

POLITICAL SITUATION IN ARMENIA

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The political turmoil in Armenia has a history of three decades. It began in February of 1988, when the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia broke out. The war occurred because of the territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, an area populated by ethnic Armenians with a small Muslim Azeri population. The war was popular in Armenia, but there was some opposition. There were small groups of peace activists who protested against the war and advocated that the conflict could be resolved through peaceful negotiations. Members of these groups petitioned the Armenian authorities in 1988-1991, but without success. During their protests, many peace activists were severely beaten, detained and arrested by the police and the Yerkrapah.¹

MAP OF ARMENIA



<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/graphics/maps/large/am-map.gif>

¹ Jeannette Goehring, Nations in Transit 2008: Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia, University Press of America, 2008.

Their situation worsened dramatically when Armenia gained independence at the end of 1991. The new Armenian government was led by the HHSh (Armenian Pan-National Movement), and supported by the Yerkrapah movement. The first Armenian President, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, former Chairman of Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR and Chairman of the Board of Pan-Armenian Movement, led Armenia, devastated by the 1988 earthquake and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to internal stability.²

In January 1998, then president Levon Ter-Petrosyan published the article “War or Peace?” in which he discussed the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The international community looked at this as a positive sign, and negotiated the possibilities of starting a dialogue between both sides. In particular, the European Union tried to work out a peaceful solution to the conflict. On March 4, 1998, Levon Ter-Petrosyan agreed to some kind of dialogue with the EU, but under the pressure of war supporters in the Armenian government, led by General Vazgen Sarkisyan, who was then Minister of Defense and the chairman of the Yerkrapah, even small concessions toward the peace party were considered national treason. As a result, L. Ter-Petrosyan was removed by the former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Robert Kocharyan, who led the war faction in the HHSh. In other words, even the modest attempts of the Armenian president to discuss a peaceful solution, were considered to be “heresy,” and Ter-Petrosyan was deposed by a coup d’état, carried out by the inner circle of power surrounding him. Robert Kocharyan, the leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, who had been summoned by Ter-Petrosyan in 1997 as Armenia’s prime minister, turned on his boss when Ter-Petrosyan softened his position regarding the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.³

² Edmund Herzig, Marina Kurkchiyan, *The Armenians: past and present in the making of national identity*, Psychology Press, 2005.

³ Svante E. Cornell, *Small nations and great powers: a study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus*, Psychology Press, 2001, p 103.

The deposing of Levon Ter-Petrosyan led to new presidential elections. During the campaign and elections, all leading candidates hardened their position regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Robert Kocharyan left the HHSh, which had reached a compromise with Ter-Petrosyan and joined, along with forty other members of the HHSh faction, the Yerkrapah⁴ which had transformed itself, within the previous three years, into a paramilitary group under the Ministry of Defense; many of the Yerkrapah members served in the secret police.

Kocharyan's presidential platform was based on the idea of no peace concessions to Azerbaijan, no territorial concessions and the readiness of Armenia to begin a new military conflict, if necessary. Kocharyan won the election, but his election was marred by extensive fraud, and its final round did not meet the standards of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Corrupt politicians did everything possible to keep Kocharyan in power. Monitors witnessed ballot stuffing, discrepancies in the vote count, a large presence of unauthorized persons in polling stations, and intimidation of voters, election workers, and even of international observers.⁵ During the elections, the country was swept into a wave of pro-military hysteria. Finally, the new Armenian government represented the most aggressive militant forces of the Armenian society. The political tensions lead to the assassination of several members of the parliament and Prime Minister Karen Demichyan.⁶

The presidential elections, which took place in March 2003 and the subsequent persecution of political opponents from the People's Party, the Republic Party and other groups

⁴ Armenia: Human Rights Development. Human Rights Watch: World Report, 1999.

⁵ Armenia: Human Rights Development. Human Rights Watch: World Report, 1999.

⁶ Robyn Dixon. Gunmen Kill Premier in Armenian Attack. The Los Angeles Times, October 28, 1999. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-oct-28-mn-27246-story.html>

of the democratic opposition, showed the nature of Kocharyan's regime. The elections were unfair and government repressions resulted in hundreds of protesters being arrested.

The presidential elections of 2003 were marred by fraud and by the persecution of the opponents of Kocharyan's regime. Robert Kocharyan remained President and his policy was intact. The government and society in Armenia continued to be based on nationalism and there were no prospects to change this ideology in the foreseeable future.

The government cracked down on opposition activities. Thus, in April 2004, thousands of opponents of the Kocharyan regime demonstrated in Yerevan, protesting the results of the presidential elections. Police brutally cracked down on protestors, many of whom were arrested and badly treated during their detention.⁷ In May 2005, police beat supporters of an independent candidate, Artur Shaboyan, during local elections, in the town of Hrazdan. According to media reports, police used batons and electric-shock equipment to attack Shaboyan supporters outside several polling stations.⁸ In May 2007, the opposition held a demonstration against the government's "preparation" for the parliamentary vote. The authorities used force to disperse the protestors.⁹ The Nor Ughi party leader, Ashot Bleyan¹⁰, and two of his deputies, were tried in Yerevan for their political activities, while Levon Markarian, a Jehovah's Witness organizer, was prosecuted for holding "illegal" religious meetings.¹¹ In September 2007, former President of Armenia L. Ter-Petrosyan re-emerged on the Armenian political arena with strong criticisms of

⁷ Armenian Civic Groups Protest Arrests, Police Brutality. Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 04/16/2004. <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/2062>

⁸ Armenia. Human Rights Overview, 2006. Human Rights Watch. <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/armeni12221.htm>

⁹ Marianna Grigoryan. Police, Opposition Members Clash in Yerevan. Armenia: Vote 2007. Eurasianet.org, May 10, 2007. <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia/news/051007.html>

¹⁰ Under a very strong international pressure Ashot Bleyan was released from jail, but not cleared from his accusations.

¹¹ Armenia: Human Rights Developments. World Report 2002. Human Rights Watch Report 2002, pp. 1-2. <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/europe2.html>

President Robert Kocharyan and his Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, which marked his new political initiative that united a number of opposition parties.

The government used torture in order to scare the opposition. Human Rights Watch reported: “Torture and ill-treatment in police custody remain widespread in Armenia. Torture usually occurs in pre-trial detention with the aim of coercing a confession or evidence against third parties¹². The torture targets political opponents in order to stop their political activism and to reduce the influence of the opposition on the Armenian population.

The Armenian government’s use of torture to carry out its objectives, including the suppression of those who resist or oppose its policies, is well documented.

The United States Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices has consistently reported on state-sponsored torture in Armenia.

There is no place for a persecuted person to escape in Armenia. According to the country rules, every resident has to have a so-called ‘*grantsum*’ or police registration, which confirms the right of residency and is represented by a special stamp on the person’s internal passport. A person who returns to Armenia must proceed to his or her place of ‘*grantsum*’ (the Armenian equivalent for the Russian “*propiska*”) and report to the local police department. In other words, the person cannot relocate or avoid going back to the place that he or she had left while fleeing to another country. In the case of those who had been persecuted, it means that they must show up in the places where they had experienced persecution. Moreover, if a person relocates, all information about him or her, would be transferred to the new place of ‘*grantsum*.’ It means that police and the National Security Service, which continues to play an extremely important role in Armenia, would immediately know the person’s background and whereabouts. Taking into

¹² Armenia. Human Rights Overview, 2006. Human Rights Watch.
<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/armeni12221.htm>

account that the protection of the individual's right to privacy is underdeveloped in Armenia, and the authorities are not bound by meaningful restrictions and regulations in this area, it is extremely difficult for citizens to shield private matters from the government's or public's scrutiny. In fact, the Armenian police and secret service (Ministry of State Security, formerly KGB) maintain a wide net of informers among the general population, mainly among housing managers and workers. Sometimes, these informers are well connected to highly-placed nationalistic individuals, and provide them with information about new arrivals.

The government of Armenia also uses detentions of unlimited length in order to suppress the opposition. The authorities thus attempt to create an atmosphere of fear in the country and to show their power. The National Secret Service arrested Vardan Malkhisyan, a leader of the Motherhood and Honor party, in December 2006, along with 31 other opponents. Government agents searched his home, hoping to find weapons, and confiscated Malkhisyan's notes from historical books.¹³ In general, the Armenian government violates human rights in all spheres of life: political, media, social and cultural.¹⁴

The presidential elections in February 2008 showed that the regime of the newly elected Sargsyan, who was openly supported by the Kremlin,¹⁵ is ready to spill blood in order to gain power. After Kocharyan's close ally, Serzh Sargsyan, was officially declared the winner, the opposition declared the results to be fraudulent and started protests which lasted for 11 days. In response, the government used force, which resulted in eight deaths and at least 131 injuries. Many opposition leaders were arrested, beaten and interrogated by police and the National

¹³ Motherhood and Honor Party: Mass detentions became a common activity of Armenian authorities. Regnum, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/753098.html>

¹⁴ Armenia: Events of 2006. World Report 2007. Human Rights Watch. <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/armeni14726.htm>

¹⁵ Тяжкие раны демократии: Центр Еревана превратился в арену уличных боев (grave wounds of democracy: center of Erevan turned into the street clashes arena), Sovetskaya Rossiya Newspaper, March 2008, <http://www.sovross.ru/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2634>

Security Service (former KGB).¹⁶ Levon Ter-Petrosyan was also detained and kept in his house against his will. The government almost completely destroyed the last remains of human rights in the country.

President Robert Kocharian declared a state of emergency and imposed serious restrictions on civil liberties, including a complete ban on public rallies.¹⁷ Police arrested some 100 people and charged them with the attempted violent overthrow of the government, organizing mass disorder, resisting police, and other alleged “criminal” offenses. The authorities committed serious due process violations, during and after the arrests of the demonstrators including denying them representation by a lawyer and ill-treatment in police custody. Security officials censored newspapers and prohibited the opposition media from publishing.¹⁸ The Armenian opposition protested again, on March 21, 2008, after the government had lifted the state of emergency, and again the police used force against the protesters.¹⁹

Each Armenian government uses its power against opponents to the regime frequently and with no limitations. Garnik Markaryan, chairman of the Motherland and Honor Party, and Samvel Arutynyan, former mayor of Goris, were among the detained. Garnik Markaryan’s home was also searched by law enforcement officers.²⁰

The regime of President Kocharyan evolved into a classic dictatorship where opponents are persecuted by all possible means. The government uses unlawful detention, torture,

¹⁶ Eight killed in Armenia protests. BBC, March 2, 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7273497.stm>; Document - Armenia: Arbitrary arrest/Fear of torture or other ill-treatment. Amnesty International, March 19, 2008. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR54/003/2008/en/EUR540032008en.html>

¹⁷ Simon Payaslian, The Political Economy of Human Rights in Armenia: Authoritarianism and Democracy in a Former Soviet Republic, I.B.Tauris, 2011 - Political Science

¹⁸ Armenia: Sargsian Should Restore Rights. Human Rights Watch. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/08/armeni18474_txt.htm

¹⁹ Armenians Rally After State of Emergency Ends. Moscow Times. March 24, 2008. <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2008/03/24/021.html>

²⁰ Арестованы Гарник Маркарян и Самвел Арутюнян (Garnik Markaryan and Samvel Arutynyan Arrested), A1+ News, February 2008, <http://www.armtown.com/news/ru/a1p/20080226/58338>

harassment and murder in order to silence the opposition. Kocharyan's successor, Serzh Sargsyan, is following in the steps of Kocharyan, a fact which is easily demonstrated by the bloody events of February and March of 2008.

On December 17, 2008, the PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) Monitoring Committee for the first time described the jailed Armenian members of the opposition as "political prisoners", and urged the Council of Europe to impose sanctions on Armenia by stripping its eight-member delegation of voting rights.

The Armenian government arrogantly denied the existence of political prisoners in the country, but public opinion and the opposition parties in Armenia convincingly established that the imprisoned opponents, including Armenia's former foreign minister and three members of parliament, were in fact victims of political persecution, which has become known as the "Case of Seven."²¹ The last "Case of Seven" trial involved the Republic Party's Aram Sargsyan, the head of the Armenian National Movement Ararat Zurabyan, the former National Assembly Vice Chairman and co-founder of the "Armat" Center for Democracy and Civil Society Development²², Karapet Rubinyan²³, former head of the National Security Service Gurgen Yeghiazaryan, the former Deputy Prosecutor General Gagik Jhangiryan, and the former head of the penitentiary department Mushegh Saghatelyan.²⁴

The regime has many tools to silence its opponents. The whole state apparatus is designed to protect the interests of the government and is managed by corrupt politicians. Those who raise their voices are dismissed from their positions, harassed by police and put in prisons.

²¹ Astghik Bedevian, Anna Israeli. Armenian Speaker Chides Europe Over 'Political Prisoners'. RL/RFE, December 30, 2008. http://www.rferl.org/content/Armenian_Speaker_Europe_Political_Prisoners/1365251.html

²² <http://www.freedomhouse.hu/pdfdocs/02-Armenia.pdf>

²³ Ասրապետ Ռուբինյանի համացանցային էջեր, <http://rubinyan.wordpress.com/>

²⁴Fate of 85 People Depends on Revision of Laws <http://www.a1plus.am/en/politics/2009/02/3/8074>

The regime sees a threat in any voice of criticism and in any leak of information. It showed its brutal nature in the crackdown of the protest demonstrations in February and March 2008 and in the cases of those who had criticized the government from the inside.

In March and May of 2009, the Yerevan administration banned opposition rallies.²⁵ The years of Armenian independence from the Soviet Union did not bring democracy to the country, which continues to experience political repressions, abuse of minorities and the suppression of human rights.

On February 24, 2010 a police officer attacked Gagik Shamshian, a prominent Armenian journalist who had been previously been subjected to attacks by police on a number of occasions. After Shamshian filed a complaint about the attack, police initiated an investigation into possible "false denunciation" on his part, a crime punishable by up to three years in prison.²⁶

The May 2010 police crackdown on opposition members who attempted to gather in Yerevan's Liberty Square has demonstrated that President Sargsyan's regime continues the authoritarian practices of his predecessor, Robert Kocharyan.²⁷ On May 31, 2010 supporters of the Armenian National Congress (HAK), an opposition party, were dispersed by police with the use of force. Riot police officers forced a number of protesters into police vans and delivered them to the nearest police department. Three journalists working for opposition newspapers were also detained.²⁸

²⁵ Armenian opposition rally banned on March 1. The Armenian Observer Blog.
<http://ditord.com/2009/02/13/armenian-opposition-rally-banned-on-march-1/>

²⁶ http://www.rferl.org/content/Armenian_Photojournalist_Fears_Prosecution/2012569.html

²⁷ Three Held After Armenian Opposition Supporters, Police Scuffle, Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, June 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Three_Held_After_Armenian_Opposition_Supporters_Police_Scuffle/2059108.html

²⁸ ՈՍԽԿԱՆՆԵՐԸ ԸՆԴՀԱՆՈՒՐԻՆ ԹՌՅՑԼ ԶԵՆ ՏՎԵԼ ԱՏՎԵԼ ԱՉԱՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀՐԱՊԱՐԱԿ, (Police Denied Opposition Access to the Liberty Square)

<http://www.armtown.com/news/am/rfe/20100531/2057350/>

According to the Armenian National Congress, in August 2011, police subjected several activists of the Armenian National Congress to physical violence and arbitrary detention. As of November 2011, the activists continue to be incarcerated.²⁹

There was growing political tension in Armenia, which may result in another outbreak of political violence and crackdown on the opposition. Commenting on the political situation in Armenia, opposition politician Ashot Manucharyan stated, “The state is on the brink of rebellion. Discontent is huge...”³⁰ Meanwhile, the Armenian National Congress continued to put pressure on Serzh Sargsyan’s government. Armenia’s opposition, lead by former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan, held a series of protests in the fall of 2011, demanding the impeachment of Serzh Sargsyan. On October 28, 2011 the opposition managed to garner about four thousand protestors who demanded early elections.³¹

During his first term, President Serzh Sargsyan managed to monopolize power in Armenia by suppressing opposition and any dissident opinion, and creating the illusion of a democratic process. The 2012 Parliamentary Elections in Armenia served as a “democracy test” and a precursor of the 2013 presidential elections, and showed a high degree of distrust towards elections as a democratic process. Levon Zurabyan, the leader of the Armenian National Congress parliamentary faction, lamented that the 2012 parliamentary elections, which took place on May 6, 2012, were riddled with gross falsifications, and failed to meet Armenia’s international obligations.³² According to the official results, the Republican Party of Armenia,

²⁹ Motion of Armenian opposition attorney’s rejected, NEWS.am, November 2011, <http://news.am/eng/news/81417.html>

³⁰ Armenia on brink of rebellion-opposition, NEWS.am, November 2011, <http://news.am/eng/news/81550.html>

³¹ Armenian Opposition Rallies in Yerevan, Voice of America, October 2011, <http://blogs.voanews.com/breaking-news/2011/10/28/armenian-opposition-rallies-in-yerevan/>

³² Оппозиционер: Власти Армении не переварили массовые фальсификации на парламентских выборах (Member of Opposition: Armenian Authorities did not digest gross falsifications during parliamentary elections), News.am, June 2012, <http://news.am/rus/news/111594.html>

headed by Serzh Sargsyan, gained 54.8 per cent of the votes, while the Prosperous Armenia Party, lead by Gagik Tsarukyan, an oligarch, also known as Dodi Gago, a leader of a criminal brotherhood closely tied to Sargsyan's clan and former President Robert Kocharyan, gained 28.,72 per cent of the votes. The Rule of Law (Orinats Erkir), pro-governmental party, led by Artur Bagdasarian, the Secretary of Security Council under President Serzh Sargsyan, gained 4.39 per cent of the votes.³³ Thus, this pseudo-democratic model gave Serzh Sargsyan control of 87 per cent of the parliament, or 112 seats out of 131. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) criticized the elections for “a low level of confidence in the integrity of the process.” Registered violations included the use of administrative resources and attempts to limit voters’ freedom of choice.³⁴

The February 18, 2013 presidential elections were dubbed as another victory of the “puppet regime” of Serzh Sargsyan, and were widely criticized by the international community. The presidential candidates did not represent the majority of the electorate. Radio Free Europe reported that international observers criticized the elections as “not genuinely competitive.” Armenian opposition failed to provide a worthy candidate to compete with Serzh Sargsyan. Levon Ter-Petrosyan, leader of Armenian National Congress and former President of Armenia, refused to participate in the 2013 elections citing his age as a reason, which experts interpreted as a lack of unity within the Armenian opposition, and the limited resources of the Armenian National Congress. The election campaign was also marred by the shooting of Paruyr Hayrikyan, a presidential candidate and the leader of the National Self-Determination Union. Two other

³³ На парламентских выборах в Армении партия президента Саргсяна набирает 54,8% голосов (In the parliamentary elections in Armenia, President Sargsyan’s Party gained 54.8 per cent of votes), Gazeta.ru, May 2012, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2012/05/07/n_2331165.shtml

³⁴ Republic of Armenia: Parliamentary Elections 6 May 2012 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/91643>

presidential candidates, Andrius Gukasyan and Aram Harutyunyan, went on a hunger strike.

Aram Harutyunyan stated that he went on the hunger strike to voice his opinion on the illegitimacy of the elections.³⁵

The results of the 2013 presidential elections surprised no one. Incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan won the elections with 58.64 per cent of the votes. He was followed by Raffi Hovhannesyan, leader of the Heritage Party, who gained 36.75 per cent of the votes. Subsequently, Raffi Hovhannesyan unsuccessfully attempted to challenge the results of the elections in the Constitutional Court. On March 2, 2013, about six thousand protesters rallied in Yerevan to support Raffi Hovhannesyan, who stated that the elections had been falsified.³⁶ In its Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) expressed concern that there were cases of pressure on voters, a lack of impartiality of the public administration, misuse of administrative resources during the campaign, as well as undue interference in the process, mainly by proxies representing the incumbent, and some serious violations on the day of elections.³⁷

The authoritarian regime always dealt harshly with the opposition. Massis Post reported that in April 2015, Armenian law-enforcement authorities arrested five leaders of the “Founding Parliament” opposition group seeking to launch antigovernment protests on April 24, demanding regime change. The law-enforcement bodies reported that they conducted “operative-investigative” measures, including “searches at certain places”, in connection with threats to public order at the upcoming Genocide Centennial commemoration events in Yerevan. In a

³⁵ Выборы президента Армении 2013 года (2013 Presidential Elections in Armenia), Caucasian Knot, March 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/218447/>

³⁶ Выборы президента Армении 2013 года (2013 Presidential Elections in Armenia), Caucasian Knot, March 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/218447/>

³⁷ Statement Of Preliminary Findings And Conclusions, Republic of Armenia — Presidential Election, 18 February 2013, International Election Observation Mission, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/99675>

statement, the National Security Service (NSS) and the Investigative Committee of Armenia said that “organization of mass disturbances at public places on April 24, 2015 has been thwarted as a result of their joint action. The “Founding Parliament” insisted late last week, however, that its street protests will not interfere with the genocide remembrance ceremonies in any way. The group also accepted municipal authorities’ proposal to rally supporters on April 24 and April 25 in Yerevan’s southern Erebuni suburb, rather than the city center. Accordingly, the authorities sanctioned the Erebuni rallies. The opposition movement’s top leader, Zhirayr Sefilian, and three of his close associates had their homes searched at around the same time. They were taken into custody afterwards. An RFE/RL correspondent saw Sefilian’s brother, Toros, also being taken away by NSS officers from the outspoken oppositionist’s Yerevan apartment.³⁸

Until the events of April 2018, President Serzh Sargsyan ruled the country with the old elite formed under Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan. The regime was notorious for its corruption and suppression of human rights. In fact, many analysts believe that a group of oligarchs share the power over the country.³⁹

In sum, Serzh Sargsyan managed, to some extent, to create a lifelike illusion of democratic rule, which he used to please the international community, while in reality, Serzh Sargsyan’s regime is nothing but classic authoritarianism. He was able to consolidate enormous power in the hands of his clan.

³⁸ “Founding Parliament” Opposition Group Leaders Arrested Ahead Of Anti-Government Protests. Massis Post, April 7, 2015. <https://massispost.com/2015/04/founding-parliament-opposition-group-leaders-arrested-ahead-of-anti-government-protests/>

³⁹ Mushvig Mehdiev . Oligarchs in Armenia control levers of political power. Azernews. March 2, 2015. <https://www.azernews.az/aggression/78456.html>

Corruption is rampant in Armenia and has penetrated all spheres of society. Armenia, along with the Dominican Republic, Honduras, the Philippines and Syria, ranks 129 in the 2011 Corruption Perception Index.⁴⁰

Since Serzh Sargsyan became president in April 2008, criminal elements penetrated into the upper levels of government. Organized crime, which has gained transnational presence in all countries with considerable Armenian Diaspora, including the United States, is deeply integrated with the oligarchy, and central to corruption schemes in Armenia, where power has been usurped by a powerful Nagorno-Karabakh clan headed by former President Robert Kocharyan, which controls the majority of organized crime, oligarchs and corrupted officials.⁴¹

According to Varuzhan Oktanyan, executive director of Transparency International's Armenian office, major financial and economic groups that are well represented in the Armenian parliament, adopted laws that benefit their spheres, and dictate policies in Armenia.⁴²

The problem of organized crime in the Armenian government has become popularized to such an extent that some political figures have become known by their nicknames in the criminal world. For instance, Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party, is known as Dodi Gago, leader of a criminal brotherhood, whereas member of parliament Samvel Aleksanyan is known as Lfik Samo, and his colleague in the parliament, Ruben Ayrapetyan, is known as Nemets Rubo (Rubo the German).⁴³ Leaders of organized crime, together with Serzh Sargsyan, his brother Sashik Sargsyan, and Robert Kocharyan, control over 60 percent of property in the

⁴⁰ Corruption Perception Index 2011, <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>

⁴¹ Почему все нынешние попытки нормализации жизни простых граждан Армении обречены (Why current attempts to normalize lives of common citizens of Armenia are doomed), Versia, January 2010, http://versia.ru/articles/2010/jan/29/korrupciya_v_armenii

⁴² Из-за отсутствия политической воли законы в Армении остаются на бумаге - Transparency International (Transparency International: Due to the lack of political will laws in Armenia remain on paper), Oratert News, April 2012, <http://www.oratert.com/russian/общественный/22359.html>

⁴³ Коррупция в Армении, есть самая армянская в мире (Corruption in Armenia is the Most Armenian in the World), Realkav Kavkaz, March 2012, <http://realkav.info/?p=269>

country.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, under such conditions, law enforcement agencies, including the Prosecutor's Office, and the judicial system, are highly corrupted and completely lack independence.

Describing the situation of corruption in Armenia, Mikael Danielyan, head of the Helsinki Association, stated that Judge Koryun Piloyan was the father of corruption in Armenia, and that corruption had become a global problem in the republic and threatens social, economic and political development of society.

Actually, there is no justice for those who run Armenia. The case of former Major General of Justice Mihran Poghosyan, who was Armenia's Chief Compulsory Enforcement Officer, who was in charge of seeing that all court rulings are properly enforced, shows it. He was accused of having shares in three offshore companies, and that he was using his position to advance his business interests while concealing his income. Armenia's Special Investigative Service (SIS) said it stopped investigating the offshore accounts of former Major General of Justice Mihran Poghosyan after Swiss and Panamanian authorities refused to help the probe into the Panama Papers revelations.⁴⁵

In April 2018, opposition rallies brought down the government of Serzh Sargsyan.⁴⁶ He was replaced by the populist leader Nikol Pashinyan, who brought a new group of politicians to power.. However, these new politicians continued the political agenda of the previous regime.

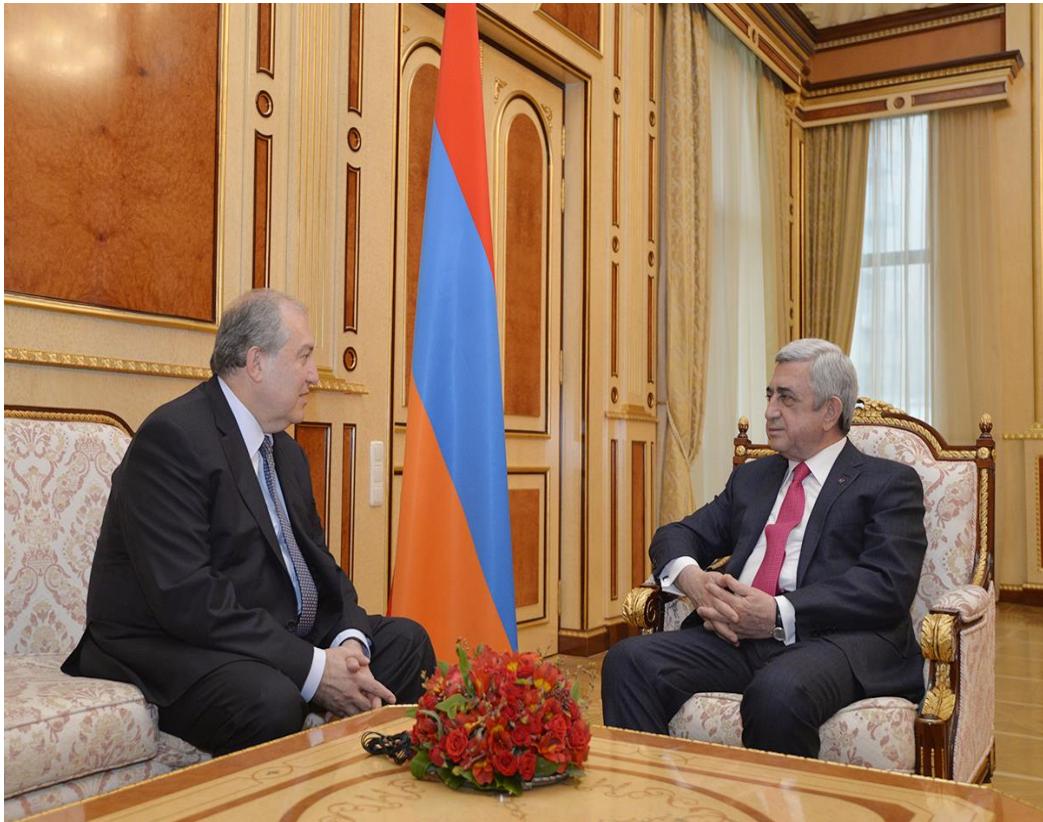
As Armenian educator and author Markar Melkonian stated, "What has taken place in Armenia since Sargsyan's resignation was neither a revolution nor a counter-revolution; it was

⁴⁴ Коррупция в Армении, есть самая армянская в мире (Corruption in Armenia is the Most Armenian in the World), Realnyi Kavkaz, March 2012, <http://realkav.info/?p=269>

⁴⁵ Armenia Ends Probe Into Mihran Poghosyan's Panama Papers Scandal for Lack of Evidence. OCCPR, January 26, 2017. <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/6012-armenia-ends-probe-into-mihran-poghosan-s-panama-papers-scandal-for-lack-of-evidence>

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43868433>

just a change of administration. We should expect several insiders of the new administration to transform themselves into oligarchs.”⁴⁷ In fact, Nikol Pashinyan made a statement that there were no oligarchy and oligarchs in Armenia on October 18, 2018 after the opening ceremony of a mining company near Arinj Mall, which he was attending along with Gagik Tsarukyan,⁴⁸ a prominent Armenian oligarch and one of the richest persons in Armenia.⁴⁹



A scene from the meeting between President Serge Sarkisian and President-Elect Sargsyan following the vote (Photo: Press service of the President of Armenia).
https://armenianweekly.com/2018/03/02/armen-sarkissian-serve-next-president-armenia-national-assembly-vote/30231_b/

⁴⁷ Armenian: No Organization, no Real Change. Hetq News Agency. May 25, 2018.
<http://hetq.am/eng/news/89359/armenia-no-organization-no-real-change.html>

⁴⁸ Hovhannes Nazaretyan. Who is considered an oligarch? Are there oligarchs in Armenia? Fact Investigation Platform, October 22, 2018. <https://fip.am/en/4546>

⁴⁹ Emil Sanamyan. Running for Tsar: Armenia’s Gagik Tsarukyan. oDR: Russian and Beyond, March 28, 2017. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/emil-sanamyan/running-for-tsar-armenia-s-gagik-tsarukyan>

There is no evidence that the new government would change its relations with Russia either. Actually, the government continues to be under the control of the same Republican Party, which ruled the country before. The mechanics of this politics are the following: Serzh Sargsyan in January 2018 offered the candidacy of Armen Sarkissian for President to be supported by the Republican Party during the Armenian presidential election. In fact, Sarkissian was the only candidate and received 90 percent of the parliament votes.⁵⁰

Returning to Pashinyan, soon after his appointment, he held a meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) summit in Sochi, and repeatedly assured him that he had no intention of withdrawing Armenia from the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty. It means that Vladimir Putin would not allow a real Western-style democracy among its close allies, like it never happened, for example, in Kyrgyzstan, which lived through two revolutions. Georgia and Ukraine who, at least, rhetorically proclaimed their turn to the West were severely punished by Russia which carried out a war in Georgia in August 2008 and the annexation of Crimea and a military conflict in Donbas after the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in November 2013-February 2014.

Abarez reports: Pashinyan quipped about how he had “lost count of the number of meeting” the two leaders have had, saying that he was told upon arriving in Moscow that he was one of the foreign leaders to pay the most visits to Moscow. “More precisely,” Pashinyan said, “I am in the top-three list. I am sure this emphasizes our unique strategic relations and I am confident this dynamic of relations will continue

⁵⁰ Armen Sarkissian to Serve as Next President of Armenia after National Assembly Vote. The Armenian Weekly, March 8, 2018. https://armenianweekly.com/2018/03/02/armen-sarkissian-serve-next-president-armenia-national-assembly-vote/30231_b/

and I hope will further develop. Of course, we expect that you will pay an official visit to Armenia next year. We will be very happy.”

The two leaders pledged to advance ties between their countries.⁵¹

Actually, from the beginning of his rule, Nikol Pashiniyan told Putin he favored closer political and military ties with Russia.⁵²



Nikol Pashinyan meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. Source: primeminister.am

It is important to point out that many top officials belong to the same ruling elite, which has reigned in the country for decades. Thus, Prosecutor General Artur Davtyan⁵³ is an old Serzh Sargsyan henchman. The National Assembly, dominated by the Republican Party, appointed him in 2016.⁵⁴ All his career as a prosecutor of a district in Yerevan, later of Yerevan, and then as a

⁵¹ Pashinyan, Putin Praise Bi-Lateral Relations. Azbarez, December 27, 2018. <http://asbarez.com/176956/pashinyan-putin-praise-bi-lateral-relations/>

⁵² [Denis Pinchuk, Andrew Osborn](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-armenia-putin-pashinyan/new-armenian-pm-tells-putin-he-wants-closer-ties-with-russia-idUSKCN1F1A3). New Armenian PM tells Putin he wants closer ties with Russia. Reuters, May 14, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-armenia-putin-pashinyan/new-armenian-pm-tells-putin-he-wants-closer-ties-with-russia-idUSKCN1F1A3>

⁵³ <https://www.spyur.am/en/companies/prosecutor-generals-office-of-the-republic-of-armenia/70269>

⁵⁴ Artur Davtyan is Armenia’s new Public Prosecutor General. Mediamax, September 15, 2016. <https://mediamax.am/en/news/politics/19846>

prosecutor of the Prosecutor General's Office, and Prosecutor General, Artur Davtyan was engaged in corruption and human rights violations, including fabricating cases against opponents to the regime.

Another top-ranking official who is a member of the post-Sargsyan government is Director of National Security Services (NSS), Artur Vanetsyan.⁵⁵ His career since 2000 under two Republican Party Presidents is full of abuses and torment of political dissidents. Despite this, Nikol Pashinyan appointed Artur Vanetsyan, putting him in charge of one of the most powerful government agencies.

Valeriy Osipyan is a person of the same nature. He was appointed Police Chief of Armenia.⁵⁶ In the past, he was known for participating in violations of human rights. His appointment was initiated by Nikol Pashinyan. In the past, he served as Deputy Chief of Yerevan Police, and under him police used beatings, torture, unlawful detentions and other due process violations. He carries some responsibility for attacks on protesters during the June 2015 protests.⁵⁷

Another notorious figure appointed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is Lieutenant-General Hunan Poghosian. He received the governorship of Syunik province. Before, he served as first deputy chief of the Armenian police during most of Serzh Sargsyan's reign.⁵⁸

The new generation of political leaders is already allegedly engaged in corruption schemes. In particular, the head of Armenia's state anti-corruption agency, Davit Sanasaryan, a close ally of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a member of his Civil Contract party and an

⁵⁵ Artur Vanetsyan appointed Director of National Security Service of Armenia. Artsakh Press, May 11, 2018. <https://artsakhpress.am/eng/news/86276/artur-vanetsyan-appointed-director-of-national-security-service-of-armenia.html>

⁵⁶ The Government of the Republic of Armenia. <http://www.gov.am/en/bodies-under-prime-minister-chiefs/783/>

⁵⁷ Human Rights Violations of the Electricity Price Hike Protesters: REPORT. Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor, September 22, 2015, pp. 1-2. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/183796?download=true>

⁵⁸ Hunan Poghosyan to be appointed as Syunik province governor. Arka News Agency, October 16, 2018 http://arka.am/en/news/politics/hunan_poghosyan_to_be_appointed_as_syunik_province_governor_/

activist in the Reject Serzh protest movement that brought down the former government and swept Pashinyan to power, has been himself charged with abusing his power, while he denies the charges and claims they are the result of political infighting. Armenia's National Security Service (NSS) announced on April 18, 2019 that they were accusing Davit Sanasaryan, the head of the State Control Service, on charges of "not carrying out his official duties and abusing his power in order to promote the interest of his employee's business."⁵⁹ The case of Sanasaryan shows that the new regime got involved in the old habit of political corruption, which plagued the history of Armenia under all regimes.

The old guard continues to enjoy impunity. For example, Armenian police inform that on July 2, 2018 an incident occurred at the Olympavan sports complex: the citizen, Vyacheslav Harutyunyov, was injured, suffering broken ribs and other injuries, in the incident, reported that he was hit by MP Gagik Tsarukyan, President of the Armenian National Olympic Committee. According to police information, Minister of Emergency Situations, Secretary General of the Armenian Olympic Committee Hrachya Rostomyan and Vice-President of the Armenian National Olympic Committee Derenik Gabrielyan were present at the incident. The victim reported that he was hit by Gagik Tsarukyan, then by Tsarukyan's chief bodyguard Eduard Babayan and one more person.⁶⁰

Armenian parliament member and notorious oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan was never charged, and his head bodyguard Eduard Babayan has been released from custody after he was detained for the brutal attack. The court considered the information provided by the defendant's

⁵⁹ Ani Mejlumyan. Head of Armenian anti-corruption body accused of corruption. Eurasianet, Apr 19, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/head-of-armenian-anti-corruption-body-accused-of-corruption>

⁶⁰ Olympavan sports complex incident victim reports he was hit by MP Tsarukyan: Emergency situations minister also present at incident. 168 hours: News and Analysis, July 3, 2018. <https://en.168.am/2018/07/03/26184.html>

lawyers sufficient to release Babayan on bail.⁶¹ This incident indicates that the political and economic elite of Armenia feels comfortable and protected under the new government.

According to Aram Sargsyan, a historian and a political analyst, Armenia is facing a formation of a new regime, which strikingly resembles the previous ones. The case of Davit Sanasaryan reflects a growing competition between the State Control Service and the National Security Service for power in the country. Aram Sargsyan pointed out that Nikol Pashinyan and his movement did not fight the system, but focused on some individuals. In reality, the country continues to be controlled by oligarchs, despite the slogans of economic revolution, but, as Sargsyan stated, it is impossible to reform the economy without changing of institutions of power, which did not undergo any serious changes under the new government. The major flaw of the new regime, in Sargsyan's opinion, is that Pashinyan and his movement did not offer a new ideology, i.e. no real democracy was introduced to the country. Sargsyan pointed out that the slogans of the revolution are not fulfilled, nothing is happening with the Republican Party, which ruled the country and committed many human rights violations, and nothing, in reality, was done to diminish the role of oligarchs. And what is troubling: the regime uses the NSS to shut down the critics: Aram Sargsyan revealed in his interview that he was called and threatened by the National Security Service after someone reported that he criticized the new government.⁶²

In June 2019 a group of opposition activists including a former Pashinyan ally, Artur Danielyan, were detained by police for their protest activities. The members of Adekvad, an anti-

⁶¹ Tsarukyan's Head Bodyguard Eduard Babayan released on 20 million dram bail: armtimes.com. Aravot, August 21, 2018.

⁶² Skype Interview with Aram Sargsyan, political analyst of the First Armenian Information Portal 1in.am., April 22, 2019.

Pashinyan-Facebook-group-turned-political-party, were detained on the evening June 8. On June 10, one of the leaders of the group, Artur Danielyan, was arrested.

On June 6, at a meeting with government ministers, President Pashinyan said there were groups of men clad in black walking menacingly around the center of Yerevan to create an atmosphere of fear, and said they were linked to “the former corrupt system.”

A few hours later, several of them were detained. “Our members were not doing anything illegal and this kind of behavior means only one thing: this is political persecution,” the group said in a Facebook post.

Some analysts agreed. “It must be said clearly: people were detained for expressing their opinion, not for their actions,” wrote analyst Hrant Mikaelian on his blog. “And this is not the first time the police have been effectively politicized and work exclusively for Pashinyan. This is an attempt to intimidate opponents of the government and more and more recalls the actions of [former Georgian president Mikheil] Saakashvili 15 years ago.”

Others made comparisons closer to home. “Now it turns out that Pashinyan took a page from Serzh Sargsyan’s book - if you cannot solve the problems in the country, then you cannot allow those problems to be discussed calmly,” wrote Hayk Khalatyan, an editor at the news website Dalma and a political analyst, on his Facebook page.⁶³ Thus, the local Armenia analysts confirm the fact that the regime went through cosmetic changes without really changing its core and essence.

Overall, Armenia lived through cosmetic changes of the regime. The events of April 2018 did not turn the country toward democracy, and did not change the nature of the regime. The entire state apparatus, including law enforcement, is preserved and police actions towards

⁶³ [Ani Mejlumyan](#). Fashion policing in Armenia raises accusations of political persecution. Eurasianet, June 10, 2019. <https://eurasanet.org/fashion-policing-in-armenia-raises-accusations-of-political-persecution>

minorities stays the same. In fact, the country follows the footsteps of Georgia, which lived through a revolution, Ukraine with two revolutions, Kyrgyzstan with two revolutions, and Moldova with student riots similar to the revolution, which resulted in a change of government. However, due to the political cultures and Soviet legacy, no changes occurred. The old systems stayed in place with some leadership changes at the top. It is also happening in Armenia: the state apparatus, extremely corrupt and authoritarian, has not been changed. The government did not purge its law enforcement and juridical systems plagued with corruption and abuses. Thus, the regime preserved itself in place.