

Enter Nikol Pashinyan

THE CAUSES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE 2018 ARMENIAN REVOLUTION

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Last spring, a surging wave of protests ended a regime of post-Soviet restoration in Armenia. A near-universal rejection of the old regime brought into the streets of Yerevan students and elderly peasants, intellectuals and taxi drivers, ethnic Armenians and the minority Yezidis, even moms with babies in strollers. In the face of the incumbents' indecision followed by hasty retreat, the protesting crowds burst into a triumphal celebration on April 23. The following day marked the somber anniversary of the 1915 Ottoman genocide. On such a day, using violence against crowds of fellow Armenians was absolutely out of the question. Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan prudently chose to resign. After another fortnight—filled with desperate maneuvering by the parliament's imperiled majority against the impressively coordinated stoppages of city traffic by protestors—Nikol Pashinyan, the charismatic protest leader and oppositional MP, had to be elected the new prime minister.

Ironically, Pashinyan inherited extraordinarily broad executive powers that were slated by the recently changed constitution to bolster Sargsyan, the outgoing supremo. A once powerful defense minister and Armenia's third president in the last decade, Sargsyan had intended to bypass the constitutional two-term limit on the presidency by becoming the state's super-premier. The scheme backfired spectacularly, and Pashinyan immediately authorized a sweeping investigation of past wrongdoings. The much publicized police searches and arrests left many people gasping—including in Moscow. The campaign culminated in late July with the imprisonment of Armenia's second ex-president, Robert Kocharyan, who was accused of constitutional violations. What made possible this Armenian revolution and where could it go next?

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A Revolution Foreseen

The demise of post-communist restoration in Armenia, however surprising, had its structural preconditions waiting for activation. To begin with, this revolution had a very typical run-up period of seemingly lost popular hopes feeding the smug arbitrariness of the rulers. First, in 2015, the ruling Republican party of Sargsyan used the atmosphere of public disillusionment and apathy to fortify its formal positions by changing the constitution in a dubiously legitimate referendum. This turned Armenia into parliamentary republic with near-regal powers accorded to the prime minister.

The likable youthful Karen Karapetyan seemed being groomed as the new prime minister. Born in Karabagh like his patron Sargsyan, Karapetyan had earned his doctorate in mathematics in Yerevan and made a successful managerial career with Russia's energy giant Gazprom in Moscow. He looked suave, urbane, and pragmatic—unlike the typically stocky brutes populating the corrupt regime. At the time, this surprising promotion appeared a smart move. It offered economic hope for Armenia that had suffered especially badly with the demise of Soviet industry. Whether Sargsyan ever seriously considered the cosmopolitan technocrat as his successor remains unknowable. In the end, Sargsyan, himself a veteran commander in the Karabagh war, claimed that the looming threat of another war made him irreplaceable, which in effect meant perpetuity since this post-Soviet conflict is now entering its fourth decade.

The new Armenian constitution made crucial the parliamentary elections of 2017, although its importance seemed lost on the many Armenians gripped by cynical apathy. In such atmosphere, the elections served the ruling party by reducing the opposition's parliamentary representation to Pashinyan's electoral bloc alone, which was inventively called *Yelk* ("Way Out"). The young *Yelk*-ers applied their energies in a grassroots campaign to mobilize voters as well as hundreds of election observers to prevent fraud. These efforts gained *Yelk* a foothold of only around seven percent of the seats in parliament. Meanwhile the older and more prominent oppositionists altogether failed to overcome the entry barriers. The game seemed over.

Then, in the Spring of 2018, Sargsyan committed two cardinal mistakes in succession. After much evasiveness, he ended up appointing himself as new prime minister *with no term limit*. This left many Armenians aghast and looking for a way out—and there was *Yelk*. Sargsyan's second mistake, which in the beginning looked minor, was to rely on his previously infallible tactic of benevolently disregarding protest campaigns to impose his own "compromise" in the end. In the past, waiting out trouble had always worked for the famously phlegmatic incumbent.

Pashinyan, a provincial himself, started his Spring 2018 counter-march by mobilizing, rather unusually, provincial Armenian towns, hitherto disregarded by opposition as the bailiwicks of local potentates. He changed his appearance from a clean-shaven

parliamentarian in a suit to a rugged, bearded hiker with a backpack—a guerrilla warrior *en marche*—entering Yerevan on foot two weeks later with growing troops of supporters. In the surprisingly skilled and energized Pashinyan, the diffuse, popular distaste for politics suddenly found a leader (as well as the simple message: *Reject Serzh!*).

A Leader, and Social Unity, Materialize

Much of the protest action, however, could be delegated to the networks of autonomous activists, seasoned in the succession of civic campaigns over social issues like environmental protection, freezing the costs of public transportation, and saving urban public spaces. Such active decentralization emerged as a crucial advantage once the authorities finally resolved to arrest Pashinyan. The locally coordinated protests continued unabated. It was all broadcast live over the Internet, a mechanism that plays a special role in maintaining daily contact among Armenians, two-thirds of whom live and work abroad as diaspora.

The Armenian revolution achieved success because it built on the well-rehearsed contemporary repertoire of collective action and revived the extraordinary internal solidarity of Armenians as a nation of genocide survivors. The huge outrage over the domestic use of army troops back in 2008, apparently on the orders of outgoing president Kocharyan, had such lasting effects precisely due to the broadly shared conviction that Armenians must never kill Armenians. The fratricide of 2008—hundreds of wounded and ten deaths, including two policemen—ensured that a decade later, in 2018, both sides assiduously avoided using violence against each other. This time also proved different because the self-serving regime had disgraced itself in April 2016 when the Azerbaijani attack in Karabagh caught Armenian troops unprepared and underequipped, while generals were seen driving expensive cars. How could a spirited, youthful revolution fail to succeed against an incumbent regime resorting to machinations to cover up its corruption, incompetence, and lack of patriotism?

After the Revolution

Once the revolution succeeded, what next? Its single leader, Pashinyan, after becoming provisional prime minister in May 2018, carefully avoided taking position on any potentially divisive social and economic issues. His only reference to economic concerns, so far, has been a much-publicized Skype chat with the American economics professor Daron Acemoglu, a fellow Armenian, who predictably advised him to replace the extractive regime with an inclusive one.

Pashinyan's first hundred days in power were marked mainly by arrests of top figures from the old political machine (not necessarily all officials, but also relatives and friends). In the short run, the anti-corruption sweep contributed to Pashinyan's huge

popularity. Yet it also irked those in Moscow's Kremlin. Furthermore, the lack of clear policy goals and credible candidates for government appointments put in doubt the professionalism of the new leader, however understandable might be his hesitations. The structural context of dilemmas, however, appears fairly constrained and therefore calculable.

Possibilities and Choices

Armenia is a small landlocked country located in a distinctly hostile geopolitical environment. Industrial plants built in Soviet times are largely beyond repair. Their bulky resource inputs and product outputs could not be cheaply transported anyway because the railroads leading to Armenia across both Georgia and Azerbaijan remain severed since the early nineties. Realistically, Armenia cannot afford to break its dependence on Russia. Pashinyan pragmatically acknowledges this major constraint. The former imperial metropole still serves as the single major supplier of Armenia's military security as well as the largest destination for Armenian labor migrants and predominantly agricultural exports (again, traveling by air or automobile across Georgia and the mountain passes of the Greater Caucasus).

At the same time, Armenia's imports of industrial goods are largely from EU countries or purchased via Georgia from unfriendly Turkey (which keeps closed its border with Armenia out of solidarity with Azerbaijan). Iran is also an important neighbor and potential energy supplier, but these trade prospects are seriously aggravated by logistical bottlenecks and international political constraints. Armenia's balance of payments, meager as it is, at present critically depends on labor remittances and foreign aid. All this seems plenty enough on the negative side.

Armenia today now seems to be following the well-established path of many revolutions, which includes the trial of deposed "monarchs" like Kocharyan. Typically, this provokes foreign intervention. Moscow could cut lifelines to Armenia in response, or indirectly encourage Azerbaijan to try another take on Karabagh. Baku seems itching for this, having burdened itself with stockpiles of expensive weapons purchased from Russia and Israel with its outsized oil revenues as well as the inertia of revanchist propaganda. The demonstration effect of the revolution in Armenia, coupled with the political turmoil in Turkey and the Islamists' penetration from the Middle East, might trigger instability in Azerbaijan, which now dangerously resembles the Shah's Iran.

Add to this Russia's own strategic frustrations with its military base in Armenia. It is the closest foothold to the Syrian theater of operations, yet this base cannot be reliably resupplied due to Georgian objections and Azerbaijan's blockade of Armenia. A short war in Karabagh might provide Moscow with an opportunity to introduce its peacekeeping forces, thus greatly enlarging and making operational the Russian military extension in the South Caucasus. Baku, however, also sees and fears the prospect of

falling into Russian dependency. The structural predictions made in my PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo ("[All Quiet on the Karabagh Front?](#)") written a decade ago still remain in force. If Azerbaijan moves against Armenia and suffers another humiliating loss, this would likely spell the end of the Aliyev oil dynasty. Even if Azerbaijan scores desperately desired victories, this could also prove unsettling on the domestic front because victory produces assertive heroic generals who tend to pose nasty challenges to presidents-for-life.

If there is a war, the now better-prepared Armenians could hold their positions. In a venerable revolutionary pattern, external assault elicits a patriotic *levée en masse*. This prospect at once makes the future dangerously incalculable. Revolutions under attack often radicalize with surprising force. Could the hitherto non-violent and legalistic Pashinyan survive such a turn of events? Might he be replaced by a yet unknown Armenian General Bonaparte or become a Napoleon himself? In the eventuality of a long, ferocious war (that may involve the use of strategic missiles), how would Turkey or Iran act? If Iran makes a move, Israel, as well as Europe and the United States (and NATO) could become involved. Remember, the largest, politically influential concentrations of Armenians abroad are in France, the United States, and also in Russia. Given the roster of dire prospects and the prior geopolitical commitments between Yerevan and Moscow, a more conservative turn could occur, and Pashinyan's Armenia could be left to meet its own economic ruin and disillusionments in the near future. But will Armenia get ruined?

Not necessarily at all. On the positive side, Armenia seems to possess a surprisingly strong economic potential. This hopeful scenario means a "developmental state" purposefully directing economic investments in the initial phases. The majority of twentieth-century precedents were authoritarian like in South Korea, Singapore, Brazil, and Chile under military rule. But there are democratic exceptions such as Israel and Ireland, which, like Armenia, capitalized primarily on their own strong ethno-national identities and large overseas diaspora. During his visit to Moscow in September 2018, Pashinyan acknowledged plans of sending Armenian troops to Syria on a "humanitarian mission." If this plan indeed comes to pass, analogies could be drawn to South Korea's sending its troops to serve alongside its Western allies in South Vietnam in the late 1960s. This move might yet buy Armenia breathing space for economic development.

Still, at present, the people of Armenia are impoverished, even if they have preserved their traditional craftsman skills, family discipline, and famed entrepreneurial spirit. Only a third of all Armenians today remain in their homeland. In addition to the historical dislocations and forced migrations, in the aftermath of Soviet collapse Armenia suffered a massive labor emigration and brain drain. This loss could yet become a gain in the longer run because Armenians, toughened and united by their difficult history, remain patriotically attached to their ancestral land and culture. The

combination of diaspora resources and connections with high-quality and relatively inexpensive labor in the homeland seems a recipe for fueling economic growth.

Conclusion

Unlike China with its ocean of cheap labor, but much like the middle-income Israel or Ireland, the Armenian model of development must focus on post-industrial economic activities: information technologies, advanced chemistry and electronics, healthcare, education, tourism, ecological high-value added agriculture, and the like. This does not exclude old Keynesian tricks like launching public works programs that immediately create jobs. Among other positive factors, the new government should mention the internal safety of Armenia: in 2017 it registered only 49 cases of homicide, which is 1.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, as low as in Western Europe. Armenia has abundant fresh water from the mountains (which still needs conservation), and add in the sheer beauty of the country, rich in ancient monuments, its diversity of climate zones, pronounced seasons, the openness and polyglot traditions of the culture, which puts a prestigious premium on education and achievement. Incidentally, chess is a compulsory subject in Armenian schools beginning in the fourth grade.

Critically missing, however, until now, has been an accountable and sufficiently strong political regime that could guarantee a proper investment climate even to patriotic Armenians from the diaspora. It remains to be seen whether the charisma and political acumen of Nikol Pashinyan could now help foster such a regime. The opportunity so far seems real. Besides, there are no alternatives.

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