



PROJECT MUSE®

The Velvet Revolution in Armenia: How to Lose Power in Two Weeks

Alexander Iskandaryan

Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization, Volume 26, Number 4, Fall 2018, pp. 465-482 (Article)

Published by Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/707882>

THE VELVET REVOLUTION IN ARMENIA: HOW TO LOSE POWER IN TWO WEEKS

ALEXANDER ISKANDARYAN
CAUCASUS INSTITUTE, YEREVAN

Abstract: The 2018 power transition in Armenia, known as the Velvet Revolution, took place roughly a year after the 2017 parliamentary election, in which the only opposition bloc of three parties—including the Civil Contract Party, led by Nikol Pashinyan, the future revolutionary leader— won just over 7% of the vote. The newly elected opposition MPs did not dispute the results of the election, but just a year later, mass protests toppled the regime in two weeks and Pashinyan became the new head of state. This article argues that the 2017 success and the 2018 demise of Armenia’s regime had the same cause: the absence of a developed political party system in Armenia. It also argues that the revolution was triggered by a lack of alternative modes of mass political engagement and made possible by the weakness of the regime—its “multiple sovereignty.” As a result, new elites were formed ad hoc from the pool of people who rose to power as a result of civil strife and who often adhere to a Manichaean worldview.

Why Velvet and Why Revolution?

The events of spring 2018 will likely go down in Armenia’s history as the Velvet Revolution. The name was coined early on by the leaders of mass protests against Serzh Sargsyan’s regime and continues to stick now that the former revolutionaries have become Armenia’s new political elite.

Alexander Iskandaryan is Director of the Caucasus Institute, 31/4 Charents St., Yerevan 0025, Armenia. Contact: iskand@c-i.am

The semantics of this coinage are instructive and by no means accidental, reflecting some important aspects of the events that rocked Armenia in April-May 2018. In Armenia, an individual's answer to the question of whether or not the power handover of 2018 can rightly be called a "revolution" is an indicator of whether or not they support the changes: the new elites and their supporters insist that the transition is a true "revolution," a term also used in general public discourse in Armenia.

In fact, this is chiefly a terminological question: the classical political revolutions of the late 18th to mid-20th centuries were for the most part "illegal" in the sense that they violated the laws and procedures of the regimes that they overthrew. A revolution was its own source of legitimacy and usually paid no attention to laws adopted by those powers against which it rebelled and which it eventually took down. A revolution was viewed as a developmental leap, a way to break free of the previous polity.¹

In contrast to revolutions of previous centuries, modern post-Soviet revolutions, sometimes called "color revolutions," can be non-violent and do not necessarily involve change to pre-existing laws or constitutions; in some cases, even parts of the elite survive unchanged.² The leadership and the management style change, as does the system for rotating power, but the declared goal of the revolution is to ensure the implementation of laws adopted by the previous authorities, whose main fault is often considered to be having failed to ensure the rule of law. In this paradigm, any change of political regime or even change of government can be called a revolution.³

The meanings behind the adjective "velvet" are also interesting. A velvet revolution is peaceful and non-violent; it is also smooth and legitimate. The adjective was previously used to characterize the 1989 post-communist revolution in Czechoslovakia. It is quite possible that the name of the Armenian revolution was carefully selected to avoid references to flowers or colors so as to preclude uncomfortable analogies with the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine.⁴

In the post-Soviet space, especially in Russia, the expression "color revolution" is often used to denote a project inspired or initiated by external players, usually by the collective "West." The mention of "color revolutions" often implies placing events within the paradigm of confrontation between Russia and the West, and seeing them as the result of Russian and Western interests colliding on post-Soviet territory. While this topic

¹ Charles Tilly. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

² Michael McFaul. 2005. "Transitions from Postcommunism." *Journal of Democracy*, 16: 3 (July 2005).

³ Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, eds. 2010. *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁴ Mark R. Beissinger. 2007. "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions." *Perspectives on Politics* 5: 2: 259–276.

lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth pointing out that although external players are sometimes involved in post-Soviet power rotations, the extent and impact of their involvement is usually overstated, including in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia.⁵ This is certainly one of the reasons why proponents of the Armenian revolution object to it being called a “color revolution”: such a denomination would stress the role of foreign players and create the impression that change of foreign policy orientation was the trigger and driving force of the power handover in Armenia, whereas the declared incentives for change—and arguably the true chief causes of the events—were rooted in domestic politics.⁶

Charles Tilly’s political theory of revolutions has some explanatory power for the case of Armenia. The events of spring 2018 can be viewed in a wider context of protest movements in the country. While a protest movement can arise spontaneously, its outcome will depend on the extent of public support for it—that is, on its capacity for mobilization. Among the prerequisites for a revolution, Tilly lists the emergence of a counter-elite and a charismatic leader, but also the unwillingness or incapacity of incumbent authorities to subdue the protests by violent means. Tilly believes that revolutionary situations can arise in the event of “multiple sovereignty,” cases in which the authorities are unable to control particular areas of political life and another force takes over. The weakness of this theory is that it does not answer the question of which conditions give rise to “multiple sovereignty.” Part of the answer can be found in structural or sociological theories, but they still do not fully explain the causes of the situations and social movements leading to revolutions.⁷ Below, I will try to show that one possible cause is that large segments of the population have no alternative means of expressing their political demands.

Analytical publications on Armenia’s power handover are few, given that it is not yet over.⁸ Some insightful articles have appeared in the media,⁹ but overall, media stories about the Velvet Revolution remain emotional. Most of the data used in this article was collected from interviews with stakeholders, participant observation, and media publications.

⁵ Sergey Markedonov. 2018. *Armianskii “transit,”* At <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/armyanskiy-tranzit/>.

⁶ Anthony Giddens. 2006. *Sociology (Fifth Edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ See, for example, Theda Skocpol. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ See, for example, Sergey Markedonov. 2018. *Pochemu v Armenii udalas barkhatnaia revoliutsiia* [Why the Velvet Revolution in Armenia Was a Success], At <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76157>; Paul Stronsky. 2018. *Armenia’s Democratic Triumph*, At <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/24/armenia-s-democratic-triumph-pub-76165>.

⁹ Samvel Martirosyan. 2018. “Sotsseti i armianskaya barkhatnaia revoliutsiia: istoriia liubvi” [Social Networks and the Armenian Velvet Revolution: A Love Story]. *The Analyticon* 113 (May), At <http://theanalyticon.com/?p=10713&lang=ru>.

Hoping to Rule Forever

The first—and what many believe to have been the main—reason for public discontent was the protracted lack of power rotation in Armenia. De facto, the Republican Party had been in power since 1999; President Serzh Sargsyan assumed office in 2008 in what was viewed as a handover from the previous Republican president, Robert Kocharyan.¹⁰ Even back in 2008, the Republican Party was unpopular, as were Kocharyan and Sargsyan. Hundreds of thousands protested against Sargsyan's accession to power based on what they believed to have been flawed elections; the March 1, 2008 move to disperse the protests culminated in the deaths of eight civilians and two police officers.¹¹

The protests of February-March 2008 were led by Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, with the future leader of the Velvet Revolution, Nikol Pashinyan, as one of the main organizers and a key public speaker on Ter-Petrosyan's behalf. These events left Armenian society polarized, and the regime (now associated with President Sargsyan) became even more unpopular.

2008 was also the first year of the global economic recession, which hit Armenia hard. Following several years of double-digit economic growth, 2008 brought about an abrupt decline in Armenia's economy, followed by years of stagnation. That trend was just beginning to reverse in 2017, which saw the first significant growth in a decade.

The decade leading up to the Velvet Revolution also saw a steady decline in the stability of the Karabakh conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh is not legally part of Armenia, but forms part of its social organism. Even though formally external, the Karabakh conflict is perceived by Armenians as a key concern for both Armenian states, the internationally recognized one and the unrecognized/de facto one. Between 2008 and 2018, the situation in the conflict zone escalated from episodic shooting with small arms, known as a "sniper war," to intensive shelling with artillery and mortar systems, the shooting-down of aircraft, and regular intrusions. From the border between Karabakh and Azerbaijan, instability spread to the borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This culminated in 2016 in what became known as the Four-Day War, which claimed hundreds of lives and was the largest escalation of the conflict since the 1991-1994 war.

It is no surprise that the Armenian public put part of the blame for these alarming developments on its authorities. Public discourse in Armenia around the Karabakh conflict had grown harsher over the years, with the media, social networks, and opposition parties accusing the government of taking a weak stand and failing to protect the interests of Karabakh

¹⁰ Stronsky, *Armenia's Democratic Triumph*.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch. 2009. "Democracy on Rocky Ground: Armenia's Disputed 2008 Presidential Election, Post-Election Violence, and the One-Sided Pursuit of Accountability."

Armenians.¹² After the April 2016 escalation, the Armenian authorities were also blamed for their inability to properly maintain the army. The very possibility of escalation in Karabakh was perceived by the society as a sign of the incompetence and corruption of the military and elites in general. Making things worse, the negotiation process in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, conducted in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, became deadlocked around 2011. Formally, negotiations were still ongoing: heads of state, foreign affairs ministers, and Minsk Group co-chairs continued to meet regularly over the years. However, the discussions now centered on incident investigation mechanisms, monitoring of the contact line, and the establishment of trust measures. In reality, efforts to resolve the conflict had been reduced to attempts to manage some of its aspects.

In Armenia, conflict settlement is no longer viewed as a realistic prospect, and this cannot fail to create public concern and insecurity. The true causes of the escalation and the deadlock in negotiations are a matter of scholarly debate that cannot be addressed here;¹³ what matters in the context of this paper is that the public blamed the political elite for the decline in security.

In a nutshell, the popularity of the ruling Republican Party and of President Serzh Sargsyan was all but nonexistent by 2018,¹⁴ while discontent with the ruling elite was ubiquitous, providing the prerequisites for a rebellion.¹⁵ Typical of the ruling party in a post-Soviet hybrid regime, the Republican Party was a non-ideological body, best described as a trade union of public officials and affiliated businesses offering career trajectories to ambitious young people without too many scruples.¹⁶ It was rejected by most of the society, especially the youth, and became associated with corruption, nepotism, and incompetence.¹⁷

¹² Hrant Mikaelian. 2018. "Perceptions of Prerequisites for Long-term Peace in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh." *Caucasus Institute Policy Brief* (March), At http://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/Karabakh_Policy-Brief_final-1.pdf

¹³ See, for example, Larisa Deriglazova and Sergey Minasyan. 2011. "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Paradoxes of Strength and Weakness in an Asymmetric Conflict." *Caucasus Institute Research Papers*.

¹⁴ In an opinion poll in autumn 2017 (the CRRC Caucasus Barometer), 6% of respondents said they "fully trust[ed]" the president, another 12% "rather trust[ed]" him, and 66% "fully distrust[ed]" or "rather distrust[ed]" him. Trust in the parliament and government was also extremely low. See 2017. *Public Perceptions on Political, Social, and Economic Issues in the South Caucasus Countries. Some Findings from the CRRC 2017 Data*, At http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/_static_content/barometer/2017/CB2017_ENG_presentation_final_.pdf. The full database of the 2017 Caucasus Barometer for Armenia can be found here: <http://www.crrc.am/caucasusbarometer/documentation?lang=en>.

¹⁵ Ted Gurr. 2010. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Christian Giordano and Nicolas Hayoz, eds. 2013. *Informality in Eastern Europe: Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices*. Bern: Peter Lang.

¹⁷ Vladimir Gel'man. 2015. *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

As the ruling party solidified its power while simultaneously falling into disrepute, the political opposition became weak, fragmented, and marginalized. These two processes continued in parallel for a number of years, with the result that people hated the regime and despised the politicians who tried (but failed) to topple it. The administrative resources of the Republican Party, combined with the disorganized and ad hoc nature of opposition groups, produced a situation where opposition parties and candidates stood no real chance of either winning elections or coming to power as a result of post-election protests. With few exceptions, starting in 1995, the losing party or candidate in national elections refused to recognize the results. In turn, each election was declared to have been flawed and was followed by protests of varying scope and intensity. It was not just the regime but the political system as a whole that was losing legitimacy.¹⁸

2008 was a watershed for this process. Until 2008, the ruling party had low credibility but there was some public trust in the opposition; following the crisis, the entire party system lost credibility. Opposition parties and leaders enjoyed little public support. The opposition's repeated failure to win elections or rise to power in some other way ruined the reputations of particular political groups and leaders, as well as those of what came to be perceived as the "traditional opposition" or political class.

This thesis can be well illustrated by the rapid rise and fall of Raffi Hovhannisyan, Armenia's first foreign minister (1991-1992), who became an opposition politician in the 2000s. At the peak of his opposition career, Raffi Hovhannisyan won almost 37% of the vote in the 2013 presidential election, coming in second behind the incumbent president. 43% of the votes in the capital, Yerevan, went to Hovhannisyan, which is unsurprising because capital cities are usually more pro-opposition than the country as a whole. However, less than three months later, in May 2013, the bloc led by Hovhannisyan received little more than 8% of the vote in the election of the Yerevan Municipal Council. Following his failure to displace the ruling regime, his public support in the capital declined by a factor of 5 in the course of two and a half months, and continued to decline to the point that four years later, in the 2017 parliamentary election, Hovhannisyan's party failed to cross the 5% threshold needed to gain seats under the parliament's proportional representation system.

Arguably, the personified nature of political parties, the near-absence of political platforms, and the non-rotation of the political class created a situation in which voters were disappointed in those politicians who had begun their careers in the 1990s (a group that included all opposition leaders until 2017) and lost trust in politicians as a whole.

The vicious circle in which the political opposition found

¹⁸ Henry E. Hale. 2015. *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

itself—being too weak to compete against the Republican Party and being further weakened by its failure to win—led to widespread public apathy and a loss of hope that things would ever change. The Republicans learned to use this apathy in their favor, manipulating it to win elections despite a lack of public support for the Republicans as a party. According to various witness accounts, the Republican Party’s methods of attracting votes included construction of village roads and promises thereof; renovation of apartment blocks in towns; direct bribery with money or goods, including agricultural produce, seeds and fertilizers; cooptation of employees in businesses that enjoyed government support or privileges, and direct pressure on public sector employees, such as teachers or hospital staff.

The weakness of the party system and lack of an alternative helped the Republican Party capitalize on its administrative resources and ties to big business.¹⁹ Lack of faith in rotation of power by means of elections reduced incentives to vote for the opposition and increased incentives to accept a bribe, favor, or promise from the Republican Party in exchange for a vote. Using this strategy, the Republican Party gradually took over most of the political platforms in Armenia: the presidential office, the parliament, the provincial administrations, most town halls, and even most village councils.²⁰ Their success gave them the illusion that they could rule in this way forever, or at least for a long time. Yet new forms of protest were on the rise.

The Weaknesses of Hybrid Regimes

Another factor that may have enabled the power transition in Armenia was that its regime was “hybrid” and generally moderate. Indeed, Serzh Sargasyan’s was the mildest of the regimes that had ruled in Armenia since independence: persecutions of political opponents were few and never large-scale; bribery and co-optation replaced electoral fraud as the main methods for winning elections; while the main media were not independent, there was pluralism; and there were no efforts to censor or ban social media. Political opposition, though weak, was allowed to exist and always received seats in the parliament.²¹

In the spirit of Tilly’s theory, my hypothesis concerning “color revolutions” is that they affect hybrid regimes more than strong autocratic ones.²² At least in the post-Soviet space, revolutions only happened in

¹⁹ Hrant Mikaelian. 2016. *Tenevaia Ekonomika v Armenii* [Shadow Economy in Armenia], At http://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/shadow_econ_print_1.pdf.

²⁰ See, for example, the Freedom House Nations in Transit 2018 report on Armenia: Freedom House. 2018. *Nations in Transit*, At <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018/Armenia>.

²¹ Dmitri Furman. 2008. “Imitation Democracies: The Post-Soviet Penumbra.” *New Left Review* 54 (Nov-Dec 2008): 29-47.

²² Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes*

countries that had some degree of pluralism, some freedom of the press, and some opposition politics. The list of post-Soviet countries that share these features includes Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia (there is no need to consider the Baltic states, which have integrated into the EU and the NATO). A “color revolution” has not happened in any of the others, from Belarus to Turkmenistan.²³

Arguably, tough authoritarian regimes preclude the formation of a protest culture, a protest milieu, and a counter-elite. Potential revolutionaries are jailed, exiled, or sometimes even murdered. By contrast, all five states that had “color revolutions” had previously had some power rotation, albeit amid criticism and public discontent and often with questionable legality. Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia all had opposition parties; although weak, these were not fake and were quite sincere in their opposition to the ruling regimes. In Armenia in particular, street protests became a permanent and prominent feature of political life and political culture in the 2010s; we can surmise that these increasingly widespread (and successful) protest practices paved the way for the events of spring 2018.

A final feature shared by post-Soviet hybrid regimes is a transition to parliamentary rule. The hybrid states mentioned above—Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan—have executed some form of transition from presidential or semi-presidential systems to parliamentary ones. Meanwhile, the other seven, which have heavy restrictions on political freedoms and political competition—Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan—remain presidential or super-presidential republics. None of them have any rotation of power except when the leader dies. Russia uses an original model in which Putin was replaced by Medvedev for one term in office, but that did not change the system as a whole.

Seen from the post-Soviet space, the parliamentary system seems to be more convenient for creating checks and balances among political forces and de-personalizing over-personalized post-Soviet politics. There is an open question as to whether this can work in countries which lack well-developed party systems, but there is no room to debate it here. At any rate, it is hardly a coincidence that all post-Soviet countries with some pluralism, some freedom of speech, and moderate regimes have chosen parliamentary systems.

After the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²³ Conversely, the events known as the Arab Spring, an umbrella term for a variety of revolutions from Yemen to Tunisia, some of which took place in extremely repressive regimes such as the one in Egypt, contradict the thesis that tough authoritarianism precludes “color revolutions.” This raises the question of whether the varied events of the Arab Spring qualify as “color revolutions” or are in fact closer in nature to the classical European revolutions of the previous centuries.

Armenia has been no exception. The idea to reform Armenia's political system in this direction originated with the opposition, and the idea became especially popular among opposition politicians during Serzh Sargsyan's second term in office. At some point in 2013, Sargsyan's administration began warming up to this idea, for a number of reasons. The first was external: Armenia needed something to show the EU after being strong-armed by Russia into cancelling its planned signing of an Association Agreement with the EU and joining the Russia-led Customs Union instead. This move hurt Armenia's relationship with Europe and its image in the eyes of EU officials. Armenia later managed to resume negotiations with the EU, signing a CEPA, a reduced version of the Association Agreement, in 2017. But back in 2013, Armenia needed to give Europe some proof of its complementarity. Transitioning to parliamentary rule was a way to show the West that rapprochement was not over.

The second reason for the transition was domestic, and without it, the EU incentive would probably not have worked. This reason was the one described in the previous section: the Republican Party's leaders believed that they could keep winning elections using the apathy of the public and the weakness of opposition parties. In this context, de-personifying elections was instrumental, as the unpopular president would no longer have to run for office in a national election, elections would only need to be held once every five years, and voters would choose a party, not a person. The Republican Party would keep winning the majority of seats in the parliament and then smoothly elect a prime minister. The system could be perpetuated, with all decision-making happening in the offices of the Republican Party.²⁴

Corresponding changes in the Constitution were put to a referendum in December 2015. With minimal turnout (51%), the changes were passed with 66% of the vote. The opposition claimed that fraud and coercion had factored into the outcome, but these post-election protests, which had become a familiar part of the political landscape, soon subsided and the changes were adopted.²⁵ Most importantly, during the campaign leading up to the referendum, President Sargsyan promised not to run for office again—be it for president or prime minister.

The 2017 parliamentary election was based on the new constitution. Under the fully proportional system, the Republican Party obtained an absolute majority, while the only opposition group represented, the Way Out Alliance, won just 9 of 105 seats. For the first time in years, not a single political force came forward to refute the election results.

²⁴ See, for example, Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2018. *BTI 2018 Armenia Country Report*, At <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/ARM/>.

²⁵ BBC. "Armenia Fraud Claims Mar Referendum on Constitution." *BBC*, December 7, 2015, At <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35025853>.

Apparently, the Republican Party leadership took this as a sign that it could continue to concentrate power in its own hands, consolidating a classical one-and-a-half-party system in which opposition is allowed to exist but all decision-making is made by the ruling party, which becomes merged with the public administration.²⁶

A year later, the flaw in their logic became apparent. Even if you have control over the political system, once your public credibility hits a certain low, it is impossible to remain in power without resorting to mass political repressions.

It can thus be argued that a number of prerequisites for the Velvet Revolution in Armenia were met: the non-rotation and over-concentration of power, the weakness of the political party system, the laxity of the regime, and the regime's delusions about its stability.

The Protesters: Looking for Simple Solutions

Networked decentralized youth protests began to break out, chiefly in the capital city, from around 2010. Their complaints varied from environmental concerns to urban planning and social issues. They relied on Facebook, Twitter, and other networks, and were intentionally non-politicized. In reality, the protests were political in nature, but the topics were not. There was an emerging core group of activists who participated in various protests, but no formal hierarchy; leadership was flexible, mostly based on self-cooptation in the course of the protests.

Experience showed that social issues attracted the most attention and support. The largest and most successful protests were the 2013 "100 drams" campaign against an increase in public transportation fares and the 2015 Electric Yerevan protest against a hike in consumer prices for electricity. These protests gathered many more people and received more publicity than environmental or urban planning issues. Protest leaders took measures to prevent the participation of political parties. This was a rational strategy: the social protests brought together much larger crowds than political rallies, and there were cases when the involvement of opposition politicians actually reduced the scope of a protest. Public fatigue with the political class was especially evident among protest-minded youth.

Besides its focus on social issues, the gradually forming protest milieu included leftist argumentation, calls for fairness and equality, and anti-corruption and anti-monopolist slogans.²⁷ While the networked non-hierarchical protest technology had been used before, in the Arab

²⁶ Derenik Malkhasyan. 2018. "Kak Serzh Sargsyan 'vystroil' revolyutsiiu" [How Serzh Sargsyan "built" the revolution]. *The Analyticon* 113 (May). At <http://theanalyticon.com/?p=10701&lang=ru#more-10701>.

²⁷ Zhanna Andreasyan and Georgi Derlugian. 2015. "Fuel Protests in Armenia: A Field Study of Social Movements." *New Left Review* II: 95: 29-48.

Spring and the Color Revolutions, and while Armenia's culture of public protests had existed since its 1988-1991 anti-communist revolution, the leftist rhetoric was a new phenomenon for post-Soviet countries. The younger generations, which have grown up in independent Armenia, do not share their parents' prejudices against leftist ideology caused by having lived in the USSR. In a way, this brings Armenia closer to Europe, where the political left is a traditional part of the political gamut and is especially popular with youth, who protest against capitalism and bourgeois values.

Armenia's regime viewed the new form of protest as a technical problem and dealt with each one as it arose, using a combination of police and political methods. The authorities did not realize that it was their own lack of credibility that had caused the protests in the first place. When all other methods failed, the government agreed to the protesters' demands: it rolled back price hikes, sent draft laws back for review, and so on. As a result, the social protests, in contrast to political campaigns, had success stories to show the public and were increasingly viewed as an effective tool for solving problems.

For almost a decade, the protests remained local; they needed a trigger to graduate to national scale. Serzh Sargsyan provided one in 2018 by breaking his promise not to run for office. It was evident that he was going to be elected prime minister—that is, the head of state under the new system—and there was no legal method of preventing this, since the Republican Party was in full control of the parliament. Having cut their teeth on para-political protests over the course of several years, protesters could now manifest public resentment in new networked forms. All that was needed was a charismatic leader with a skilled team behind him.

As usually happens when there is widespread demand, everything clicked into place. Serzh Sargsyan's planned election to the post of prime minister triggered the spread of protests to national scale, and 42-year-old MP Nikol Pashinyan, head of one of the three parties in the Way Out Alliance, took the lead in the protests. His biography is quite illustrative of the movement and the pool of people it brought to power.

The Charismatic Leader

Raised in the town of Ijevan in northeastern Armenia, Pashinyan was 16 when he began to study journalism at Yerevan State University. While still a student, he reported news for the print media and entered politics; at 23, he coordinated the campaign of one of the presidential candidates in the 1998 election. He figured prominently in a variety of scandals and lawsuits that centered around criticizing public officials. His activity as a journalist is hard to distinguish from his political activism; he became known as a relentless critic of the regime.

In 2007, he founded the Impeachment Alliance, which called for the resignations of President Robert Kocharyan (on the grounds of “high treason and other grave crimes”) and then-prime minister Serzh Sargsyan.²⁸ The Alliance won 1.3% of the vote in the 2007 election (about 17,000 votes), although Pashinyan claimed the vote had been rigged and 400,000 votes had been faked. Pashinyan’s Alliance then merged with the Armenian National Congress. Pashinyan himself joined the electoral team of its leader, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, and was one of the key public speakers at mass post-election rallies in which Ter-Petrosyan claimed the victory for himself. Following the violent dispersion of the protests on March 1, 2008, Pashinyan was wanted by the police. In 2009, he turned himself in and was sentenced to seven years in prison, but he was amnestied in 2011. He resumed his career in the Armenian National Congress and was elected as one of its MPs, but split from Ter-Petrosyan in 2013 to found a new alliance, Civic Contract. Civic Contract became a political party in 2015 and joined the Way Out Alliance for the 2017 election, in which Pashinyan was once again elected MP.

Thus, Pashinyan’s entire adult life had been about fighting the regime. He started out as a journalist criticizing the authorities and rose to popularity as a public protester and speaker only loosely and temporarily affiliated with the classical opposition. Pashinyan was set apart from the “old guard” in many respects, including his age: he was a whole generation younger than the leaders who had emerged in the late 1980s and acceded to power during the independence struggle and Karabakh war. Younger people, for whom the disintegration of the USSR is no longer part of their personal history, consider the older political generation outdated, and feel closer to Pashinyan in terms of style, paradigms, and even appearance.

Pashinyan’s Civil Contract Party actually received its name from a new type of non-political protest. A project publicly discussed in 2013–2015, Civil Contract institutionalized civil protests, in contrast to the fruitless political movements of the previous two decades. It strived to re-format opposition activity into a creative new form for a new generation. The widespread demand for new forms of protest was thus filled by the creation of a youth-driven movement clearly distinct from the “old guard.” Pashinyan had learned the lessons of 2008: the old methods and old paradigms were not going to work. The youth protests of July–September 2015—the Electric Yerevan campaign—provided a good model, but their focus was on a concrete social issue. The next logical step was for a networked decentralized protest movement to focus on a political issue.

²⁸ “Karabakh za prezidentskoe kreslo” [Karabakh for the Presidential Chair]. *AI Plus*, March 14, 2007. At <https://ru.aiplus.am/15910.html>.

The Social Roots of the Protest

It is also worthwhile to analyze who the protesters were. The main driving force of the movement of which Pashinyan eventually became the leader were residents of Yerevan under the age of 30, from a middle-class background, with above-average education levels.²⁹ Many supporters were students or young white-collar workers. This is logical, because active long-term involvement in protests, some of which lasted for months, requires a financial base and plenty of free time. It also requires adherence to a certain worldview and faith in the outcome of the protest.

Armenia had a fair supply of this type of actor as a result of its Soviet past. Under the Soviet modernization project, Armenia's role was to develop science and technology in research institutions, factories, and laboratories chiefly working for the military. As a side effect, in the late Soviet era Armenia had a large stratum of intellectuals who were later to play key roles in the 1988-1991 anti-Soviet revolution in Armenia. While many of the leaders of that revolution came from formal and natural sciences, the industry that produced them could not survive outside the Soviet militarized economy and became extinct in Armenia shortly after its independence from the USSR. Armenia's economy underwent rapid de-modernization in the 1990s, whereupon most of its educated class became unemployed, with many individuals emigrating to job markets in Russia and the West.

Even though the market of independent Armenia had few skilled jobs to offer, the next generation of Armenians was brought up by Soviet parents who had life plans for their children that required obtaining a university degree. However, their parents' experience also indicated that taking up mathematics, physics, or chemistry was a guarantee of unemployment (that sector eventually came back to life in the 2000s in the form of computer science, but that is a totally different story). As a result, many young people rushed into departments and fields that had been scarce or non-existent in the USSR. Those were chiefly humanities and social sciences, such as international relations, political science, economics, law, management, journalism, and other specializations that young people hoped would provide a good alternative to their parents' educational trajectories.

Since the educational market of independent Armenia was free and scarcely regulated, it reacted to the rising demand by providing a mass supply of low-quality services. The new specializations were taught by educators with backgrounds in Soviet ideological disciplines such as Marxism-Leninism, atheism, the history of the Communist party, and the like, or by ones who had moved over from the hard sciences. Literature,

²⁹ See the backgrounds of the original members of the Civil Contract Party, briefly described on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Contract_\(Armenia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Contract_(Armenia)).

curricula, and methodology were lacking, as were scholarly traditions and visions. The outcome was thousands of young people graduating every year with worthless university degrees in areas for which the market would have had no demand even if the degrees had been of an international standard. Graduates were left with the options of learning a new trade, taking up an unskilled job, or emigrating.

Arguably, it is this very social stratum that became the driving force of mass protests in the 2010s. For them, civil activism was a method of self-expression and an outlet for their energy. Young people with degrees in humanities and social sciences formed the core of the NGO sector, discussion platforms, and youth initiatives and movements. Understandably, given their disillusionment, their ideology was generally anti-establishment and increasingly also anti-bourgeois. They began taking up the leftist slogans that their parents' generation had associated with the USSR and therefore rejected.

The Manichaean Worldview

Understandably, and in line with their leftist views, the main focus of the youth protests was the concerns at the top of the social agenda: corruption, nepotism, the merger between business and politics, and the monopolization of Armenia's economy. Unfortunately, the education that young people had received did not help them understand the origin of these issues at all. The lack of a democratic tradition, the Soviet legacy of political views, the social pessimism of the older generations whose social and financial standing had been dealt a terrible blow by the collapse of Soviet industry in Armenia, and the poor quality of education—all of this combined to produce a simplistic worldview in which governance was about “bad” or “good” leaders. The elites were viewed as the cause, not the result, of the problems facing Armenia. In this worldview, the solution is universal: fire the bad guys and hire good guys instead. In general, Armenian citizens believe that free and fair elections will result in the election of honest and competent public servants, corruption can be exterminated by jailing corrupt officials, good police work is all it takes to prevent monopolization, and so on.

Thus, negative slogans are key to the success of a campaign. Any positive program could work against the protesters—whether leftist or rightist, pro-Russian or pro-Western, all positive slogans have their proponents and opponents. However, no one supports corruption and no one is against fair elections; the simpler the dichotomy, the wider the support. Since Serzh Sargsyan had clearly and publicly promised not to run for office and had broken this promise, the slogan had every chance of winning popular support. On March 31, 2018, Nikol Pashinyan and his supporters

began a march from Armenia's northern capital, Gyumri, to Yerevan, protesting against Serzh Sargsyan's upcoming election to the post of prime minister. Their slogan was "Take a step, reject Serzh."

In line with Armenians' personified perception of politics, personification was the strategy of the spring 2018 protests. Evil was personified by Serzh Sargsyan, the man who had lied to the nation and wanted to keep ruling it. Change was personified by Nikol Pashinyan, who was not so much the movement's leader as its symbol. The sincere young protester was thus set up in opposition to the corrupt, hypocritical middle-aged politician. This image was so vivid that it attracted many people who had never paid any attention to politics before.

Even though Pashinyan and his team campaigned "by the book," they applied the methodology in creative ways. First, the vivid imagery appealed to teenagers: students aged 14 and upwards joined the movement. Second, the protesters were mobile: if they encountered a police squad and things got complicated, they just walked away and blocked a different street. Third, the protest was so decentralized that it required no leaders and could originate anywhere: it was enough for someone to start shouting slogans or blowing a vuvuzela and a crowd would gather and block a street.

At first, the rallies involved several thousand people in Yerevan. Once the parliament elected Sargsyan prime minister on April 17, the protests evolved: more people took part, from all age groups and all social strata.³⁰ It also spilled over to other cities, towns and villages; human road-blocks paralyzed traffic all over the country.

The authorities continued to react with policing, arresting and isolating leaders and activists. This had the opposite of the intended effect: new leaders and activists emerged locally, and participation increased in proportion to repressive measures. Serzh Sargsyan agreed to negotiate with Nikol Pashinyan on the latter's terms, in public and with media present, but walked out of the negotiations once Pashinyan announced that he was only prepared to discuss the timeline for Sargsyan's resignation. Pashinyan and some members of his team were arrested, but it was too late: over a hundred thousand people were taking part in the protests in the city of Yerevan alone.

The regime's options were to involve the army or to hand over power. Meanwhile, April 24 was approaching, the day when Armenians worldwide commemorate the early 20th-century genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In Yerevan, up to half a million people usually visit the genocide memorial on that day; the ritual involves slowly walking up the hill on which the memorial is situated. The date and the place are

³⁰ Olesya Vartanyan. 2018. "Velvet Revolution" Takes Armenia into the Unknown, At <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenia/velvet-revolution-takes-armenia-unknown>.

considered sacred; a regime that attempted repressive action on Genocide Day would be doomed. With hundreds of thousands walking together, anything could have turned the commemoration march into a gigantic anti-government rally. It is no surprise that Sargsyan announced his resignation on April 23.

Since Pashinyan wanted to take the legalistic road and avoid disbanding the parliament, the Republican Party tried to hold onto power for a while. Once Sargsyan resigned, the Republican majority in the parliament rejected Pashinyan's candidacy for prime minister. The next day, Pashinyan encouraged his supporters to block all the main roads, including the road to Yerevan's airport. MPs were insulted on social media and pressured in the streets. Armenia's second-largest political party, Prosperous Armenia, led by major business operator Gagik Tsarukyan, announced its support for the protest movement and called for a boycott of the parliament. On May 8, the parliament elected Pashinyan prime minister.

Challenges

Once Pashinyan became the head of the executive branch, he replaced the heads of most ministries and agencies either with his associates from the protest movement or with technocrats from the previous administration who had agreed to work in the new government. In his speeches, Pashinyan expressed commitment to a legalistic transition and continuity in foreign policy.³¹ The change of government was made in line with legislation; heads of local administrations are being gradually replaced; and plans were announced for a snap election of the parliament. As of August 2018, Armenia was ruled by a coalition of former protest leaders and former public officials. Pashinyan has stressed that the new authorities will not pursue a "vendetta" against the previous administration; continuity and legalistic adherence to procedure are generally viewed as positive characteristics of the new regime.

The newcomers in the cabinet are finding public administration challenging. Civic protests are their only vision of politics. The new regime is dependent on public opinion and often follows in its tracks. Fighting corruption is still at the center of the new leaders' ideology and is still understood as a fight against corrupt individuals. Prominent figures from the old regime, including former president Kocharyan and family members of former president Sargsyan, are being prosecuted on various charges. While the means are still legalistic, the choice of targets appears to be politically motivated.

The popularity of the new authorities borders on euphoria;

³¹ Sergey Markedonov. 2018. "Armenia i Rossiia: kak ne poteriat tochki soprikosnoveniia" [Armenia and Russia: how not to lose touch points]. *Eurasia Expert*, August 11, 2018, At <http://www.eurasia.expert/armeniya-i-rossiya-kak-ne-poteryat-tochki-soprikosnoveniya/>.

expectations are enormous and cannot be fulfilled in principle. Armenia suffers from a whole range of systemic problems that cannot be handled overnight, including poverty, unemployment, the Karabakh conflict (which takes its toll on the economy as well as security), poor infrastructure, insufficient investment, a merger of business and politics, and so on.

There is also a political problem: despite his popularity, Pashinyan has no institutional support. The Civil Contract party is tiny; the majority of MPs still come from the Republican Party and Prosperous Armenia. A strong political party cannot be built in a matter of months, which means that the party and the elite in general will be recruited by means of self-co-optation of individuals and groups with all types of backgrounds.

It often happens after revolutions that the authorities have to build themselves while they govern, recruiting from a limited pool of human resources. It would have been a lot easier had Armenia possessed a fully formed political party system with ideologies and teams. Instead, the collapse of its party system is both the reason for and the outcome of current developments. The Republican Party, by nature, is unable to survive once it is severed from the state administration. All other parties are still proto-parties.

Since they are required by the parliamentary system, political parties will be set up and operate; the question is whether they will be able to form a stable political system. The same features of the public movement that helped it win—decentralization, personification, networking, absence of hierarchies—will stand in the way of state-building. A state consists of institutions, structures, and systems; replacing individuals will not lead to change. The rotation of power has given the new government public credibility; they will have to learn to use it under the pressure of time and society's—and often their own—unrealistic expectations. A reality check over the coming months may prove instructive, with the new authorities learning about red lines and procedures.

While the transition of power has been smooth and non-violent, it has also been protracted: almost five months on from the start of the “Velvet Revolution,” the new administration still does not have a majority in the legislature. Pashinyan and his team remain highly popular (in September 2018, the bloc backed by Pashinyan scored an 81% victory in the municipal election in the capital, Yerevan³²) and have every chance of a landslide victory in a snap parliamentary election once they decide when and how to organize it.

With reservations, we can conclude that, at least in the post-Soviet realm, this method of power rotation may be typical for this set of gains:

³² Protocol on results of the elections of Yerevan Council of Eldermen, September 23, 2018. See Central Election Commission of the Republic of Armenia, <http://res.elections.am/images/doc/23.09.18v.pdf>.

an unpopular regime with little domestic legitimacy, desperately clinging to power but lacking will or capacity for violent repressions; a marginalized “classical opposition;” a networked informal public protest; and a charismatic leader. As the last in the sequence of “color revolutions” in the five post-Soviet countries with some or most of these parameters, the Velvet Revolution heralds the end of the post-Soviet era and the demise of the generation of politicians who rose to power in the course of the disintegration of the USSR. The new generation of decision-makers attained their maturity in the post-Soviet period; their backgrounds are strikingly different from their predecessors’. This does not necessarily portend any changes for better or for worse, but may be the beginning of a new, post-post-Soviet era.