to speak, twice. He for-

---

6 Note that there is another point of view stressing that the analogy with the situation in Russia is valid only at a superficial level, whereas, in fact, it does not exist. According to Alexander Iskandaryan, "...the difference here is a fundamental one: till the end of his second term Putin was in full control of the parliamentary coalition, the business elites, and the executive structures. Had he wished so, he could have appointed anyone ... Kocharyan did not have any possibility to appoint. Sargsyan won the status of a "successor" by means of a political struggle, succeeding in leading the party of power and winning a majority in the parliament". See: Iskandaryan, Alexander. "Armenia v 2007 g.: publichnost protiv elitnosti." *Kavkaz – 2007. Yezhegodnik Instituta Kavkaza* ("Armenia – 2007: Publicity vs. elitism." *Caucasus – 2007. CI Yearbook*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2009 (in Russian). – P. 29. But even with this interpretation, one has to cite an important clarification, mentioned by Iskandaryan, that "the society did not apprehend Kocharyan and Sargsyan as competitors, but only as members of the same nomenclature, who were passing on the baton from one to the other in order to preserve the power of this nomenclature ..." – Ibid.

got to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (*The Eighteenth of Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

The imposition of a state of emergency after the “events of March 1” created parallels with 1996, when Levon Ter-Petrosyan introduced a state of emergency after his declared victory. Neither the events that occurred in 1995-1996 and 2008 nor their participants qualify as “world-historical.” Of course, given the loss of life and the great harm done to the society and the country, they cannot be considered a farce. Still, one cannot help seeing, if not a comic element, then at least irony in that the politician who created the system of electoral fraud, political repression and suppression of popular discontent, himself became a victim of that system. The punishment did not come in the form of a legal sentence: the Armenian state turned out to be incapable of that. More adequately to the extent of social development in Armenia, it took the shape of the famous parable, “what goes around, comes around.”

However, the mirror image of the 1996 situation is more serious and more tragic than a confirmation of a proverbial wisdom. Unfortunately, the parallels extend much deeper. What matters is not the external resemblance between the events (the same faces, the state of emergency, military in the streets), but the return to the archaic paradigm that condemns the society and the state to regress to a certain political regime peculiar to Armenia. I am referring to the form of *loose authoritarianism* that has become typical for the Armenian political culture and that kind of *rolls into feudalism and is accompanied by fragmentation of the government and the privatization of its institutions, deliberate demoralization of the society, cynicism and phrase-mongering instead of political programs, and the provincialization of public policy institutions.*

On the surface, this may look like decentralization and delegation of authority (and is sometimes interpreted that way by international experts). However, whereas in democratic systems this assumes delegation of responsibility, in Armenia this turns into refusal to accept responsibility. Of course, one could argue at length about the adequacy of the power hierarchy on which the authoritarian political system relies, and whether any other models could be proposed. In any case, the feudal fragmentation of power with its underlying principle of *my lord's lord in not my lord*, that emerged in the mid-1990s and is reproduced today, cannot be considered a viable and reasonable alternative. When it comes to the enforcement of state policies, this leads to interruptions in the chain between decision-makers and performers, to inconsistencies, and, in some cases, to irresponsibility and self-will in middle and lower ranks of the administrative system (due to lack of data, we refrain from discussing the functioning of shadow structures that can become the true govern-

ment once official structures fail to act. They usually have a system of unquestioned centralized power typical for security bodies and the mafia).

The regime of Levon Ter-Petrosyan never recovered from its 1996 “victory.” Whereas before that, in 1993-1996, Ter-Petrosyan was able to control the situation and maintain his personal power using security institutions and, more importantly, paramilitary units, in 1997, that regime collapsed and Ter-Petrosyan lost control over his environment. A system of feudal princelings emerged, neither of whom succumbed to their patron, and each of whom believed that the president owed his presidency to him. Thus, the president became a hostage, dependent on the whims of his courtiers. Soon thereafter, this resulted in a systemic crisis and an early exit of Levon Ter-Petrosyan from the presidency (in January 1998). Thus, Ter-Petrosyan’s victory resulted in the defeat of the regime that he had created.

In February 2009, Levon Ter-Petrosyan lost, but, paradoxically, within a year, the political paradigm that he had “planted” years ago won again (which made Ter-Petrosyan’s return to power unnecessary). The paradigm did not make it overnight, nor did it win without a struggle, however short-lived. Meanwhile, at the end of February 2008, immediately after the elections, there was an attempt to chart an alternative way. The elections highlighted the fact that the tightening of the authoritarian “vertical of power” does not release the tension in the society; on the contrary, it exacerbates the crisis of social justice and solidarity. Socio-economic problems do not receive proper solutions, and even the economic growth does not reduce the tension; what is more, it increases the gap between the rich minority and the deprived majority.

Without doubt, the awareness of this situation pre-determined the change in the program of the newly elected president. The period of Serzh Sargsyan’s ascent to the office was a period of attempts to transform the existing regime through democratic means. In this regard, his policy speech of February 26 is particularly revealing.<sup>7</sup> Two major themes stand out in that speech:

1. *the idea of unity and of overcoming the existing differences;*
2. *respect for rights and freedoms, and in the first place the right of people to form their government through elections.*

These points were reiterated four times in different contexts as the basic principle of the state and the society. The practical step aiming at ensuring the consolidation of the public was rather effective: the president invited all his competitors, i.e. all presidential candidates, to enter into a coalition and develop a joint program of

---

<sup>7</sup> *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun*, 27.02.2008.

action. He also made a gesture towards the opposition electorate, promising them to get rid of the established oligarchic system and the “*khmbapets*” (literally “chieftains”), i.e. the various princelings, usually walking around with their armed bodyguards, causing great public outrage, if not hate.

The government’s program of unification was in strong contrast to Ter-Petrosyan’s confrontational narratives. However, Sargsyan’s speech did not produce the calculated effect. A particularly bad framework was chosen for voicing those serious ideas: a nationwide meeting with attendees brought in from the regions on the orders of regional authorities. Sargsyan’s short and very “un-rally” style speech, combined with the lack of entertainment, singing or dancing that have, alas, become typical for Armenian rallies, caused a significant number of participants to move over immediately to a neighboring area where Levon Ter-Petrosyan was holding his permanent rally, giving it new impetus. Instead of unity, the confrontation only intensified. It was a harsh lesson: social solidarity is achieved by deeds, not clumsy bureaucratic moves.

Following the “events of March 1” (see below), the authorities made another attempt at formulating a policy for reforming the system and resolving the crisis. The policy envisaged overcoming the polarization of society by addressing economic and social problems. The government’s program was voiced by newly appointed Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan in parliament at the time of the government’s confirmation hearings.<sup>8</sup> Tigran Sargsyan was quite accurate in pinpointing the problems inherited by the new authorities: *an unhealthy moral and psychological situation, a divided society, a significant share of shadow economy, corruption, arbitrariness of officials, unequal conditions of competition, poverty, etc.*

Tigran Sargsyan suggested responding to these challenges systematically and identifying solutions based on the following principles:

1. *In a rapidly changing world, it is necessary to respond to changes rapidly;*
2. *Protect Armenia against negative external influences and, at the same time, create conditions for the kind of co-operation that is desirable for us;*
3. *Knowledge-based society and economy;*
4. *Safeguarding the rights and freedoms of people.*

Had this program been fulfilled, it would have led to a fundamental change in the political regime in Armenia and laid the foundation of social consensus. However, it required entering into conflict with the existing system at a very awkward time of confrontation with the proponents of regime change who rejected the very possibil-

---

8 *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun*, 30.04. 2008.

ity of dialogue. After all, authorities did not dare take that step. The prime minister's slogan, "Strong universities, strong state," remained just a slogan. The slogan that became reality was "Strong local lords, weak state". Having failed to find support within the society, which was itself so weakened by the crisis as to be in need of long-term rehabilitation, the central government made a tacit deal with the local lords, including both formal and informal ones. Those were precisely the people whom the president earlier called *khmbapets* and who stood to benefit from the confrontation between the government and the opposition. The very first clashes between the central government and the local lords (including the strained relations between the prime minister and the governor of Syunik region, as well as the high-profile case of the brutal murder at the "Odnoklassniki" café, implicating the bodyguards of one of the oligarchs), planned as demonstrative steps towards restoring order, turned into their opposite, i.e. a show of the impunity of local lords.

We can see the underlying similarity between the events of 1996 and 2008 in that in both cases authoritarianism was dealt a powerful blow, but its weakening under these circumstances does not lead to its transformation into a democratic mechanism, and creates a feudal mosaic; the legislation on local self-government, adjusted to the requirements of the Council of Europe, contributed to this situation, together with the existing parochial and clan relationships.<sup>9</sup> The loose authoritarianism established at the center was perfectly complemented by electoral feudalism in the field, when the nation itself chooses its feudal lord.<sup>10</sup> The elections to local self-government bodies, held in the late summer and early autumn of 2008, clearly demonstrated who actually wields power in the regions. In the current system, the most important feature of democracy - the formation of government through elections - becomes a ritual legitimizing the already established formal and informal hierarchy. The timid attempts of the central government to somehow make a difference by supporting candidates who competed against the most compromised of

---

9 The implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government is a rather good example of how a formally honored postmodern project can lead to deep archaization. In this case, the meaningful idea of the "Europe of the Regions," resembling a complex medieval system, is based on the delegation of powers and responsibility to local authorities and communities. The Charter's formal implementation in Armenia yields the opposite results, i.e. break-up of links, suppression of people's rights by their elected leader, disregard towards the public interest and restoration of the clan organization of the commune.

10 For details on "electoral feudalism," see Zolyan, Suren. "Instituty zapadnoi demokratii i armyanskie realii." *Sravnitelnoe konstitutsionnoe obozrenie* ("Institutes of Western democracy and the Armenian reality." *Comparative Constitutional Review*). – Moscow: Institute of Law and Public Policy. – № 2 (59), 2007 (in Russian). – P.132

local lords were a failure. It is significant that people from the criminal world were put forward as alternatives to the existing lords: others could achieve little under those circumstances. Of course, the idea of recruiting an “enlightened” bandit to sort things out is too exotic to be successful, but it is revealing nonetheless. Needless to say, the local elections and the post-electoral processes led to skirmishes, beatings, bribes and blackmail. Whereas the previous authoritarian regime avoided direct clashes with criminalized local elites, yet somehow managed to keep them in check, under the new conditions this control was lost. The news that *khmbapets* and warlords would no longer enjoy power in Armenia turned out to be mere wishful thinking.

The attempts to attack the financial and economic power of the new feudal lords - the shadow economy - were similarly unsuccessful. The prime minister’s fight against the “shadow” very soon came to resemble the same kind of fight in boxing - that is, a training simulation of a fight without an opponent. But unlike boxing, in which such a fight is harmless, real losses surfaced soon. The government’s purpose was to establish control over trade fairs/markets - the “black holes” controlled by a group of oligarchs engaged in the business of wholesale trade. But the latter managed to divert the fight to a different direction; in fact, the government tightened control over medium and small businesses that had been in a rather sorry state even before that.

Even though the political activities of Ter-Petrosyan and his Armenian National Congress (ANC) were gradually eroding, his political agenda was in demand, replacing the declared but never implemented policy of systemic reforms of the political and economic paradigm. The symptoms of this can be picked up in the fact that the authorities were going along with the information/PR and foreign policy agenda, dictated by the supporters of the Congress. Above all, this related to the assessment of the election results and the events of March 1, 2008. Levon Ter-Petrosyan and his propaganda machine managed to turn his defeat in the election into a PR victory; having abandoned arguing his case properly before the Armenian Constitutional Court, he emphasized statements about the illegitimacy of the existing government, which was also a way of justifying his claims to victory in the presidential elections. The logic of the paradox is that in 1996 he was unable to convince even his closest associates of his declared victory. At present, the further away from the 2008 elections, the higher results are attributed to Ter-Petrosyan (his closest associate Levon Zurabyan even went so far as to suggest that Ter-Petrosyan won 75 percent of the poll). This is logical: the greater the progress of the regime once formed by him, the higher the percentages that he is entitled to lay claims to.

The interpretation of the “events of March 1” should be considered another important PR and, also, political and legal victory for Ter-Petrosyan supporters. In this matter, a kind of coalition has formed that blocks any information which does not fit into the script of “good rebels” and “evil punishers.” The taboo on unbiased coverage of the events is quite explicable: none of the actors determining the present information policy would benefit from admitting that for several hours, power was up for grabs; that the police lost control of the situation and even of their own units; and that the opposition lost control over its “extras,” especially ones mobilized from suburbs and villages near Yerevan. Police brutality coupled with misinformation, actively disseminated by Ter-Petrosyan’s associates, about hundreds of casualties including children, generated a mass psychosis, later deliberately pumped up, leading to riots and (possibly spontaneous) pogroms. Levon Ter-Petrosyan who had earlier declared a “national liberation struggle to a victorious end” preferred to sit and wait at his residence, while his emissaries apparently did not have any meaningful program of action, except for a constant whip-up of tension, which ultimately resulted in the pogroms. The police, who in the morning of March 1, 2008 exacerbated the situation by their unjustified cruelty (including towards random passers-by), fled towards the evening, showing that under extreme circumstances the police are unable even to ensure their own safety to say nothing of “law and order.” Back in his time, Garegin Nzhdeh said that looters can be daring thieves but never brave soldiers. For those police officers who are accustomed to beating the defenseless and engaging in extortion, there is a more suitable [Russian] proverb: “A bully is always a coward.” The army had to assume atypical functions, i.e. maintaining public order. And unlike 1996, the army did its job without “plainclothes Commissars” or any interference in the life of the city. By virtue of its symbolic presence, the army helped bring life back to normal. The army was perhaps the only institution that acted in a dignified and adequate manner.

The question of who is to blame for the “events of March 1” was constantly discussed throughout the subsequent months of 2008, and there is still no clear answer. The opposition demanded that perpetrators be named, while the authorities either kept mum or gave rather obscure explanations, never voiced by any of the people at the top. It is noteworthy that another, equally important, question, “who saved Yerevan, and possibly even Armenia on that tragic night, who prevented developments fraught with more serious consequences?” has not been answered either. Until now that person has not been named... Strange as it may seem, it is quite possible that there was no such actor: the crowd, devoid of a leader, exhausted its energies in meaningless riots. The shock that dawned next morning brought to

naught the calculations of those radicals who had hoped that the bloodshed of the previous night would raise a new wave of protests, which the authorities would not be able to control.

As for the authorities, they, in turn, failed to substantiate their original version of planned mass riots and the attempts to seize power. One can only speculate that either as a result of the taboo on a significant portion of information, or due to the clumsy work of investigators, the charges brought against the arrested collapsed in the courts, and the story of peaceful thugs brutally attacked by the police was the only one left. From the very beginning, Levon Ter-Petrossyan's supporters managed to impose their version of events on international organizations and the mass media, and had it return to Armenia, but this time not as their own interpretation, but as the opinion of the international community. As for the authorities, their position turned out to be extremely inconsistent: inside the country, the authorities issued criminal accusations against the opposition, making dialogue impossible despite a number of symbolic steps (such as the prime minister's participation in the congress of anti-government forces). At the same time, the authorities were on the defensive in the international arena and acted as advocates of negotiation and compromise. This duality could not last long: soon the authorities had to move from attack to defense in the domestic arena too and had to go from charges to excuses or repentance, Dostoevsky style (in the vein that we are all guilty, each of us bears our share of responsibility).

As we can see, Levon Ter-Petrossyan's defeat at the elections did not prevent the political paradigm that he had once created from winning, through the imposition of its value system, and thus, also from establishing a mechanism (and ideology) of control. The rather modest results received by Ter-Petrossyan and the Armenian National Congress (ANC) under his leadership in the next year's (2009) elections to the city council of Yerevan should be ascribed to his personal account but should not obscure the fact that his stated agenda and its main features remained in demand and have been becoming reality.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to limit the analysis of the situation in 2008 to a description of the confrontation between forces that won or lost the elections on February 20, 2008. Let us ask ourselves a seditious question: are there any forces in the society today able to resist this paradigm? And furthermore, is it maybe the form of organization that is most suited to the condition of the Armenian society today, a condition that emerged after the forced emigration (in large part, of well-educated and energetic people of a creatively active age) after years of decline in education, culture, the establishment of a conglomerate of political cynicism and oligarchic

economy? Sadly, the vicious circle that emerged back in the 1990s is increasingly gaining more inertial force and resistance: *the electoral feudalism breeds the feudal electorate*, and, at the same time, *the feudal electorate regularly reproduces the electoral feudalism (the rule of elected feudal lords)*. This is manifested most clearly in institutions of local self-government, but the process of feudalization does not only possess a spatial-temporal dimension. Less visible, but more dangerous is its spread within the society at large. It is generally accepted that the antidote to ineffective government is the civil society.

Can we consider the society that has taken shape in Armenia a civil one?<sup>11</sup> From a formal point of view, it exists, of course. We can point to thousands of NGOs, dozens of parties, hundreds of formally independent media, etc. But in reality, only the trappings of a civil society are present, and they serve exactly the opposite purpose: even greater fragmentation and feudalism.

Of course, there is a significant difference between feudalization of the government and fragmentation of the society. With regard to the organization of the society, one should not be talking about the fragmentation of government but rather about the fragmentation of interests, which may be even more dangerous: it leads to a state of “war of all against all,” and that is precisely what Hobbes referred to as the “natural state.” “Civil society,” according to the British philosopher, forms in the process of emerging from this “natural” state, through the introduction of mechanisms for the harmonization of interests. Unfortunately, Armenia is undergoing quite the opposite process: the formal civil society is increasingly taking on the features of the natural one. Privatization came first. It was followed by feudalization and (in some cases - for instance, party building) by criminalization of what the supposed civil society institutions. A characteristic feature of this system is that inter- and intra-clan struggles come to replace political processes, often spilling into outright intriguing, but sometimes going over into the criminal field. Therefore, when interests clash, they rarely lead to reconciliation; confrontational solutions are the norm (“might is right”). Parties and nongovernmental organizations, too, in large part, function as big or small fiefdoms serving their leader; they are amenable not to the society, but to their grantor, irrespective of whether it is a public authority, a domestic tycoon or an international cash-cow. This dependency is naturally complemented by their omnipotence in their feud.

---

11 A Ph.D. thesis on the Armenian parliament as an institution of civil society was once defended at Yerevan State University. This is not just an indicator of qualifications of Armenian political scientists, but also an indication that the concept of civil society – in terms of content – though often used, remains unclear even to experts, not to speak of citizens.

The failure of the non-governmental sector, or what is referred to as civil society institutions, is particularly evident in the case of the media (not because of higher extent of degeneracy, but because of greater visibility). It is quite symbolic that all the supposedly independent TV channels are running soap operas that depict with great empathy the everyday life of gangsters, their toils and worries (their *Bitter Happiness*, as one of the most popular shows is called). This is symbolic because journalism has become part of the criminal world, a kind of petty racketeering, a weapon of extortion and blackmail. Various press clubs and committees protecting the rights of journalists have over time turned into lobbyists for the right to extortion and irresponsibility. In any case, recent discussions of possible amendments to the existing law were restricted only to this topic, leaving aside (as, supposedly, something contradicting the freedom of speech) such serious issues as objectivity, media independence, professionalism, quality of journalistic products, and journalists' ethics.

What is the way out of this situation? Describing the situation in Armenia in 2004, we offered two scenarios: "in sum, we can identify contrasting scenarios for future developments. The pessimistic scenario assumes the exacerbation of the crisis phenomena that have not been properly addressed; as a result of mass protests, these could lead to dictatorship, or disintegration of state power and its handover to regional or departmental "princelings." An optimistic approach, in contrast, assumes that the stability will allow taking steps to lower socio-economic tensions and strengthen the civil society and social cohesion. This is crucial for solving Armenia's foreign policy issues, particularly the Karabakh problem."<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, we see that the pessimistic scenario was the one that came true - thank God, not fully - and that the grounds for optimism have diminished. Moreover, while earlier it was possible to somehow continue in the spirit of the past, the situation has now changed dramatically. The push for innovation induced by the global economic recession, on one hand, and the changing global and regional political layout (of which Barack Obama's election was a symptom), on the other, require a system for the organization and functioning of the state and society that is much more flexible than the existing one.

Shall we wait, then, for the situation to reach a critical point, as it did in 1996 - 1997?

Clearly, measures must be taken, and there is no point in inventing anything new

---

12 Zolyan, Suren. "Eto sladkoe slovo – stabilnost. Armenia v 2004 g." *Kavkaz – 2004. Yezhegodnik Kavkazskogo Instituta SMI* ("That Sweet Word – "Stability." Armenia in 2004." *Caucasus 2004. CI Yearbook*). Ed. by Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: CI, 2006 (in Russian). – P.102

here: it is enough to recall the previously quoted policy statements by the president and the prime minister. Notably, these provisions were laid out with great foresight even before the onset of the global economic recession, so they have now become even timelier. So, the only thing that remains to be done is to implement them. There is no reason to doubt a sincere desire to do so, the question is, what forces (if any) are ready to support them...

As for the eradication of the electoral feudalism and the change of regime in general, there is no need to invent anything original in this realm either. The history of mankind has - long ago - answered the question of which political and legal mechanisms are needed to overcome the feudal system. These mechanisms are laid down not only in history books but also in both the Constitution and the Penal Code of the Republic of Armenia. They consist in strict adherence to the following constitutional principles:

1. Branches of the government (executive, legislative and judicial) must be separated and must not be involved, either directly or indirectly, in business;
2. Politics and business must not be associated with the criminal world; as business is closely linked with crime, it would seem that the separation of politics from business can help solve this problem relatively easily.

Unfortunately, these two provisions are not as simple as they may appear at first glance. They contain a contradiction: the system can only be changed by a strong government, in cooperation with a consolidated and socially conscious society. But today's reality is such that people ask: what good is a government which is not associated with either business or criminals? In the opinion of most Armenians, a government like that would be useless when it comes to politics; all it may be good for is entertaining people with televised speeches or greeting foreign visitors at the airport.

Solutions may appear simple and obvious, but no matter how good they sound in conferences or television debates, hardly anyone in their right mind would insist that their implementation is simple and feasible in the near future. During one of his travels, Jonathan Swift's famous character, Gulliver, visits an academy where he meets, among others, political scientists. That meeting makes a depressing impression on Gulliver:

*"In the school of political projectors, I was but ill entertained; the professors appearing, in my judgment, wholly out of their senses, which is a scene that never fails to make me melancholy. These unhappy people were proposing schemes for persuading monarchs to choose favourites upon the score of their wisdom, capacity, and virtue; of teaching ministers to consult the public good; of rewarding merit, great abilities, eminent services; of*

*instructing princes to know their true interest, by placing it on the same foundation with that of their people; of choosing for employments persons qualified to exercise them, with many other wild, impossible chimeras, that never entered before into the heart of man to conceive; and confirmed in me the old observation, "that there is nothing so extravagant and irrational, which some philosophers have not maintained for truth."<sup>13</sup>*

---

13 Jonathan Swift. *Gulliver's Travels*. Part III, Chapter VI.