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PROTESTS IN ARMENIA. THE DOMESTIC DIMENSION

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Introduction by the Special Editor

Last spring, hundreds of thousands of courageous Armenians took to the streets to hold the government accountable non-violently. Peaceful demonstrations unseated the competitive authoritarian regime in Armenia, which had lasted for more than two decades, and led to the empowerment of pro-democratic groups all over the country.

When Nikol Pashinyan initiated a protest march, walking from the northern city of Gyumri to Yerevan in protest against Serzh Sargsyan's decision to assume the seat of prime minister after the end of his second term as president, only a few dozens of his supporters joined him. The seat of prime minister had become the country's top political position following 2015's constitutional referendum, which transformed the country from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of government. Yet what began as a small rally known as "take a step, reject Serzh", within a month snowballed into a massive, nation-wide civil disobedience movement, which was unique in many ways.

Beyond its peaceful nature, the movement was driven purely by intense mass pressure for democratization and happened at a time when the regime seemed most rigid and not ready to depart. In contrast to recent revolutionary movements in the broader region, Armenia's Velvet Revolution was devoid of any foreign policy agenda. Unity of the opposition, which is often deemed as a prerequisite for a successful regime transition, was also less self-evident in the case of Armenia. And even though Nikol Pashinyan initiated and spearheaded the movement, at one point it became fully self-organized. Protestors used a toolbox of novel, inspiring, creative and unusual strategies making it harder for the regime to react swiftly and hamper the movement.

The peaceful transition of power was followed by snap parliamentary elections in December further reinforcing the mandate of the Pashinyan government to undertake serious democratic reforms. His party alliance My Step won over 70% of the vote. Ironically, the former ruling party, the Republicans, who had almost invariably won a majority in every parliamentary election over the past 20 years failed to pass the 5 per cent threshold and were, thus, ejected from Parliament. (See Figure 1 and Table 1 on p. 10/11 at the end of this issue for the election results). International observers hailed the elections as free, competitive and widely trusted in the society.¹ The Economist named Armenia "country of the year" that made most progress over the past year.

Armenia has still much work ahead, however, to cement last year's gains. To provide a more level playing field for political competition its electoral code needs to be revised, especially the controversial rating system and campaign financing laws. Full-fledged economic reforms and the fight against corruption, which the current government has given a high priority, require a more competent and profound approach to ensure sustainable results. The remarkably high rate of poverty in Armenia is the crucial issue to address. With almost 30 per cent of the population living below the national poverty line, the government's steadfast commitment to promote inclusive economic growth is essential for effective poverty eradication. Today more than ever is the time for building a more democratic and prosperous future for Armenia.

The Caucasus Analytical Digest published a special issue in 2018 analysing the international community's reaction to the revolutionary events in Armenia (CAD No. 104, <http://www.laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest104.pdf>). This issue focuses on the domestic dimension of the Velvet Revolution. In his contribution, Mikayel Zolyan seeks to explain what made the Armenian revolution possible and how the consolidation of authoritarian rule deprived the Armenian regime of its flexibility. Anahit Shirinyan, in turn, takes a closer look at the development of the political party system in Armenia. She discusses various challenges and opportunities of the recent switch to a parliamentary system of government for the development of programmatic, well-structured and well-institutionalised political parties in Armenia.

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¹ See e.g. the OSCE/ODIHR report on Armenia's early parliamentary elections, 9 December 2018, available online at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/405890?download=true>

The Poverty of Authoritarianism: What Made the Armenian Revolution Possible

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Abstract

While revolutions are difficult to predict, the Armenian revolution was particularly unexpected, as it happened at a time when the political regime seemed highly stable. However, in hindsight, it has become clear that the political regime that had been built in Armenia had exhausted itself, with the pre-conditions for the revolution building up in recent years. Armenia's political system had gravitated from a hybrid regime to a consolidated authoritarian regime, albeit a soft one. However, this consolidation actually deprived the Armenian regime of the flexibility that is often key to the survival of authoritarian regimes. In the absence of other factors that can boost authoritarian regimes (e.g., foreign policy successes, charismatic appeal of leaders, strong ideology, or high profits from exporting natural resources), the Armenian regime had few resources to ensure its survival.

Introduction

Revolutions are difficult to predict. The events of April–May 2018, which came to be known in Armenia as the Revolution of Love and Solidarity, were no exception. As late as February–March 2018, the internal political situation in Armenia seemed to be under complete control of the government of Serzh Sargsyan. Moreover, it seemed that Serzh Sargsyan's regime, which had managed a successful transition from a presidential republic to a parliamentary one, was stronger than ever. However, today, looking back at the previous developments, several factors contributing to the demise of Serzh Sargsyan's regime can be identified. In fact, some of those developments that at the time could have been seen as signs of the regime's consolidation ultimately accelerated its demise.

Flexible Authoritarianism: Post-Soviet Armenia's Political System

Post-Soviet Armenia was a case of what are generally described in the political literature as hybrid regimes, or, in other words, regimes that combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism. Armenia was one of the Soviet republics where a mass protest movement emerged in the late 1980s; this movement combined a national agenda with demands for democracy. It is no wonder that in the early 1990s Armenia positioned itself as "an island of democracy" in the Caucasus. However, authoritarian tendencies were becoming increasingly obvious. By 1995, Armenia's democracy had already been tainted by the closure of an opposition party and its media outlets, as well as by disputed elections. In particular, the 1996 presidential election became a watershed. The pattern that was established repeated itself many times: a presidential election in which the incum-

bent is declared the winner amid accusations of fraud, leading to mass protests. Since then virtually every presidential election in Armenia has been accompanied by major protests.

However, Armenian authoritarianism has always been relatively soft, especially in comparison with certain other post-Soviet cases. Under presidents Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018), the ruling elite expended considerable effort maintaining the political system's democratic facade. This meant that the opposition, free media, and civil society were allowed to operate and even sharply criticize the government as long as they presented no realistic threat to the ruling elite. In situations when the opposition was perceived as a threat, the government did not hesitate to resort to violent crackdowns, as was the case in April 2004 and March 2008. However, as a rule, "tightening of the screws" in such cases was limited in time, and the regime eventually reverted to maintaining a democratic facade. The opposition was never completely destroyed, the free media was never completely strangled, and civil society was never completely placed under state control. These qualities of Armenia's political system led Levitsky and Way to include Armenia as a case study in their seminal work on "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2013).

Toward Full Authoritarianism

Though the process of authoritarian consolidation in Armenia was slow and non-linear, by the second half of 2010s, it was becoming increasingly obvious. International indices captured this trend, as during the final years before the revolution, Armenia walked a fine line between a hybrid and full authoritarian regime. In 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit listed Arme-

nia as an authoritarian regime, and in its 2017 report it placed Armenia just above the threshold separating hybrid regimes from fully authoritarian ones (Armenia received 4.11 points out of 10, while the borderline between authoritarian and hybrid regimes is 4.00 points, placing the country at 120th globally) (Lragir, 2018). In its 2017 ratings, Freedom House gave Armenia an aggregate score of 45 out of 100 (100 being most free, 0 being the least free) and described the country's political system as follows: "Voters in Armenia have little say in policymaking, and formal political opposition is weak... high levels of corruption as well as political influence over the media remain concerns" (Freedom House 2018).

Signs of authoritarian consolidation were becoming increasingly obvious during Serzh Sargsyan's second term. The presidential election itself in 2013 revealed that the Armenian political system was on the brink of a new authoritarian trend. Two of the potential candidates seen by many in Armenia as the most likely rivals of the incumbent Serzh Sargsyan—Gagik Tsarukyan and Levon Ter-Petrosyan—did not put their candidacies forward in the election. It is true that this helped the opposition candidate Raffi Hovhannisian, who as a result remained the only plausible opposition candidate, gather around 40% of the votes, which is one of the highest results shown by an opposition candidate in Armenia to date. Hovhannisian's supporters challenged the election result; however, unlike 2008, when post-election protests presented a serious danger to the regime, the protest movement of 2013 proved to be short-lived and failed to create a serious challenge to the regime. Ultimately, the 2013 election helped Sargsyan to re-assert his legitimacy as president, which had been tainted by the disputed election and the post-election crackdown of 2008.

The next stage in the consolidation of Sargsyan's power were the events of spring 2015, when Sargsyan neutralized the challenge coming from the largest "systemic opposition" party, Prosperous Armenia led by businessman Gagik Tsarukyan. Tsarukyan had earlier joined forces with Ter-Petrosyan and Hovhannisian, creating a united opposition front that succeeded in forcing the resignation of then prime minister Tigran Sargsyan. In spring 2015, Sargsyan threatened confrontation and a crackdown against Tsarukyan and his party. The latter, having been a part of the dominant political and business elite in Armenia for decades, was presented with the choice of either becoming the "radical" opposition and facing repression that such status entails or retreating into a "safe zone" of "systemic opposition". Prosperous Armenia and Tsarukyan chose the path of submission. Tsarukyan announced that he was leaving politics,

and his party reverted to being loyal "systemic opposition". The developments of 2015 meant that Serzh Sargsyan and his Republican Party remained the only viable political force in the country (Zolyan 2015).

These developments also meant that nothing stood in the way of the constitutional reform planned by Sargsyan and his close circle, which was aimed at prolonging Sargsyan's power indefinitely. The reform, started by the referendum of 2015, was presented as an endeavour that aimed to make Armenia more democratic. As the opposition and civil society worried, it was actually aimed at removing the constraints on Sargsyan's power, ensuring that after the end of his second term as president he could continue ruling the country in the capacity of the prime minister. However, the aims of the reform were not revealed for a long time: Sargsyan himself shied away from replying to questions regarding his plans following his second presidential term. Even though various pro-government figures often spoke about Sargsyan as an irreplaceable leader, it was only in 2018 that Sargsyan himself admitted that he had no plans to relinquish power (on the constitutional reform see Weinberger 2015).

The hardening of the authoritarian regime also came with the advent of a certain ideology, or rather quasi-ideology, which was supposed to legitimize the consolidation of Sargsyan's authoritarian regime. The propaganda of the so called "nation-army concept" became ubiquitous in Armenia especially after the so-called "four-day war", an escalation of fighting in the zone of conflict that took place in April 2016. The idea of "nation-army" was promoted in particular by the former head of Serzh Sargsyan's administration, Vigen Sargsyan (no family relation to Serzh Sargsyan), who became Minister of Defence in October 2016. While the government never formally defined what the concept of the "nation-army" meant, it was essentially a combination of several initiatives related to the fields of defence and security on the one hand, and on the other a dramatic rise in government propaganda focusing on the idea of consolidating the nation around the army, and, by extension, its commander-in-chief. Posters reminiscent of the late Soviet era appeared across Armenia with slogans conveying the message that the army and the people are one, illustrated by pictures of civilians and military side by side. The quasi-ideology of "nation-army" was used to marginalize and stigmatize government opponents and civil society actors (on the "nation-army concept" Pambukhchyan 2018).

The consolidation of authoritarianism faced resistance. As the political opposition was either deprived of resources, discredited or co-opted into the ruling elite, this resistance took the form of protests led by

civic activists, as in the case of the Electric Yerevan protest in 2015, or of an armed group, as was the case with the Sasna Tsrer crisis. While both Electric Yerevan and Sasna Tsrer seemed to represent major challenges to the regime, both crises were effectively managed quite skilfully by the government, which in the short-term perspective actually seemed to make the government stronger. However, today, in hindsight, it may be argued that both Electric Yerevan and Sasna Tsrer ultimately weakened the regime and paved the way for the 2018 revolution.

What Destroyed the Armenia Regime

Ironically, the consolidation of the regime that took place during Serzh Sargsyan's second term ultimately helped to bring it down. This consolidation actually deprived the Armenian regime of the flexibility that is often key to the survival of authoritarian regimes. In the absence of other factors that can boost authoritarian regimes (e.g., foreign policy successes, charismatic appeal of a leader, strong ideology, high profits from exporting natural resources, etc.), the Armenian regime had few resources to ensure its survival. At the same time, the Armenian regime never became "hard-line" enough to prevent civil society from continuing to function in Armenia. The regime became consolidated enough to destroy the elements of democracy that might have helped it to survive, but it never became brutal enough to crush all possible sources of resistance. Combined with other factors, such as the lack of socio-economic achievements, mistakes and failures in foreign and security policy, the "hardening" of the regime ultimately weakened it.

The consolidation took place in an environment in which Sargsyan's regime could hardly boast of any major achievements. When it came to economy, Sargsyan's Armenia was never able to completely recover from the 2008–2009 economic crisis. The failure of Armenia–Turkey "football diplomacy" and the abrupt diplomatic U-turn in 2013, when Armenia suddenly rejected the Association Agreement with the EU in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, undermined the credibility of Armenia and Serzh Sargsyan personally on the international arena. Most importantly, "the four-day war" in April 2016 dealt a significant blow to the legitimacy of Serzh Sargsyan and the Armenian political elite in general.

Up until April 2016, a large part of Armenian society was ready to forgive the government for a lack of democracy, difficult socio-economic conditions, and ubiquitous corruption, as long as the government ensured peace and security, as well as the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, the realization that

Azerbaijan might try to use internal turmoil in Armenia was a powerful factor that often prevented Armenian opposition protests from reaching the same level as protests in Georgia or Ukraine. The April war showed that the government was unable to prevent an escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. It also showed that the corruption that had also penetrated the Armenian military was a deadly threat for the country's security. All this undermined the government's ability to play "the Karabakh card" in internal politics. The "nation-army concept" was probably aimed at mitigating fallout from the April war, but, as the events of 2018 showed, it failed to do so.

Another factor that helped the success of the protests was the fact that within the political and business elite in general, not everyone was equally happy about Serzh Sargsyan's de facto third term. Rifts within the ruling elite may include supporters of prime-minister Karen Karapetyan (usually seen in connection to Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan (no relation between the two) or former president Robert Kocharyan. Sargsyan's desire to reach indefinite and unlimited power alienated parts of the ruling elite, which probably helped the protesters to achieve their goal. Additionally, the period of transition from a presidential system to a parliamentary one resulted in a power vacuum that provided an opportunity to strike; this was used by the opposition movement perfectly. Hence, the outcome was that Serzh Sargsyan's regime, which had seemed at its strongest, was removed by a massive peaceful protest movement.

All of these mistakes and weaknesses of the regime became obvious when it faced a new generation of protesters. The revolution of 2018 became possible, among other things, due to a new generation of Armenians, who had not experienced the Soviet system, coming onto the scene. The leaders of the protests were mostly in their 30s, and Pashinyan himself turned 43 in June 2018. Moreover, many activists, including those who started the protests, were even younger, mostly in their 20s; this meant that they not only could not have had any recollection of the Soviet system but also that they could not have experienced the difficult 1990s and the failed protests that had taken place in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, while many middle-aged and older Armenians were sceptical of those protests precisely because they had seen so many unsuccessful protests in their lives, the new generation was free from that psychological burden. However, the most important motivation for the youth was their realization that they had no opportunity of pursuing a successful career under Serzh Sargsyan's corrupt and authoritarian regime.

Epilogue: Will the Revolution Lead to More Democracy?

In conclusion, the attempt to build a consolidated authoritarian regime in Armenia failed miserably. The defeat of Sargsyan's regime was as sweeping as it was unexpected. All the factors mentioned above seem obvious today in hindsight; however, as late as early 2018, virtually no analysts were able to predict that Sargsyan's regime was nearing its end. The success of the protests was far from obvious even several days before the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan on 23 April 2018.

Today, the question that Armenian analysts and Armenia-watchers abroad often ask is whether the revolution will lead to more democracy or whether it will result in a new hybrid or even authoritarian regime. The history of revolutions is full of examples, when what began as a triumph of democracy eventually led to a new authoritarian, or even totalitarian political regime. Usually, there are three roads that can lead to

an undesirable turn of events: the revenge of the old elite that returns to power, hijacking of the revolutionary agenda by radicals, and, finally, degradation of a democratic movement itself in the event its leaders are corrupted by power and popularity.

None of these scenarios can certainly be excluded completely in Armenia; however, history is also full of examples of mass protests that actually led to the establishment of functioning democracies. The experience of post-Soviet Armenia, where the ruling elites were never able to build a full-scale authoritarian system for three decades also suggests grounds for optimism. Finally, the peaceful nature of the Armenian revolution, also serves as a basis for optimism. The exclusion of violence as a tool for achieving political goals, which had been proclaimed by the leaders of the Velvet Revolution, is the cornerstone of democratic politics, and if Armenian society is able to adhere to it in the future, it will be the best guarantee against a slide into authoritarianism.

About the Author

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Bridging the Gaps in Armenia's Political Space: the Political Party System after the 'Velvet Revolution'

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Abstract

Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' further underlined the inherent flaws in Armenia's political space. Political parties had lost touch with their voter base and had broadly failed to fulfil their functions. Consolidation was reached not in the political, but in the public field. The civic activist base played a crucial role in the revolution, raising further questions as to the relevance of political parties. However, with a switch to a parliamentary system of governance, the role of the parliament—and the political parties—has become crucial. For the parliamentary democracy system to gain traction, political parties will need to adapt and develop institutionally—both separately and as a whole—in the process and work closely with civil society more broadly.

The Context

The Velvet Revolution swept through Armenia at a time when the country had just switched into a parliamentary system of governance. The new revolutionary government carries the promise of building a more democratic, liberal and just Armenia. Snap parliamentary elections held in December 2018 have created a truly representative parliament through free and fair elections—something Armenia had long lacked. The vote brought a landslide victory to Pashinyan's 'My Step' alliance. The alliance received 70.4% of the votes, while the Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia parties received 8.3% and 6.4% of the votes, respectively. The two former ruling coalition partners, the Republican Party of Armenia and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun, failed to overcome the 5% threshold that parties need to enter the Parliament.

In addition to the plethora of challenges that need to be approached, the political system will also need to navigate a new form of governance. Now that the executive power has moved from the president to the prime minister, the role of the parliament will naturally increase. However, the new parliamentary system arguably lacks the most crucial component necessary for a functioning democracy: a stable and institutionalised party system. Armenia's political parties are not attuned to parliamentarianism. Most of the parties remain under-institutionalised, hierarchical, personalistic or clientelistic entities that have broadly failed to fulfil their political functions. Many lack distinct ideological bases and fail to offer viable electoral programmes. The parties have lost touch with the wider public and have squandered the trust of their constituencies. For a long time, the political field in Armenia was monop-

olised, fragmented and polarised, and it is still far from having a stable and coherent party system in place.

The revolution has further underlined these inherent flaws. The political field failed to consolidate prior to the events that snowballed into a huge wave of public protests. As public dissatisfaction with the political system had been brewing for a long time, Armenia has developed a viable tradition of street protests as the only remaining alternative to the electoral system that has not been trusted for over two decades. When they decided to launch a 'street struggle' against the move of former president Serzh Sargsyan into the office of prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party were not even able to garner the support of their partner parties across the Yelq parliamentary alliance, let alone reach a broader consolidation across the opposition spectrum. Instead, Pashinyan managed to generate convergence across the civil society and public fields, including with circles that mistrusted him. The civic activist base has played a crucial role in the revolution, acting in a remarkably de-centralised fashion. In contrast, major political parties were absent from the process.¹ Parliamentary parties tuned in only after president-turned-prime-minister Sargsyan had resigned and the protesting crowd had swelled into unprecedented numbers in what rather looked like an attempt to save face and remain relevant.

However, while the revolution has questioned the relevance of political parties, the parties remain irreplaceable in terms of the functions they need to carry out in order for a democratic regime to be consolidated in Armenia.

The Political Party System

Armenia's political parties have been lost in transition, similar to most other institutions in the country.

¹ Representatives of several political parties were involved at the individual level, while a few parties expressed support of the protesters but never threw full political support behind the process.

A number of factors have affected the parties' evolution. For one, informing the evolution of political parties was the former semi-presidential form of governance. The role of political parties in a presidential system is usually limited in scope. The parties tend to serve as electoral parties or electoral machines that seek to occupy the highest number of political offices and provide political support for the executive—the president. Accordingly, presidential systems, especially in young democracies² and non-democratic regimes, tend to incentivise the emergence of political parties that are loosely structured, personalistic and clientelistic in nature and have a low level of institutionalisation. This gives the political field the flexibility to restructure parties or change party affiliations based on the call of the day. Because presidential systems generate a 'winner-takes-all' approach, the political field also tends to be more polarised in the presidential system (Croissant and Merkel, 2004).

These deficiencies are all applicable to the party system currently in place in Armenia. The political context also matters. Armenia's pre-revolutionary hybrid regime and under-developed political party system had been reinforcing each other. Clearly, a lack of free and fair elections is not conducive to the institutionalisation of parties, as the rules of the game favour other factors, such as access to money and administrative resources, to succeed in the competition for power.

The political system developing in Armenia prior to the revolution can be framed as a one-party rule under the veneer of a multi-party system. The coalition government in place was a pretence at democratic governance rather than a genuine power-sharing exercise, as the ruling Republican Party of Armenia had the absolute majority of votes in the parliament. Even though the Armenian parliament has always had multi-party representation,³ because of deep mistrust towards electoral processes in Armenia among both the wider public and the expert community, the parliament could not be said to have been truly representative. The switch from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of governance stipulated by Constitutional changes in 2015 was broadly viewed as an attempt by the ruling elite to perpetuate their power while formally remaining within the confines of the law—something that eventually backfired.

It was in this context that Armenia's political parties were operating. The ruling party and parties that had formed a coalition with the ruling party at various points lost touch with reality and failed to see the deepening rift

between the public and themselves. As for the opposition in Armenia, it had long been marginalised—'divided and ruled'. Parties in opposition to the government had failed to consolidate and funnel accumulated public grievances to generate political change. Fragmented and polarised, they would end up fighting each other more than challenging the incumbents and would normally fail to support a united opposition candidate in the presidential elections (with the exception of 2008) or form pre-electoral alliances and garner a weighty share of votes at parliamentary polls. Most street protests led by political forces would soon falter, leading to public disappointment and alienation from political parties. These deficiencies point to the weak institutionalisation of not only individual political parties but also the political party system as a whole. It is no wonder, then, that the disillusionment with the political elite led to the emergence of a vibrant civic activist movement.

Clash of the Political and the Civic

The opposition political parties in Armenia managed to build up and lead street protests of various strengths until 2013, and they depleted all political capital to consolidate the street after that. Since 2010, as a sign of disgruntlement from dysfunctional political parties, various grassroots civic movements began to emerge. Groups of civic activists engaged in ad hoc struggles for environmental and social issues, ranging from the preservation of green spaces to marching against electricity price hikes. In most cases, the groups managed to attract scores of citizens and recorded successful results, with the authorities having to cave in to their demands. With these activities happening in the context of accelerating civic movements worldwide, these groups gained traction as the dominant engine of change in Armenia. This has made many speak of the civil society groups filling the void of political space in Armenia.

However, these movements avoided politicisation by distancing themselves from political parties (which they mistrusted) and choosing not to raise systemic and political demands. However, most of the social and environmental issues addressed by the movements had deeper roots in the oligarchic economy and constrained political space and were political in nature. The ad hoc protests were fighting symptoms while the causes remained unchallenged.

This explains the limits of civic activism, not only in Armenia but also elsewhere. Most civic movements are based on anti-institutional networks.⁴ This is perhaps

² It is important to note that the political party system is underdeveloped in young democracies regardless of the system of governance.

³ The minimum number of parties/blocs represented in the parliament had previously been four.

⁴ In the Armenian context, it would be accurate to differentiate between the civic movements and institutionalised NGO groups. While there is some overlap between the two, the above-mentioned movements have also well distanced themselves from bigger organisations that comprise the so-called NGO-crazy.

where the inherent contradiction between the civic and the political stems from. To achieve political change, the system that a civic movement dismantles should be replaced by another. However, civic movements have neither the willingness nor the capacity to undertake political functions. As Ivan Krastev put it, “you can tweet a revolution, but you cannot tweet a government” (Krastev, 2015).

However, Armenia’s Velvet Revolution seems to have reconciled this contradiction. It was the fusion of *the political* and *the civic* that made the revolution possible: a political leadership—however small its initial support base—that initiated and led the process and was ready to take political responsibility for the aftermath and a civic activist base that tapped into its accumulated experience to dismantle the old system.

What Next?

The political elite more broadly will still need to re-establish themselves in the political space and regain their representative function. While Pashinyan and his immediate team enjoy unprecedented popularity and support at the moment, it is largely the effect of the revolution and is unlikely to be sustained forever, and public trust in other political parties still remains low. Given that he has political ambition, Pashinyan will have to deal with the empowerment of his own hitherto small party, which, among other things, lacks political cadres. While it is true that parliamentary systems incentivise the development of more programmatic, well-structured and well-institutionalised political parties, a switch to a parliamentary system per se does not guarantee such change. Many other factors affect party system evolution, and path dependence will be difficult to eliminate. The new political system in Armenia will therefore need to tackle the challenge of the sustainability of the new form of governance. It is not enough for individual political parties to be well institutionalised; the party system should also be institutionalised. Armenian political parties still need to learn to function in a multi-party environment and be attuned to coalition building and power-sharing practices.

Although the December elections were competitive, free and fair due to the political will of the interim government, there is still a need to carry out a number of reforms that will also institutionalise such a level playing field for free and fair elections in the future. These include reforming the country’s electoral code⁵ and the law on political parties. Improving the way elections are won and the way parties operate will also positively affect the evolution of the party system in Armenia. For example, installing an all-proportional representation and removing the so-called ‘rating system’ (a form of majoritarian

system) will favour the development of a stable and programmatic party system over a personalistic one. The way party financing is organised can also contribute to the institutionalisation of parties. With very little public funding and a small membership base, the existing system makes parties dependent on private donations. In the past, this has rewarded the merger of business and politics in Armenia, giving bigger political parties with oligarchic ties advantages over smaller political parties of the opposition that have no influential donors. Creating mechanisms for the increased public funding of political parties can level the playing field, contribute to a competitive party system and fuel institutional and programmatic parties with professional party cadres.

In the longer term, the new Armenian leadership might need to review the current Constitution. Although it is meant to produce a parliamentary system, the way the Constitution stipulates that the parliamentary majority be formed is against the spirit of parliamentary pluralism. More specifically, it requires that elections produce an absolute majority force in the parliament, thereby presuming a one-party rule. This stipulation is meant to help avoid a government formation crisis in a country with external threats to its security in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but it can also be exploited by a ruling party in a non-consolidated democracy.

In the shorter term, the civil society/activist base of the revolution can contribute to the new political system, especially in the process of reforming the country. Following the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, scores of civil society representatives entered politics, running for the parliament or taking up key positions—to help facilitate reforms. Although there can be certain reservations regarding such practices, this would also be logical for Armenia, given that the old system has depleted itself and the new political forces that have come into power lack human resources and professional cadres. In considering gender parity as a cross-cutting issue, the new government should also increase the momentum of using the huge potential that women can bring to good governance in Armenia.

Becoming attuned to a new system of governance will take some time. It will take political will and responsible collaboration for the political parties in Armenia to turn into functional actors of a parliamentary democracy. In the meantime, the civil society/activist base has a role to play, both as contributors to the fruition of a new, more democratic system and as government watchdogs. Armenia still needs the fusion of the political and the civic to sustain the momentum of the Velvet Revolution.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and references.

5 An attempt to do this prior to the December vote was thwarted by the old guard in the Parliament.

About the Author

Anahit Shirinyan is a foreign policy analyst focusing on Armenia and the South Caucasus. She is an Academy Associate and was previously an Academy Robert Bosch Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. In the past, she worked on institutional development and strategic planning with political parties in Armenia and facilitated political party dialogue in the South Caucasus more broadly.

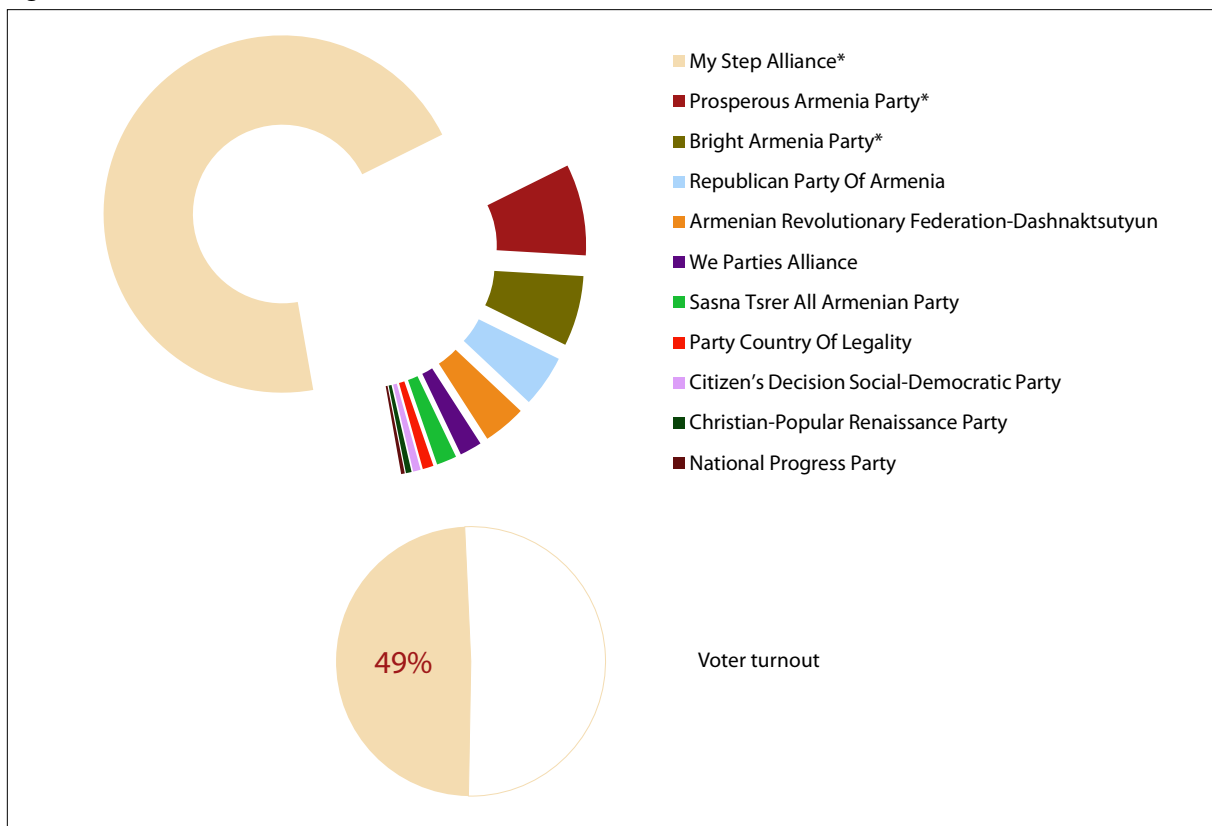
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DOCUMENTATION

Results of Armenia's Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 December 2018

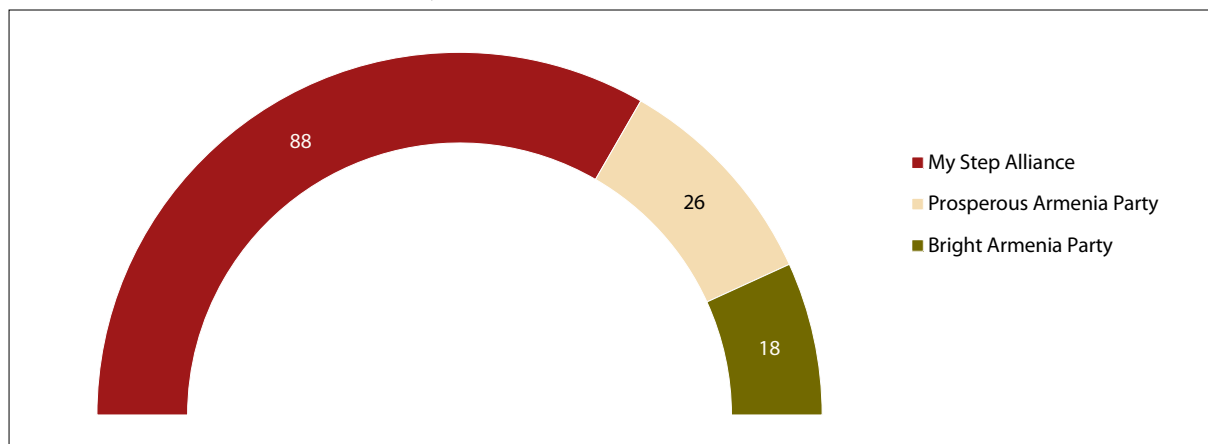
Figure 1: Official Election Result



*Parties which received the minimum number of votes necessary in order to exceed the electoral threshold (5% for parties and 7% for multi-party alliances) required to gain seats in parliament.

Please see overleaf for exact figures.

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, <https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/>

Figure 2: Distribution of Parliamentary Seats

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, <https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/>

Table 1: Official Election Result

Party	Number of Votes	% Share
My Step Alliance*	884.864	70.4%
Prosperous Armenia Party*	103.801	8.3%
Bright Armenia Party*	80.047	6.4%
Republican Party Of Armenia	59.083	4.7%
Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun	48.816	3.9%
We Parties Alliance	25.176	2.0%
Sasna Tsrer All Armenian Party	22.868	1.8%
Party Country Of Legality	12.393	1.0%
Citizen's Decision Social-Democratic Party	8.514	0.7%
Christian-Popular Renaissance Party	6.458	0.5%
National Progress Party	4.121	0.3%
Voter turnout:		49%

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, <https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/>

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