

# ARMENIA'S VELVET REVOLUTION

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Through much of the Eurasian region, deepening authoritarianism has been the defining political trend of recent years. In 2018, Armenia defied this pattern when a peaceful nationwide protest movement dislodged a deeply corrupt semiauthoritarian regime and set the stage for free and fair elections. The Kremlin, which has become the bulwark of Eurasian authoritarianism, projects a narrative that portrays the democratic changes of the early 1990s as a foreign aberration, a brief deviation from a historically determined authoritarian trajectory. Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" gives the lie to this narrative. Recalling earlier openings such as the national-liberation movements that arose in the waning years of the USSR and the more recent "color revolutions" (protest movements that successfully challenged fraudulent elections or undemocratic leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan), Armenia's breakthrough suggests that the window for democratic progress has not closed.

While Armenia's new government faces enormous challenges, the country has taken remarkable strides toward democratization over the course of just one year. Protests began in April 2018, sparked by Republican Party leader Serzh Sarkisian's plans to sidestep a two-term limit by moving from the office of president to that of prime minister. On April 14, a group of about thirty opposition and civil society activists forged an alliance to oppose Sarkisian's appointment. Using social media, they ignited a national civil-disobedience campaign that forced Sarkisian's government to resign on April 23—a mere six days after his election to the premiership. On May 7, Nikol Pashinian, a charismatic protest

leader and head of the tiny opposition party Civic Contract, was elected prime minister. Over the summer, several former officials were arrested on criminal charges of corruption and abuse of office.

In December, Armenians chose a new parliament in early elections. These elections were free and fair—a notable milestone in a country where previous votes had been dogged by charges of fraud and manipulation. The My Step Alliance, led by Pashinian, won 70 percent of the vote and now controls 88 of the 132 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. The other two parties that entered parliament are Prosperous Armenia (the party of oligarch Gagik Tsarukian) with 26 seats, and the technocratic Bright Armenia, a former coalition partner of Civic Contract, with 18. Both parties are broadly supportive of reform, but are independent of My Step. Some opposition parliamentarians are beginning to engage in intense criticism of the ruling party, although they lack the votes to block legislation. Sarkisian's long-ruling Republican Party, meanwhile, failed to clear the 5 percent threshold for representation in parliament.

Each of the post-Soviet states where color revolutions have occurred has experienced cycles of opening political space followed by backsliding. The revolutions created opportunities for systemic reform, but years later persistent problems with corruption, weak judiciaries, and weak political parties remain. Various pitfalls could lead to a similar outcome in Armenia. The inexperienced young politicians who have come to power may make serious mistakes; a dearth of competent professionals in government service may stall or derail reforms; and as socioeconomic improvements are slow to materialize, the reformers' popularity may begin to wane, creating a temptation for them to abuse government authority.

One important way in which Armenia differs from Georgia and Ukraine is that Armenia does not seek to change its geopolitical orientation. Pashinian has made it clear that his government will honor Armenia's international obligations, which include accepting Russian military bases and Russian border guards, as well as maintaining Armenia's membership in Russian-led intergovernmental institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). He has sought to show respect for Russia's foreign-policy interests while also asserting Armenia's sovereignty in a way that is compatible with Russian president Vladimir Putin's own vision of state sovereignty. As Armenia's new government begins to pursue anticorruption and transitional-justice agendas likely to ruffle feathers in the Russian Federation, the future prospects of this strategy remain uncertain.

Popular democratic movements have emerged repeatedly over the past three decades of Armenian history. These episodes of activism included major demonstrations over contested elections in 2008 and 2013,

as well as numerous social and economic protests in the 2010s. These actions constituted a long process of experimentation with different leaders, tactics, and forms of protest, which in 2018 finally culminated in a peaceful transfer of power carried out in accordance with Armenia's constitution.

Armenia's unexpected revolution suggests that it would be unwise to discount the persistent public appetite for democracy in other countries where democratic movements have arisen repeatedly only to be defeated and marginalized. The Armenian experience also underscores that protests are not merely fleeting outbursts that relieve the pressure on a dysfunctional system. Protests that are repressed or that do not bring about systemic changes nonetheless provide a reminder that governments are supposed to be responsible to their citizens. Even where protests are seemingly apolitical, focusing on narrow issues such as transport prices or the destruction of a public park, they generate leaders, encourage young people to keep questioning the political elite, and foster collaboration among members of civil society.

### **Democratic Precursors**

Armenia's breakthrough seemed sudden. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the 2018 protest movement built on ideas and networks that have been maturing gradually over time. Since the 1980s, Armenians had pursued change by mobilizing protest movements, at first around issues of national self-determination and later around demands to counter corruption and to hold free and fair elections. Even as Armenia's post-Soviet leaders moved away from democratic rule, these movements continued to challenge creeping authoritarianism, invoking themes of national awakening, overcoming deprivations, and establishing an accountable government. The most significant movement prior to 2018 occurred in 2008, when President Robert Kocharian resorted to violence to suppress peaceful opposition protests that could have culminated in a "color revolution." Although some believed that these events had resulted in the onset of civic apathy, strong performances by opposition parties in subsequent elections and frequent protests around social issues show that public demand for democracy persisted.

While the leadership of Armenia's protest movements changed with the generations, there was considerable continuity in goals and spirit. Successive civil society and opposition movements learned from their predecessors' achievements and failures, and they have adjusted their strategies to engage broader segments of the population.

As freedom of assembly gradually widened in the last years of the USSR, Yerevan's first mass rallies took place in 1988. They called for unification with Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority autonomous region of the neighboring Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. In subsequent

years, the dispute over this region's status escalated into an Armenian-Azerbaijani war, and the area remains a highly volatile conflict zone. What started as a movement to change the status of Karabakh ultimately grew into the Armenian independence movement. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a leader of this movement—Levon Ter-Petrosian, a charismatic orator and a scholar of ancient languages—became the first president of post-Soviet Armenia.

Following the 1996 presidential balloting, Armenia saw its first dramatic protests calling for fair elections: Crowds who suspected that Ter-Petrosian had fixed the vote to secure a second term burst into parliament to demand a recount. In 1998, Ter-Petrosian was ousted and replaced by Prime Minister Robert Kocharian, formerly the defense minister of Nagorno-Karabakh. In sharp contrast to the firebrand intellectual Ter-Petrosian, Kocharian was a onetime Komsomol (Communist youth-group) official and was seen as a figure of the security services. He easily developed a friendship with Russian president Putin following the latter's rise to power in 2000.

Kocharian established a "patronal" authoritarian system, similar to though less repressive than the Russia system.<sup>1</sup> Such regimes are prone to instability because they lack clearly established processes for choosing leaders, but they allow some space for society to contest the elite's arbitrary decisions. In Armenia, the question of succession twice became a touchstone for revolutionary mass movements, first in 2008 and then again in 2018.

## **The 2008 Election**

The most significant precursor to the Velvet Revolution was the mass protest movement of 2008. In that year, Kocharian, who was reaching the end of his second term, sought to engineer a transition to fellow Karabakh native and former defense minister Serzh Sarkisian. Ter-Petrosian challenged Sarkisian for the presidency. Although Ter-Petrosian was in his sixties, he proved surprisingly popular among the youth, who flocked to his fiery speeches and festive rallies. Ter-Petrosian called for greater government transparency and accountability, and he also brought Armenia's independence struggle to life for a new generation. On February 16, when official results proclaimed a first-round victory for Sarkisian, the opposition organized a standing protest in Yerevan's central Freedom Square. This movement followed closely the model of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine: A tent city was organized with continuous rallies and concerts. Participants celebrated the nation and issued calls for a second round of voting. Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," the hymn of the EU, rang out over the square, and EU and Ukrainian flags were prominently displayed.

As the protests continued, they attracted more people. At major

marches, the size of the crowd swelled to more than a hundred thousand. The protesters were overwhelmingly young residents of Yerevan and tended to be middle-class, but others were starting to travel in from the regions to participate. On February 26, a government rally was organized for Sarkisian, and thousands of people were bussed in from other parts of Armenia. These people left the government rally and walked over to Freedom Square to join the protest, a deep embarrassment for the government. Sarkisian's inability to draw supporters also cast doubt on his claim to have won over 50 percent of the vote in a field of nine candidates.

How flawed were the 2008 elections? While domestic and international observers noted many instances of electoral fraud, its overall scale was difficult to assess. The OSCE released a statement endorsing the official results on February 20, but later amended this statement to be more critical of the process. Domestic election observation was chaotic, with Armenian monitoring groups lagging far behind those in neighboring Georgia in their technical capacity.

Over the thirteen days of protest, the Armenian opposition had difficulty communicating the credibility of its cause to outsiders. There were very few independent media outlets and even less international coverage. While there was radio and internet livestreaming from the square, only a single local television broadcaster carried reports from the protests.

The government decided to clear the square early in the morning of March 1. Authorities employed excessive force, beating people who were sleeping in tents. Ter-Petrosian was placed under house arrest after imploring his supporters to comply with the demands of the police. Protesters regrouped in other parts of the city. Police attacked demonstrators indiscriminately, and as rumors about the extent of the violence spread, some protesters fought off the police with sticks and metal bars and set vehicles on fire. During the night, police shot indiscriminately, set off tear gas and flares, and drove vehicles into protesters. Altogether, at least eight protesters and two policemen were killed. In addition, there were scores injured and more than a hundred arrested. In the evening of March 1, martial law was declared for a period of twenty days. Numerous activists went into hiding, fled abroad, or were sent to jail.

International human-rights monitors concluded that the government used excessive force and that it failed to investigate the killings, instead pursuing politically motivated cases against the protest organizers.<sup>2</sup> By demonstrating that the government was ready to kill its own citizens to remain in power, the 2008 events created a deep rift between state and society. One of the key mandates for Armenia's new government is to initiate a process of transitional justice that will properly analyze what occurred, determine legal and ethical responsibility, and ultimately help to bring about reconciliation.

The tragedy of 2008 was also a formative experience for the generation of activists who would go on to lead the Velvet Revolution. Pashinian, then 33 and editor of an opposition newspaper, proved able to connect with the crowd through showmanship and powerful rhetoric, emerging as a prominent opposition leader. Following the March 2008 events, he went into hiding for nearly a year, then surrendered to authorities and served time in jail for “organizing mass disorders.” After being amnestied from prison in 2011, Pashinian entered parliament as a member of Ter-Petrosian’s party, but broke away to establish Civic Contract in 2015. Many others who joined Civic Contract, and later the 2018 protest movement, were active in the 2008 demonstrations. In the intervening decade, these activists learned to speak to the broader masses—and social media arrived to help them spread their message.

### **The Experimental Decade**

Following the crisis of 2008, it might have seemed that the public had accepted the authoritarian order. In fact, however, opposition remained, particularly in Armenia’s developing civil society. Activists who seemed to represent marginal segments of society, such as small opposition parties or environmental movements, learned to build strategic alliances and to connect effectively with the broader public. Thanks to a network of NGOs organized by Transparency International, by the time of the 2013 presidential elections there was a credible and professional national vote-monitoring group that could work with international observer missions on the basis of systematic data. Revelations made by the investigative-reporting organization Hetq led to Armenia’s becoming one of only three countries where the Panama Papers’ disclosure of hidden offshore accounts resulted in a high-level official’s resignation.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2013 presidential balloting, the incumbent Sarkisian was again declared to have secured a first-round victory. Once again, thousands took to the streets to challenge the results. Opposition candidate Raffi Hovannisian walked to each town in Armenia in an effort to greet every voter and carried out a three-week hunger strike. This protest ended peacefully. At its conclusion, even as Sarkisian was being inaugurated for his second term, Hovannisian led thousands at a parallel event in a vow to resist Sarkisian’s rule and build a better system.<sup>4</sup> Over successive elections and protests, Armenian civil society was struggling to find a way of pursuing its goals that would not bring about violent reprisals.

During this period, young people in Armenia largely avoided politics while also using creative protest tactics to advance social causes. These included protests against bus-fare hikes in Yerevan, campaigns to protect a public park, and the “Save Teghut” environmental movement, which shut down a Russian-backed mining concern. The largest demonstrations occurred during the “Electric Yerevan” movement

in the summer of 2015, when youth staged a peaceful march and sit-in to protest a rise in electricity prices. Sarkisian, who preferred to handle conflict by trying to wait it out, held off for ten days before ordering the protest's forcible dispersal by police. He subsequently granted many of the protesters' demands.

Inspired by social-media posts, the "Electric Yerevan" protests lacked clear leaders, but the spokespeople who emerged were opposed to engaging in politics (and especially geopolitics). They sensed real danger from any comparison to Ukraine's EuroMaidan demonstrators, having observed the way Russian media demonized Ukrainians. In speaking to reporters and foreign observers, they emphasized that their goals were limited exclusively to reducing the price of electricity. Many of the young protesters also mistrusted Pashinian, who called on members of parliament and other public figures to prevent violence by standing between the police and the youth.

As this example suggests, the social protests of the 2010s were frequently successful at redressing specific grievances. Their participants, however, perceived themselves as separate from politics, which they regarded as a futile and dirty pursuit. Nonetheless, by 2018 many of these same young people rallied to demand a change of regime, and some of them even agreed to take up government office.

In April 2016, intense fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh (dubbed the "four-day war") revealed that Armenia's military capabilities had suffered due to high-level corruption. Rule by two successive "strongmen" from Karabakh, it turned out, had failed to deliver greater security. Anger over this state of affairs set the stage for a July 2017 rebellion in which Sasna Tsrer, a nationalist group composed of Karabakh war veterans, seized a police station in Yerevan and held it for almost two weeks. Although peaceful crowds of Sasna Tsrer's supporters rallied every night, most Armenians were unwilling to sanction violent protest. Eventually, police suppressed the rebellion and its supporters with indiscriminate force. The Sasna Tsrer gunmen surrendered to police and received long sentences (they were released following the Velvet Revolution).

As the end of his second term as president in 2018 approached, Sarkisian faced a dilemma due to the presidential two-term limit set out in Armenia's constitution. To perpetuate its rule, his government decided to shift power to the prime minister, who was under no such limitations. In 2015, a referendum was held on constitutional amendments that, among other things, dramatically increased the prime minister's power and reduced the power of the president. These amendments officially passed with support from 63 percent of voters, though there were allegations of government pressure and manipulation. In addition, the electoral code was modified to bolster the dominance of the ruling Republican Party.

The 2017 parliamentary elections were surprisingly quiet. Despite the electoral-code changes, the Republicans were held to just under 50

percent of the vote, in part due to the strong performance of Prosperous Armenia (which took 27 percent). Pashinian's coalition (the Yelk Alliance) received slightly less than 8 percent of the vote. While it is debatable how independent Prosperous Armenia actually was,<sup>5</sup> the resulting parliament had at least the appearance of pluralism and included a few genuine oppositionists.

In contrast to the events of 2008 and 2013, there were no major protests, even though domestic and international observers largely deemed the vote to be deeply flawed.<sup>6</sup> Most Armenians were disillusioned with party politics, and there were widespread reports that both the Republican Party and Prosperous Armenia had engaged in vote-buying, with the average price for a vote reportedly being around US\$20.<sup>7</sup> This led average Armenians to feel either complicit in the results or pessimistic about the alternatives. Seeing that the population had passively accepted the constitutional revisions of 2015, changes to the electoral law, and the 2017 parliamentary results, most observers concluded that Armenians had resigned themselves to accepting the regime's dictates. This conclusion was erroneous.

## The Revolution

In March, Sarkisian began hinting at his intention to take office as prime minister. Given the risks involved, what drove him to make this move? Although Sarkisian did use his position to benefit himself and his family, the Armenian political system was not dominated by a single personality the way the Russian or Azerbaijani governments are. Thus it might have been possible for Sarkisian to leave elected office while remaining head of the Republican Party and keeping much of his wealth and influence. It seems, however, that regime insiders were unable to identify a candidate who would both be acceptable to Moscow and preserve the balance of power within Armenia's elite.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, Sarkisian's attempt to have himself named prime minister—a decision that ordinary Armenians had never even tacitly supported—proved to be a flashpoint in a way that the rigged 2017 elections had not been. Civil society leaders and many ordinary Armenians expressed despair at what they saw as the final consolidation of the ruling regime's political dominance. There also was mounting discontent with Armenia's continued lack of economic and other progress. Finally, there was the leadership of Nikol Pashinian, who had clearly learned from the experience of previous protest movements.

In late March, activists led by Pashinian formed the "Take a Step" initiative and traveled on foot from the northern city of Gyumri through several rural districts, arriving in Yerevan on April 14. There they merged with the Yerevan-based civil society group "Reject Serzh" to issue a call for a nationwide civil-disobedience campaign. The protests of the Velvet Revolution sought to dispel the hostility and fear left by



the memory of the March 2008 and Sasna Tsrer events. Participants held their outstretched hands palms up to demonstrate that they were unarmed, with Pashinian declaring “in our hands there are no stones, there is no hate, there is no aggressiveness, in our hands there is only love, in our hands there is only respect . . . light is in our hands.” They made a simple, clear demand: *Reject Serzh*.<sup>9</sup>

Protesters combined old methods, such as chanting slogans and blocking roads, with new technologies: Protests were organized in real time and updates shared over social media. The organizers deliberately avoided a “Maidan” scenario. There was no central location and no tent city. On the contrary, the activists were mobile and spontaneous. They designed their protests so as to paralyze traffic, with intersections blocked by parked cars, carousels of slowly walking protesters, and even mothers with strollers. The police had to chase protests that popped up constantly in new locations. The overall atmosphere was jovial, inclusive, and festive, and it tapped into the “fear of missing out” that social media so famously engenders—the protests looked good on Instagram. Pashinian and his young supporters also knew how to use very traditional symbols: Pashinian, for instance, held up his bleeding hand, injured by barbed wire, like a martyr.

On April 21, Sarkisian agreed to a televised meeting with Pashinian. It lasted less than two minutes. Pashinian asked Sarkisian to resign, and Sarkisian refused, saying that the protesters had not learned the lesson of March 2008. When Pashinian responded, “you cannot threaten the Armenian nation,” Sarkisian stormed off the stage. On the following day, Pashinian and several other protest leaders were arrested, but rallies continued in Yerevan and gained momentum throughout the country. Priests and Armenian soldiers stood at the forefront of the column of protesters that marched through Yerevan on April 22. Ultimately, Sarkisian elected not to use violence against his own citizens. On April 23, he stepped down, making the remarkable statement: “Nikol Pashinian was right, I was wrong.”<sup>10</sup> A new era in Armenian politics had begun.

The months between Sarkisian’s resignation on April 23 and the December 9 parliamentary elections were distinguished by an unusual model of direct democracy (a term adopted by Pashinian himself).<sup>11</sup> A savvier politician than many had expected, Pashinian proved adept at managing the personalities and interests of the ruling elite while maintaining strong public support. By harnessing his personal popularity and appealing directly to the people when the entrenched elites threatened to block or reverse progress, Pashinian was able to achieve a peaceful and constitutional transition. While the durability of this model remains to be seen, it worked during the revolutionary period because the revolution’s leaders and average Armenians shared the same priorities: removing the most corrupt officials and holding new parliamentary elections that would be free and fair.

In three key instances, Pashinian used social media to appeal directly to the Armenian people, asking them to take to the streets and reject the Republican Party's attempts to hold on to power. He did so in April during the initial movement to force Serzh Sarkisian to resign; in May, when Republican Party MPs threatened to elect their own candidate as the new prime minister; and in October, when legislators moved to change the parliamentary rules to make it more difficult to hold new elections. The Republican Party continued to dominate the legislature until the December elections, and so long as the official levers of power remained in their hands, protests were the only means available to push beyond the initial revolution and to hold officials accountable.

### **First Steps**

During the revolutionary period, Pashinian launched one of his government's most visible and popular campaigns thus far: prosecuting corrupt officials, in particular those complicit in the 2008 attacks on protesters. Initially, the government allowed many corrupt officials and businessmen to avoid prosecution by returning a portion of the money they had stolen, but eventually it moved on to prosecutions. The handful of symbolic investigations launched to date have exposed the scale and impact of corruption, and they have also shaken the presumption of impunity. The first high-profile case was both strategically and felicitously chosen. Raids on the home of retired general Manvel Grigorian—a former Republican Party MP and father of the mayor of Etchmiadzin (the spiritual home of the Armenian Apostolic Church)—revealed not only his tremendous personal wealth, but also a stockpile of arms, food, and other goods stolen from donations intended for troops serving in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>12</sup>

This and other high-profile arrests served several important functions. First, they indicated that the Pashinian government would prosecute unpopular corrupt officials and return at least some of their assets to the state. Second, they highlighted the way in which corruption threatened not only Armenia's economic interests, but also its security. Third, they increased trust in the National Security Service, which played a prominent role in the raids, and helped Armenia's new leadership to make allies among the security forces.<sup>13</sup>

In late July, former president Kocharian and former deputy defense minister Yuri Khatchaturov—then head of the Moscow-led CSTO—were arrested and charged with “overthrowing Armenia's constitutional order” as part of an investigation into the events of 1 March 2008. Kocharian, with control over several major media outlets, a personal friendship with Putin, and possibly vast personal wealth, was one of the most obvious threats to the Pashinian government. From that perspective, his arrest was politically expedient. Yet by prosecuting Kocharian, the new government

risked angering not only the powerful Karabakh clan—there have been repeated protests in Karabakh calling for the former president’s release—but also the Kremlin. Though Russia has been more cautious in its approach to Armenia than it was in postrevolutionary Ukraine or Georgia, Pashinian’s attack on corruption clearly makes many Russian officials uneasy, and the signs of pressure from Moscow are growing.

In September, leaked calls between two top security-service officials seemed to offer evidence that Pashinian had specifically urged the arrest of at least Khatchaturov.<sup>14</sup> The publication of these recordings on YouTube was widely understood as a Russian power play. Yet while a few among the Armenian elite took issue with what looked like the Pashinian government placing pressure on the courts, the broader public seems to have been largely unperturbed. This may in part reflect a recognition that during the transitional period some institutions—including the heavily corrupted judiciary—were still functioning as though under the old regime.

While using mass popular support to compel concessions from some within the ruling elite, Pashinian began building strategic alliances with other powerful figures. Prominent among them was Gagik Tsarukian, whose Prosperous Armenia party was not investigated. Prosperous Armenia declared its alliance with Pashinian and My Step shortly after Sarkisian’s resignation, and its votes in parliament were key to Pashinian’s confirmation as prime minister in May and to calling for early elections in October. While Tsarukian had longstanding connections to Kocharian and was no great friend to Pashinian (who in 2004 accused the oligarch of blowing up his car),<sup>15</sup> he clearly could judge which way the political wind was blowing.

The new government’s future relationship to Prosperous Armenia will be a critical question. In a revolutionary period, alliances with oligarchs might be necessary. Eventually, however, the government will need to apply the rule of law consistently or risk becoming mired in the same kleptocratic system that was at the heart of Armenia’s old regime. Breaking free from political dependence on oligarchs is a difficult task that neither Ukraine nor Georgia, fifteen years after their first color revolutions, has yet been able to accomplish.

The December elections marked the end of the revolutionary period and the beginning of the difficult process of creating a new system. Despite the progress of the past year, the challenges facing Armenia’s new government are immense. In the domestic realm, years of rule by a criminally corrupt regime have saddled Armenia with a legacy of injustice, high levels of poverty, and a heavy debt burden. Moreover, most of Armenia’s major domestic business concerns are controlled by people connected to the former authorities, as are many of the broadcast and online media. These outlets have already begun a campaign of criticizing and distracting the government with minor scandals, undermining its ability to set a clear agenda.

Thus far, the new government has struggled to elaborate its initial priorities for structural reforms. While the political will to counter corruption and restore justice is evident, Armenia's new leadership has yet to move convincingly beyond select, high-profile cases to address the issue in a comprehensive way. Areas such as tax and customs policy, education, and regional development are similarly awaiting a clear vision for reform. Certain promised reforms seem to have been placed on hold, including the constitutional and legal changes needed to address two dangerous legacies of the previous regime: the over-concentration of power in the prime minister, and an electoral system designed to perpetuate single-party dominance.

The experiences of Georgia and Ukraine illustrate how difficult it can be to hold corrupt officials accountable in a way that respects the rule of law, while simultaneously trying to bring in a new cadre of independent and professional judges, investigators, and prosecutors. Nonetheless, it is vital that the new government undertake key reforms now, while it has a strong popular mandate. The first key priority for creating a legitimate democratic government is to finish dismantling Armenia's oligarchic system. This will require setting out clear criteria for determining which corrupt entities will be subject to prosecution, and which will only be required to reimburse the treasury—decisions that hitherto appear to have been made in backroom deals. In the longer term, plans will be needed for breaking up monopolies and creating a strong, independent anticorruption body.

An equally urgent priority is reforming the judiciary and instituting some form of transitional justice. Armenia's judges and prosecutors are notoriously corrupt and subject to political pressure. As it is not practical to replace the entire judiciary at once, there needs to be a phased plan for removing the most compromised officials and training new ones, ideally chosen through a system that precludes patronage appointments. One of the first tasks facing an independent Armenian judiciary will be to work toward rectifying the injustices suffered by the hundreds, if not thousands, of Armenians who were wrongly imprisoned or had their businesses seized by the old regime.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the government must lay out a plan for economic development. Armenia currently suffers from crushing levels of poverty, and the best political reforms will be meaningless if they do not bring increased prosperity and security for ordinary Armenians.

## **Challenges Abroad**

On the foreign-policy front, Armenia's challenges include closed borders with Turkey, the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and continued Russian influence. Armenia has taken a more conciliatory attitude toward Russia than did Ukraine or Georgia, but any attempt it

makes to create a transparent and accountable government will inevitably threaten Russian interests. Russia controls key sectors of the Armenian economy, including gas and electricity distribution; Russian forces

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operate a military base in Gyumri and patrol Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Iran; and a considerable percentage of Armenian citizens either reside in Russia permanently or migrate there on a seasonal basis.<sup>16</sup> Russia also serves as the dominant arbiter of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Kremlin could use any of these levers to cripple Armenia. By January 2019, Putin had started to flex his muscles, most prominently by increasing the price of natural gas and by hosting a series of meetings to introduce Pashinian to President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. Notably, Putin sent New Year’s greetings to former president Kocharian, who is now in detention awaiting trial, but has delayed congratulating Pashinian on his electoral victory.

Yet any overt action to seriously harm Armenia right after its revolution would cost Russia its popularity among the Armenian population. Given the common pattern of backsliding in the years following a democratic breakthrough, Putin may deem it more expedient to wait, and to begin easing Russia’s clients into key positions after the popularity of the democrats begins to wane. After all, just six years after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich—the same politician whose fraudulent victory in 2004 had triggered that year’s protests—won a largely free and fair presidential vote. Russia may wish to conserve the considerable reservoir of goodwill it still enjoys in Armenia rather than reprise the scenario that has played out in Ukraine and Georgia, where Russian military intervention has alienated the public. If such medium-term calculations are indeed behind Russia’s current display of restraint, Armenia’s reformists have only a short window of opportunity in which to prove that they are capable of governing effectively.

Pashinian is seeking to balance Armenia’s dependence on Russia by deepening his country’s other relationships—for instance, by implementing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU that was signed in 2017 and continuing to develop Armenia’s Partnership for Peace arrangement with NATO. Analysts have floated a range of plans for economic diversification, from Silicon Valley partnerships to alternative-energy development to expanding Armenia’s tourism sector. China is building a large new embassy in Yerevan and

is poised to expand its influence through technology and investment. Deepening Armenia's relationship with an ambitious global power that may seem to offset Russian influence, in addition to being a potential source of funding for infrastructure upgrades, could prove very alluring, and many analysts point to China as they look around for potential partners to help stimulate economic growth.<sup>17</sup> Finally, as a genuinely popular head of state who is not dependent on nationalist parties, Pashinian may be in a better position than his predecessors to find compromises with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and to begin working toward normalizing Armenia's long-frozen relations with Turkey.

Regardless of whether the new government will be able to construct a better polity, a dramatic change in the mindsets of ordinary Armenians has taken place. People have regained a sense of self-worth; they refer to the government as "theirs" and express pride in the removal of the old regime. The 9 December 2018 parliamentary elections were the cleanest national elections that Armenia has ever held. Even with the many challenges the new government faces, the prospects for real democracy are brighter now than they have ever been.

Already there are promising signs in some areas: The new government supports Armenia's nascent technology and alternative-energy sectors, which provide models for generating economic growth. Armenia and Azerbaijan are making small but symbolically important steps toward starting negotiations over Karabakh. Civil society in Armenia as well as in the Armenian diaspora remains ready to engage with the government on these issues, and it can be a powerful source of support in developing new policies that reflect local needs and priorities, as well as in explaining the necessity of tough reforms to the broader public.

The new government is at the pinnacle of its popularity, but it has only a brief time in which to enact needed reforms. The government must outline its top priorities and work with its allies in civil society, the diaspora, and international institutions to put them into action. Reforms, particularly those that reduce government spending, may not be universally popular, and public support for the government is likely to decline as the mood of revolutionary euphoria fades. The key lesson from other transitions, however, is that Armenia must boldly embark on the path of reform, or risk letting its historic opportunity slip away.

## NOTES

1. See "Good News from the Caucasus? An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Demokratizatsiya* 26 (Fall 2018): 438.

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