

Caucasus Edition

Journal of Conflict Transformation

POLITICAL TRANSITIONS
AND CONFLICTS IN THE
SOUTH CAUCASUS

Caucasus Edition Volume 3, Issue 2
2018

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The Poverty of Militarism: The ‘Velvet Revolution’ and the Defeat of Militarist Quasi-Ideology in Armenia

Mikayel Zolyan

In the last years before the Armenian “velvet revolution,” the ruling elite of Armenia suffered from a severe lack of legitimacy and public trust. The government tried to fill this vacuum by resorting to a militarist quasi-ideology, represented by the so-called “nation-army” concept. Under the pretext of national mobilization, this concept advocated consolidation of society around the political leadership. However, the unpopularity of the ruling elite and widespread corruption undermined the efficiency of the use of the “nation-army” concept for legitimization of the existing system, paving the way for the “velvet revolution.” Of course, while the defeat of “nation-army” militarism is certainly good news for both Armenia and the whole region, it would be premature to expect immediate advances in the solution of the Karabakh conflict. However, in the long run, Armenia’s change of government creates an opportunity for new approaches, which, in perspective, could lead to progress in peaceful conflict transformation.

‘You Don’t Change Horses in Midstream’

For decades one of the biggest problems both for the political elite and the political system in Armenia has been the lack of political legitimacy. The democratic facade of the political system contrasted the practice of widespread election manipulations. Accusations of stolen elections, often followed by mass protests and a violent crackdown on the opposition, have plagued the Armenian government since the mid-1990s. While in each specific case the degree and nature of the violations may have varied, the overall trend was obvious: not a single time in the history of post-Soviet Armenia has the

government been changed through elections. The rules of the game have been set in such a way that the incumbent government was winning all the national elections in the country, ensuring the survival of the political elite, but also depriving it of the trust of the population and eroding its legitimacy.

Obviously, disputed elections are a common feature of many authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Political regimes that lack legal-democratic legitimacy often compensate for it with other types and sources of legitimacy, which may include charismatic leadership, influential ideology, and economic prosperity. Armenia’s ruling elite had none of these sources of legitimacy at its service. Instead, it exploited another common tool for compensating the lack of democratic legitimacy: external conflict. For many governments around the world, external conflict, which can be exploited to consolidate against external enemies, has been indispensable in securing support or the passive acceptance of societies that otherwise would have been reluctant to accept their governments as legitimate. For both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the conflict has served as a tool for political elites to consolidate their support and marginalize competitors.

The argument, which is best summarized by the proverbial Russian expression “you don’t change horses in midstream” has been a part of the discourse of the Armenian ruling elites since the early 1990s, as has been the case with many post-Soviet governments. In 2018, it was once again used by the ruling elite to justify the prolongation of Serzh Sargsyan’s power. Thus, a few weeks before the “velvet revolution,” ruling Republican Party MP Gevorg Kostanyan argued that “during war you don’t change the commander—that’s it,” citing the Karabakh conflict and Sargsyan’s position as the chief commander (Kirakosyan 2018). For Armenia’s ruling elite the strength of the Karabakh factor was based not just on the possibility of a war at any minute, but also on the perception that the Armenian side emerged as a victor from the conflict in the 1990s. Hence, the argument went, while there may be problems in the economy, corruption, lack of jobs, and inequality, Armenia’s rulers at least achieved success on the Karabakh issue. Thus, the ruling elite took credit both for the current status of Nagorno-Karabakh and for the relative peace, which continues in spite of the numerous incidents on the line of contact.

The April War and the Erosion of the Serzh Sargsyan Government’s Legitimacy

The government’s potential to use the Karabakh factor as the basis for its legitimacy was severely limited by the events in April 2016—the so-called

“four-day war.” The April events showed that Sargsyan’s government’s ability to guarantee peace in Karabakh through a combination of military and diplomatic measures was exaggerated. Neither the existence of a strong military force, nor Armenia’s alliance with Russia and membership in organizations like CSTO, stopped the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh from escalating in April. Also, cases of corruption and mismanagement in the army were revealed, which influenced the performance of the military in the “four-day war.” The government itself confirmed this perception in the aftermath of the “four-day war” by firing several important officials (Tovmasyan 2016).

One aspect of the events of April 2016 seems all the more important today: a widespread volunteer movement, as well as a relief effort, taking place outside of the government institutions, mostly through grassroots initiatives. Men volunteered to serve in the military, while citizens all over the country collected food, clothes, and hygiene items in order to send this aid to the troops and civilians who had suffered as a result of the fighting. A lot of this mobilization took place outside of the government structures, which also led to the eroding of the “security argument” used by the government to ensure its legitimacy. As one of the observers of this process, Raffi Elliott-ian argued “solidarity with the military does not mean approval of the state” (Elliott-ian 2016). While the majority in society did not question the need for consolidation, it was the government’s ability to lead such consolidation that was increasingly under doubt. In retrospect, we can see how this erosion led to the tectonic shift in Armenian politics two years later.

However, while all of this is clear in hindsight, the immediate effects of the April events have been somewhat different. In its immediate aftermath, the government benefited from the patriotic consolidation, as even some of its harshest critics toned down their rhetoric and called for a pan-national consolidation around the government. This consolidation, however, did not last long, and the effect described above manifested in the events of July 2016, when a militant group calling itself “Sasna Tsrer” (“the Madmen of Sasoon”) attacked and captured a police station. Though the group’s actions were clearly illegal, and moreover, violent, a large part of the public sided with the gunmen rather than with the government. While the violent nature of the group’s action prevented large numbers from joining them, the overall mood in society showed that the support of the current government was at an extremely low point. Several thousand supporters marched in the street, many politicians and intellectuals either expressed support for the gunmen, or took a middle road, disapproving of their methods, but supported the idea of protesting against the government. The government’s position on the crisis

had relatively little public support, especially as there were cases of police brutality against protesters. The fact that a group of radical militants could perform a violent action against the law enforcement, and be treated by a significant part of the public as heroes, showed how deep the crisis of legitimacy was that the Armenian government faced (Zolyan 2016).

‘Nation-army’—Militarism as a Quasi-Ideology

With the defeat of the Sasna Tsrer, and the subsequent appointment of a new government under Karen Karapetyan, it seemed that Serzh Sargsyan’s government managed to regain control of the internal political dynamic. This trend was confirmed by the confident victory of the Republican Party in the April 2017 election, even though it was marred by accusations of vote buying and antagonizing voters. It seemed that Sargsyan’s government had absorbed the harm that had been done to its legitimacy by the April war and was set to reproduce itself through the constitutional reform process, which had been set in motion by the constitutional referendum in 2015.

The so-called concept of “nation-army” was put forward by Sargsyan’s team in this setting, more specifically by his former chief of administration turned minister of defense, Vigen Sargsyan. Up to the very moment that the Sargsyans’ lost power, there was never any official document detailing the essence of the “nation-army” concept. There were several legal initiatives that were considered a part of the “nation-army” policies, some of which created huge public outcry. These included the creation of a foundation for the victims of the fighting, which was to be financed by a level tax of 1000 AMD (of about 2 Euro) put on all Armenian citizens. There was also the initiative of abolishing the right to deferment for university students, which led to student protests (Kupfer 2017).

There were also some initiatives that were generally well or neutrally accepted, such as the initiatives “I am” and “I have the honor,” which introduced alternative schemes for attracting additional recruits to the military. These programs envisaged the following, as described by Armenian political analyst Anna Pambukhchyan:

“‘I am’ was offering financial reimbursement (around 10 thousand USD) for an additional year of military service to the two years of the compulsory military service. The money would be paid by the state at the end of the contract. The second program was called ‘I have the honor’ and was offering academic deferment for 3 years of military service instead of compulsory two as an

officer. In both cases the soldiers would serve on the borderline” (Pambukhchyan 2018).

However, there were also concerns with those programs voiced mostly by experts and civil society. “CSOs have criticized both programs because they could be attractive only for the soldiers from financially insecure families, hence the soldiers standing on the borderline would be mostly from poor families” (Pambukhchyan 2018).

The most widespread part of the “nation-army” concept was the increased use of military/militarist rhetoric in the government propaganda. Members of the government and pro-government bloggers widely used the rhetoric of “nation-army” in their communication. They stressed the constant threat of war and the need to unite and consolidate against the enemy, and made it obvious that such consolidation needed to take place around the chief commander of the nation, Serzh Sargsyan. While Sargsyan avoided saying that he planned to stay in power as prime minister after the end of his presidential term, he said that he was planning to “continue playing a role in providing security for Armenia” (Azatutyun 2017). As late as April 20, 2018—three days before his resignation—Sargsyan said in an interview with Shant TV company that the resolution of the Karabakh conflict would not be left “to the next generations” (Regnum 2018). Some analysts interpreted that as a declaration that he would not step down before the conflict is resolved—in other words he would never step down (Dubnov 2018).

Thus, the rhetoric of “nation-army” provided an ideological justification to Sargsyan’s regime in order to legitimize its continued existence. Militarist rhetoric was used not just to glorify the current government, and to call the people to obey it unconditionally, but also to marginalize and demonize opposition and civil society. Thus, during the discussions in parliament regarding the abolition of the deferment for university students, he accused opposition MPs Ararat Mirzoyan and Edmon Marukyan of not having served in the army (Aysor 2017). Earlier, Vigen Sargsyan also sharply rebuked another oppositional politician, Zaruhi Postanjyan, who opposed his suggestion to collect an extra tax to finance the medical treatment of wounded soldiers, stating that only his good education prevented him from using profanity to address her, who, according to Sargsyan, was guilty of “taking political selfies on the tribune of the National Assembly” (Panorama 2016).

This rhetoric was echoed by other members of the establishment close to Vigen Sargsyan. Among them an especially romantic and creative image of the “anti-national” and “anti-army” efforts of the opposition and civil society was

painted by Republican MP and former popular singer Shushan Petrosyan. For an unknown reason she especially singled out the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, a leading Armenian civil society player, which had not been carrying out any projects directly related to the military sphere. She was quoted as saying that “when you are standing on the ground of your country and you feel that you are the continuation of it, and you have blossomed, no Soros, no Eurasia Partnership Foundation, nothing else can stop you” (Aravot 2018).

The Nation vs. ‘the Nation-army’ Concept: the ‘Velvet Revolution’ and What Comes Next

By Spring 2018 it seemed that the “nation-army” concept had helped the government to achieve its objective—provide a quasi-ideological legitimization to prolong President Serzh Sargsyan’s power. And then came April of 2018. Sargsyan’s government was swept away by the wave of mass protests that crossed along various layers of Armenia’s society. The military mostly remained neutral throughout most of the “velvet revolution,” with the exception of an episode in the morning of April 23, the day of Sargsyan’s resignation, when soldiers from the regiment of Armenian peacekeepers joined the protests, unarmed but in uniform (Al Jazeera 2018). If Sargsyan’s government had hopes that the military would come to their aid, these were clearly misplaced: the “velvet revolution” showed that “the nation-army” concept had failed to inspire the military, just as it failed to inspire the civilian public. When on May 2, Pashinyan was asked by a Russian journalist whether the government would use force against his movement, he replied that “if they bring the army to Yerevan, all the soldiers will join us, all 100 percent of them, I guarantee you this, and we shall close the streets not by cars, but by tanks” (Kommersant 2018). Throughout the “velvet revolution” period pro-government media was full of reports of increasing concentration of Azerbaijani forces on the line of contact; however, these failed to reduce the level of “revolutionary activity” of Pashinyan’s supporters.

So why did the militarist quasi-ideology of “nation-army” fail to produce the effect desired by Serzh Sargsyan’s government? Why did all the discourse of “nation-army,” “security,” and “supreme commander” fail to convince Armenian society that the continuation of Sargsyan’s rule was necessary to ensure Armenia’s security? Part of the explanation is that the concept of “nation-army” came from an already discredited ruling elite, compromised by corruption, election fraud, and violent suppression of dissent, particularly the events of March 1 2008, which was the bloodiest episode in the internal politics of Armenia. Throughout the 10 years of Sargsyan’s rule the socio-economic

conditions remained dire, as Armenia never really recovered after the crisis of 2008-2009. All this meant that Sargsyan and his team had a serious problem of trust.

Even though they won the election of 2017 (arguably through voter bribery and use of administrative resources), the 2017 CRRC poll suggested that the trust toward them remained extremely low, at only 18 percent for Sargsyan (Asbarez 2018). According to the same poll, the trust for the army as an institution was, however, dramatically higher, with 51 percent of the population “fully trusting” it and an additional 26 percent “rather trusting than not,” putting the military, together with the Armenian Apostolic Church, in the position of the most trusted institutions in Armenia (Asbarez 2018). These numbers once again helped to explain the rationale for the “nation-army” concept: to transfer the legitimacy that the military still enjoyed in the eyes of the Armenian population to the political regime: it was a smart strategy, but it did not work.

Another question is what the defeat of “nation-army” ideology means for the future of Armenia and the region, particularly the perspectives of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. One should be cautious about making quick conclusions. On the one hand, the defeat of the militarist rhetoric is good news for the whole region, as it can potentially contribute to the general cooling off of passions in the zone of conflict. However, the very logic of conflict is dictating its own rhetoric. Moreover, the internal situation in Armenia demands that the new government will be hard pressed to show that it is not weaker in any way than the previous government. Pashinyan himself, who in the past has been an ally of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, has struggled to shrug off the image of a “defeatist,” which has been associated with Ter-Petrosyan in the past, and which Pashinyan’s rivals tried to project on him. Besides, Pashinyan’s government is more sensitive to the public mood inside Armenia than the previous regime was, since the new government gets its legitimacy from popular support, rather than from the support by the state apparatus or recognition by the international players, as was the case with the previous government. And, obviously, the public mood in Armenia has been significantly hardened during the last years. In the coming years, Pashinyan’s position will reflect this public mood.

So, while the new Armenian government has abandoned the ideological concept of “nation-army,” it does not necessarily mean that the conflict resolution is significantly closer. In fact, if some observers have had hopes concerning “an authoritarian peace,” these hopes will probably no longer be

attainable, even though, in my personal view, these hopes were never realistic. Whatever changes have happened in Armenia, they will hardly bring about a change of dynamic in the conflict, including the rhetoric, unless they are echoed by the Azerbaijani government. On the contrary, a leader like Pashinyan, who stresses his popular legitimacy, will have more incentive to react strongly to possible militant rhetoric from the other side than Serzh Sargsyan, who draw support from the state apparatus and could sometimes be dismissive of public opinion.

However, having said all that, there are also grounds for optimism in terms of peaceful conflict transformation. A detailed analysis of the discourse of the new government on the Karabakh issue is outside the scope of this paper, but, together with “tough” statements, one can also see “peace-oriented” language in some statements. In the long run, the defeat of the militarist rhetoric and quasi-ideology can have a benign effect on the perspectives of peaceful transformation if the rejection of militancy takes place on both sides of the conflict. Armenia’s new political elite, which emerged as a result of a peaceful revolution; which is to a high extent comprised of former opposition and civil society activists; and which claims democracy and human rights as its highest values and non-violence as the underlying principle of organizing life in “New Armenia,” is significantly more prone to peaceful conflict resolution than the former elite. It is important that today all sides of the conflict realize this opportunity and take small steps in the direction of de-escalation of the conflict. While significant progress in the resolution still remains unlikely in the short term, today we are dealing with a unique possibility in breaking the pattern of spiraling escalation that has been developing in the latest years, as each side felt that it had to respond to the actions of the other side, leading to more militancy in rhetoric and more violence on the line of contact. Unfortunately, this possibility, which has emerged as a result of the recent changes in Armenia, is not going to last very long, so it needs to be used now.

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