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Echoes of Defiance: Post-War Protests and Their Implications in Armenia

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Abstract

The post-war protests in Armenia from 2020 to 2024 serve as a vivid case study of political unrest, collective trauma, and societal mobilization following the Nagorno-Karabakh war. These movements, driven by Armenia's territorial losses and the profound national identity crisis that ensued, reflected widespread dissatisfaction with governance, structural weaknesses, and political leadership. Despite their emotional resonance and the symbolic power of movements like the "Holy Struggle," the protests faced significant challenges in achieving systemic change. This article examines the anatomy of these protests, highlighting their historical roots, organizational dynamics, leadership strategies, and the structural conditions that shaped their trajectory. By analyzing Armenia's post-war protests, this study contributes to broader debates about the resilience of post-conflict societies and the limitations of protest-driven reform in addressing deep-seated governance crises.

Keywords: Post-war protests, Armenian politics, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Holy Struggle movement, collective trauma.

Introduction

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war profoundly altered Armenia's political and social landscape, catalyzing a wave of protests that revealed the country's unresolved challenges. The defeat in the 44-day conflict led to territorial losses and displaced thousands of ethnic Armenians, triggering widespread grief and outrage. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, perceived as a symbol of national failure by many, became the focal point of public discontent.

The protests reflected deeper systemic issues within Armenia's political framework, including weak institutions, socio-economic inequalities, and public mistrust of both current and former political elites. From the spontaneous outbursts of grief in late 2020 to the organized campaigns of movements like the "Holy Struggle," these demonstrations encapsulated the tensions between Armenia's aspirations for reform and the enduring fragility of its governance structures.

This article explores the complex dynamics of these post-war protests, examining their origins, evolution, and ultimate limitations. Through a combination of historical analysis, theoretical frameworks, and case-specific insights, it seeks to understand why these movements resonated wit many yet failed to achieve their intended outcomes. By situating Armenia's experience within broader patterns of

post-conflict mobilization, the study provides valuable lessons on the interplay between protest movements, political systems, and societal resilience.

The Anatomy of Post-War Protests in Armenia: Grief, Mobilization, and Political Struggles

The post-war protests in Armenia, spanning from 2020 to 2024, present a vivid and complex case of political unrest, collective trauma, and societal mobilization. These movements, triggered by the profound consequences of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, reflect a broader crisis of governance, national identity, and public trust in political leadership. The protests' anatomy reveals deeply ingrained tensions within Armenian society, shaped by decades of unresolved challenges and amplified by the war's devastating outcome.

At the heart of these protests lies the deep national grief and indignation following Armenia's defeat in the 44-day war with Azerbaijan. The war resulted in significant territorial losses, including parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, and displaced thousands of ethnic Armenians from the region. For many, the ceasefire agreement signed in November 2020 by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan symbolized a national humiliation and betrayal (Cookman, 2020). This agreement, brokered by Russia, solidified Azerbaijan's territorial gains and dashed the aspirations of Armenians who had long fought to secure Nagorno-Karabakh as a central element of their national identity. The war's outcome exposed not only military vulnerabilities but also long-standing structural weaknesses in governance and national preparedness (Terzyan, 2021).

The protests were initially spontaneous, reflecting raw emotional outbursts from diverse sections of society. Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, families of fallen soldiers, and opposition political figures converged in their shared outrage against the government (Cookman, 2020). Protesters stormed government buildings, marched through symbolic locations like Republic Square in Yerevan, and demanded Pashinyan's resignation. These early demonstrations were characterized by their intensity and immediacy, with participants expressing both grief and a profound sense of betrayal. They quickly transformed into a more organized movement as opposition coalitions, including the Homeland Salvation Movement, sought to channel public

anger into a structured campaign for political change. The Homeland Salvation Movement, composed of 17 opposition parties, became a central force in the protests. Led by figures such as Vazgen Manukyan, the coalition attempted to capitalize on the public's discontent to force Pashinyan out of office (Hairenik Weekly, 2024). The protests' tactics evolved as the movements progressed. Early demonstrations relied on mass gatherings and emotionally charged actions, such as storming government buildings and organizing vigils for fallen soldiers. Over time, protesters adopted more strategic methods, including roadblocks, occupations of public spaces, and coordinated media campaigns to amplify their message. Social media played a crucial role in mobilizing participants, disseminating information, and countering government narratives (Terzyan, 2021). Symbolic actions, such as planting Armenian flags along contested borders and holding marches in historically significant locations, imbued the protests with a sense of continuity and existential urgency.

However, the opposition's fragmented nature and its association with Armenia's pre-2018 political elite limited its ability to gain widespread support. Many Armenians viewed these figures as emblematic of the corruption and inefficiency that had plagued the country for years. This perception undermined the opposition's credibility, despite their efforts to frame themselves as defenders of national dignity (RFE/RL, 2021).

Prime Minister Pashinyan's government responded to the protests with a combination of law enforcement, political maneuvering, and rhetorical framing. Security forces were deployed to contain unrest, with riot police frequently using non-lethal measures such as stun grenades to disperse crowds (Saribekian & Bedevian, 2022). The government sought to portray the protests as politically motivated disruptions orchestrated by the opposition, emphasizing the need for stability in a time of national crisis. Pashinyan also leveraged Armenia's democratic institutions to reinforce his legitimacy, calling for snap parliamentary elections in June 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). Despite the opposition's efforts to undermine him, Pashinyan's Civil Contract party secured a decisive victory, gaining a supermajority in parliament. This outcome underscored the complexity of public sentiment; while many Armenians were dissatisfied with Pashinyan's leadership, they were unwilling to return to the old

political order represented by figures like Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan (Terzyan, 2021).

The protests of 2022 marked a significant shift in focus and intensity. Known as the “Resistance Movement,” these demonstrations were fueled by fears of further territorial concessions to Azerbaijan and dissatisfaction with the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. Protesters demanded stronger security guarantees for Artsakh’s population and a firmer stance against Azerbaijan’s actions. The tactics employed during this period included not only traditional rallies but also disruptive actions such as blocking major roads and occupying government buildings (Terzyan, 2025). Clashes with security forces became more frequent, with incidents of mass arrests and injuries (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The June 2022 protests, for instance, escalated into violent confrontations, reflecting the growing frustration and polarization within Armenian society.

Despite their scale and persistence, the protests failed to achieve their primary objective of ousting Pashinyan or forcing significant policy reversals. Several factors contributed to this outcome. The opposition’s internal divisions and lack of a unified vision undermined their ability to present a credible alternative to Pashinyan’s leadership. Public distrust of the old political elite further eroded support for opposition-led movements, as many Armenians remained skeptical of figures associated with past corruption and mismanagement. Additionally, the government’s ability to leverage democratic mechanisms, such as elections, to reaffirm its mandate helped to neutralize the protests’ impact. Pashinyan’s narrative of being the only leader capable of navigating Armenia through its post-war challenges resonated with enough voters to sustain his position.

In 2024, the protests took on an increasingly symbolic and moral dimension, with Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan emerging as the leader of the "Holy Struggle" movement. Galstanyan led demonstrations against territorial agreements with Azerbaijan, framing the movement as a defense of Armenia’s sovereignty and dignity. His leadership brought a new layer of cultural and religious resonance to the protests, appealing to deeply rooted notions of national identity (Hairenik Weekly, 2024). The "Holy Struggle" arose as both a response to immediate political decisions and a

reflection of deeper societal grievances and collective memory. Rooted in the aftermath of territorial concessions and disillusionment with unfulfilled promises of post-revolutionary governance, the movement sought to channel public frustrations into a campaign to reclaim national dignity and moral authority in the face of perceived political failures (Terzyan, 2025).

As a religious figure, Galstanyan brought a distinct moral legitimacy that went beyond partisan politics. His slogan, "Armenian, Armenia, Homeland, God," found resonance in a society where the church plays a significant role in cultural and national identity (Kucera, 2024). Through his framing of the movement as a moral crusade, Galstanyan succeeded in rallying diverse groups, from disillusioned former supporters of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to those yearning for the stability of Armenia's past political structures.

The movement heavily relied on symbolic actions to evoke historical and cultural continuity (Bennett, 2024). Protests often took place in nationally significant locations, amplifying their emotional resonance and reinforcing the perception that the movement was deeply embedded in Armenia's collective identity. Religious rituals and nationalist rhetoric added layers of spiritual and cultural significance, making it harder for critics to dismiss the movement as merely a political opposition effort (Bennett, 2024). These tactics tapped into long-standing feelings of loss and resilience that have shaped the Armenian national psyche.

Despite its success in mobilizing public sentiment, the "Holy Struggle" highlighted the inherent limitations of movements that depend heavily on symbolism and moral authority. While the movement's message resonated emotionally, it struggled to formulate a clear political strategy or actionable solutions to Armenia's systemic problems (Grigoryan, 2024). Calls for Pashinyan's resignation, while emotionally powerful, lacked a coherent plan for what would follow, exposing a disconnect between the movement's moral position and its political feasibility.

As the movement's momentum declined, its strategic shortcomings became increasingly evident. Galstanyan's background as a religious leader, rather than a political strategist, left the movement vulnerable to criticism. While it effectively channeled public anger, it failed to establish the institutional and organizational

structures needed for sustained impact. The lack of a clear governance framework or policy agenda raised concerns about its ability to transform public discontent into meaningful reform. A significant misstep of the "Holy Struggle" was its failure to distance itself from Armenia's former ruling elites. Archbishop Galstanyan's public meetings with former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan alienated many Armenians who view these figures as symbols of past corruption and governance failures.

The government's approach to the "Holy Struggle" further highlighted its challenges. Authorities used a mix of repression and rhetoric, deploying security forces to disperse rallies and framing the protests as destabilizing rather than constructive. Clashes between protesters and law enforcement, along with arrests, demonstrated the government's focus on control over dialogue (Azatutyun, 2024). These measures exacerbated public frustration but also emphasized the movement's inability to withstand sustained pressure due to its organizational weaknesses.

Ultimately, the "Holy Struggle" encapsulates the broader challenges of public mobilization in Armenia's political landscape, where protests often struggle to achieve lasting change. While the movement's reliance on collective memory and moral authority inspired significant initial support, it revealed the fragility of efforts that lack institutional backing or actionable policy goals. As seen in past movements throughout Armenia's post-independence history, the "Holy Struggle" illustrates the difficulty of progressing from resistance to meaningful reform in a system characterized by centralized power and weak institutions.

The "Holy Struggle" serves as a testament to both the resilience and the limitations of Armenia's civil society. While it succeeded in critiquing government policies and garnering widespread support, its inability to sustain momentum or enact systemic change highlights the broader issues facing the nation. To break this cycle of protest and disillusionment, Armenia must establish mechanisms for translating public demands into durable reforms, addressing the root causes of its political vulnerabilities while promoting a more inclusive and participatory political culture.

Structural Conditions Driving Protests

Armenia's recurring protests are rooted in the structural weaknesses of its political and social systems, which create fertile ground for unrest while limiting the potential for transformative change.

A central issue is the **weak institutional frameworks** that characterize many post-Soviet states, including Armenia. The lack of mechanisms for political accountability, judicial independence, and participatory governance fosters a vacuum that protests often seek to address. Public mistrust in state institutions exacerbates this problem, compelling citizens to rely on informal networks and charismatic leaders. This reliance perpetuates cycles of instability, as these systems are inherently fragile and unstructured, incapable of addressing deeper systemic issues.

Adding another layer of complexity are **socio-economic grievances**, which intersect with political discontent to drive public mobilization. High unemployment, widespread emigration, and perceptions of systemic corruption fuel a sense of inequity and frustration. Economic hardships are not only direct causes of discontent but also symbolic of broader governance failures. These intertwined grievances catalyze protests, transforming economic struggles into powerful motivators for political action.

Elite dynamics and political polarization further shape the trajectory of protests in Armenia. Political elites often operate within a deeply polarized environment, where protests become arenas for elite competition rather than vehicles for systemic reform. The rivalry between figures like Nikol Pashinyan and his predecessors demonstrates how protests can be co-opted as tools for political power struggles, sidelining the public's broader demands for justice and accountability. This elite-driven polarization limits the ability of movements to unify around shared goals, undermining their capacity for meaningful change.

The **cultural and religious dimensions** of Armenian society also play a unique role in its protest movements. The Armenian Apostolic Church, as both a spiritual authority and a symbol of national identity, often becomes entwined with civic mobilization. Movements like the "Holy Struggle" leverage religious symbolism and

moral narratives to frame their causes as righteous and essential to the nation's survival. While this strategy unites broad segments of the population, it risks alienating those who prioritize secular governance or view religion as a private matter. This dual-edged role of cultural and religious dimensions creates both opportunities and limitations for protest movements.

Challenges to Sustained Impact

Despite their ability to galvanize public sentiment and bring attention to pressing issues, Armenian protests face significant barriers to achieving long-term impact.

One major obstacle is the **fragmentation of civil society**. While protests can unite disparate groups in moments of crisis, this cohesion often dissipates in the absence of sustained organizational capacity. Without robust intermediary institutions to channel protest energy into actionable reform, movements struggle to maintain momentum. This lack of cohesion not only weakens their immediate impact but also limits their ability to build durable frameworks for systemic change.

State repression further complicates the landscape for protest movements. As noted earlier, the Armenian government has often employed a dual strategy of coercion and narrative control to stifle dissent. Portraying protests as destabilizing, coupled with the use of arrests, police force, and intimidation, forces movements into a defensive posture. This not only weakens their ability to advance their agendas but also shifts public perception, reducing the broader appeal of their cause.

A reliance on **charismatic leadership** over institutional frameworks undermines the longevity and effectiveness of many protest movements. Figures like Archbishop Galstanyan excel at mobilizing public sentiment and framing moral narratives but often fail to establish the organizational structures necessary for systemic reform. This reliance on personal leadership creates a tension between short-term mobilization and the need for institutional resilience, leaving movements vulnerable to disbandment or co-optation.

The structural conditions and challenges outlined above reveal critical insights into the dynamics of protests in Armenia and beyond. First, the recurring nature of unrest highlights the urgent need to address the underlying institutional weaknesses

and socio-economic disparities driving public dissatisfaction. Without reforms to strengthen governance, foster accountability, and reduce corruption, protests will remain cyclical rather than transformative.

Second, the role of elites and polarization underscores the importance of creating platforms for inclusive dialogue and consensus-building. Bridging divides within both the political class and civil society is essential to ensuring that protests serve as catalysts for systemic change rather than battlegrounds for power struggles.

Lastly, the interplay between cultural, religious, and political dimensions in Armenian society demonstrates the value of balancing tradition and modernity in mobilization efforts. Movements must navigate the fine line between leveraging cultural identity and embracing inclusive, forward-thinking frameworks to foster unity across diverse societal groups.

For protests in Armenia to transition from episodic expressions of discontent to agents of lasting reform, they must address these structural and organizational challenges. The path forward lies in building resilient institutions, fostering inclusive political cultures, and prioritizing long-term strategies over short-term gains. These lessons are not only critical for Armenia but also offer broader insights for understanding the complexities of protest dynamics in fragile democracies.

Theoretical Insights From the Armenian Case

The protests in Armenia following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war serve as a lens to examine broader theoretical debates surrounding collective trauma, societal mobilization, and the resilience of political systems under stress. Such cases illuminate the challenges faced by post-conflict societies grappling with governance crises, identity fragmentation, and the limits of protest-driven reform.

The mobilization of large-scale protests in Armenia aligns with theories of ***collective action and social movements,*** particularly resource mobilization and political opportunity frameworks (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tarrow, 1998). Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the role of material and organizational resources, such as social media and diasporic networks, in facilitating collective action. Social movements gain traction when institutional vulnerabilities create political

opportunities, as seen in Armenia's post-war governance crisis, where public dissatisfaction intersected with systemic failures in governance and national security.

In cases like Armenia, the intersection of historical grievances and contemporary challenges creates fertile ground for protest. The 2020 war brought renewed focus to long-standing territorial disputes involving Nagorno-Karabakh, which had previously served as a significant element of Armenian collective identity. The protests, therefore, were not merely reactive but deeply connected to historical experiences of struggle and perseverance.

The concept of ***collective trauma*** is instrumental in understanding how societies process profound losses, such as those experienced in Armenia after the war. Collective trauma transcends individual grief, becoming a shared memory that shapes political identities and actions (Alexander, 2004). In Armenia, the defeat symbolized not just territorial loss but also the erosion of deeply held aspirations for national sovereignty, leading to what Volkan (1997) describes as "large-group identity crises."

This shared trauma transformed societal grievances into political mobilization, emphasizing existential fears about national survival. In similar cases, such as post-war Bosnia, collective trauma has served as both a mobilizing force and a barrier to reconciliation, creating polarized narratives that complicate governance and societal cohesion.

Effective leadership and framing are critical in transforming grievances into sustained movements. Leaders such as Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan in Armenia leveraged moral authority and cultural symbolism to unify diverse constituencies, tapping into what Snow and Benford (1988) call “frame alignment processes.” By framing the protests as a moral crusade to protect Armenia’s sovereignty and dignity, leaders created a resonant narrative that mobilized action across societal divides.

However, reliance on moral authority without political expertise often limits a movement’s efficacy, as seen in Armenia’s “Holy Struggle” movement. Similar dynamics can be observed in other contexts where moral leadership, such as that of the Dalai Lama in Tibet or Lech Wałęsa in Poland, has succeeded in galvanizing public sentiment but required institutional or political frameworks to achieve lasting change.

The Armenian government's response to post-war protests reflects broader theories on state resilience and the management of dissent. Davenport's (2007) theory of state repression and accommodation illustrates how governments oscillate between suppressing protests and co-opting their narratives to maintain legitimacy. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's administration employed a dual strategy: deploying security forces to curb unrest while leveraging Armenia's democratic institutions, such as snap elections, to reaffirm its legitimacy.

Armenia's case highlights the paradox of democracy in post-crisis contexts: while elections can restore legitimacy, they can also expose unresolved societal fractures, as many voters remain skeptical of both incumbents and opposition forces.

The Armenian protests underscore the inherent limitations of movements driven by collective trauma and symbolic leadership. Theories of ***contentious politics*** (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001) emphasize that protest movements must build durable networks, articulate clear policy goals, and engage institutional actors to transition from resistance to reform. In Armenia, the fragmentation of opposition groups, compounded by public distrust of pre-2018 elites, inhibited the creation of a coherent alternative to Pashinyan's leadership.

These challenges are not unique to Armenia. Similar dynamics have played out in post-Maidan Ukraine and post-Arab Spring Egypt, where mass mobilization was undermined by factionalism, weak institutions, and the absence of actionable governance strategies. Such cases reveal the difficulty of sustaining momentum in environments where political systems are characterized by centralized power and limited pluralism.

The Armenian protests provide broader insights into the dynamics of post-conflict mobilization. First, they illustrate how collective trauma can act as both a catalyst for unity and a source of division, depending on how it is framed and addressed. Second, they highlight the role of historical narratives in shaping contemporary political action, as unresolved grievances often resurface in moments of national crisis. Third, they underscore the limitations of protest movements that prioritize symbolic actions over institutional engagement, pointing to the need for

robust civil society structures capable of bridging the gap between resistance and reform.

Finally, Armenia's experience demonstrates the critical importance of leadership capable of navigating the tension between moral authority and practical governance. Movements that fail to balance these dimensions risk becoming transient expressions of discontent rather than vehicles for sustainable change.

Conclusion

The post-war protests in Armenia, marked by their scale, persistence, and symbolic power, underscore both the potential and the limitations of societal mobilization in addressing governance crises. These movements succeeded in articulating widespread public discontent and reasserting national identity in the face of profound collective trauma. However, their failure to achieve systemic change highlights the challenges of transitioning from resistance to reform in a context of weak institutions, fragmented opposition, and centralized political power.

Movements like the "Holy Struggle" exemplify the role of moral authority and historical narratives in uniting diverse constituencies but also reveal the limitations of symbolism without strategic political direction. The Armenian experience demonstrates the critical need for coherent leadership, actionable policy agendas, and robust institutional frameworks to sustain the momentum of protests and translate public demands into durable reforms.

As Armenia continues to grapple with the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, its society faces the task of bridging the gap between public mobilization and systemic transformation. The lessons from these protests serve as a poignant reminder of the complexities of governance, identity, and resilience in post-conflict societies, offering insights that extend far beyond Armenia's borders.

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