New Government, New Discourse and Old Constraints: Armenia After the "Velvet Revolution"

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Abstract

This paper explores the political implications of the 2018 "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia, with a focus on the dynamics of the post-revolution state-building. The findings suggest that Pashinyan's discourse on "New Armenia" has revolved around the narratives on "people's government" and "economic revolution," with little to no emphasis on "updating" the foreign policy identity. Thus, in contrast to Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, the domestic change in Armenia has not led to foreign policy shifts. While the new government's vision of the "people government"-led "New Armenia", has strongly resonated with the Armenian society, a series of domestic factors (authoritarian legacy, weakness of institutions) and external constraints (troubled neighbourhood, tremendous dependence on Russia) seem to adversely affect its translation into reality. A question arises as to whether actor-driven factors will prove powerful enough to outweigh structure-induced constraints, thus materializing the underlying ideas of the revolution.

Keywords: Armenia, "Velvet Revolution," "people's government," nation-building, authoritarian legacy.

Introduction

Two years after the "Velvet Revolution" Armenia remains in the academic spotlight, due to a series unanswered questions about its both domestic and foreign policy outputs. Essentially, it has sparked a renewed interest in post-Soviet revolution studies, including but not limited to the dynamics of post-revolution nation-building processes.

There is a lot of scholarship on the political and socioeconomic rationale behind post-Soviet revolutions, that would trace their causes to a series of factors, ranging from electoral fraud to mounting social-economic discontent (Tucker, 2007; Beacháin and Polese, 2010).

There has been a tendency in existing studies to focus specifically on the "anti-Post Soviet" of revolutions, positing that "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan sought to purge the Newly Independent States' ruling elites and political-economic systems of residual 'Sovietism' (Nikitin, 2007). Similarly, the Armenian revolution can be viewed as Armenia's society's bold attempt at de-institutionalizing post-Soviet order model resting on repressive rule.

Despite the fact, that the root causes and possible effects of the "Velvet Revolution" have been studied, there has been little attention to the new Armenian government's discourse on "New Armenia" and its policy implications.

This study represents an attempt to fill the void, by examining the interplay between ideational and material outputs of the "Velvet Revolution."

It addresses the following questions: 1. What are the core narratives underlying the post-revolution government's discourse on "New Armenia." 2. What are the core political (including foreign policy) outputs of the "Velvet Revolution."

The study builds its empirical argumentation by analyzing a broad variety of sources, including the newspaper articles, observations from political speeches, official documents, and interviews, which provide a body of discourse.

The paper will proceed as follows: First, the post-revolution government's discourse on "New Armenia" will be discussed, focusing on the narratives of "people's government" and "economic revolution." The second section will focus on foreign policy challenges facing "New Armenia." The final section will analyze some of the outputs of the new government's reforms, focusing on anti-corruption policy.

New Government, New Discourse

Post-revolution Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has inherited a country, fraught with corruption, weak rule of law, lack of economic opportunities and poverty. No wonder, Pashinyan's discourse predating and postdating the "Velvet Revolution" has revolved around the narrative of "New Armenia" – a country of law and justice, prosperity, and democracy (Pashinyan, 2019). Therefore, the biggest mission of the new government would be the fight against corruption and other authoritarian malpractices to make sure that "never again will anyone dare to humiliate our people through vote-buying practices, administrative coercion or in any other way", as "any attempt to stop this rebirth and flight of the Armenian people and to strangle their hope and optimism in corruption and permissiveness will meet a crushing counter-attack" (Pashinyan, 2018a).

A closer scrutiny of Pashinyan's discourse suggests that the core characteristic of "New Armenia's" political identity is the "people's government": "before April 2018, Armenia's dominant political factor was the criminal, economic, political elite, while the people's will has become the country's dominant political factor after the revolution... Yes, the people's power is established in Armenia; yes, we have a people's government in Armenia" (Pashinyan, 2018b).

A closer look at the discourse on "people's government" shows a blurred line between state and society. Given huge public support for Pashinyan's government manifested in its landslide parliamentary victory in December 2018, Pashinyan and his proxies would even

contend that any step against their government is a step against the Armenian people, as they represent "people's government" (Factor, 2019).

Pashinyan's discourse suggests that he embodies the will of the people and that Parliament's legitimacy is based on that will: "In Armenia, there is no coalition government. In Armenia, there is no parliamentary majority. In Armenia, the ultimate power directly belongs to the people and the people carry out direct rule. This is the key meaning of the revolution that took place in Armenia" (Armenian Weekly, 2018).

Clearly, in attempts of rousing public protests against Sargsyan's regime, Pashinyan would subject former president's government to fierce criticism for its inability to raise living standards and eliminate corruption. Meanwhile, his discourse on post-revolution Armenia's development strategy suggests that government has little to do with those issues, given that in "people's government"-led Armenia people are the sole source of reforms and changes. The government is "only a partner and should not be seen as a giver of work" (Eurasianet, 2019a).

Notably, in the speech he gave to introduce the program, Pashinyan said that "poverty is in people's minds" (Eurasianet, 2019a). He added that "the numerical parameters of the economic revolution actually depend on how many Armenian citizens will respond to our call to become activists of the economic revolution and how many will decide to take advantage of the opportunities of the same revolutionary platform" (Eurasianet, 2019a). It follows that any possible failure of the new government would be people's failure unable to overcome "poverty in their minds."

Pashinyan would make extensive use of the "people's government's" narrative to stress the necessity of fundamental judicial reforms as "the people of Armenia continue to perceive the judiciary as a leftover of the former corrupt regime that continues to plot and execute deceptions against the people," said Pashinyan, who also called for the resignation of the country's sitting judges and a new vetting process for new judges (Armenian Weekly, 2019). Moreover, he went as far as to accuse Armenia's judicial system of conspiring against him and his Government and declared that the next phase of the "Velvet Revolution" will take the form of judicial reform (Kucera, Mejlumyan, 2019).

The confrontation between Pashinyan's government and the "remnants" of the former regime escalated to a point, where the Armenian parliament adopted a bill on holding a referendum on suspending the powers of a majority members of the Constitutional Court.

Pashinyan hailed the current Constitutional Court as an obstruction to completing the revolution in Armenia. Moreover, Pashinyan has treated the Constitutional Court as an instrument that prevented the Armenian people from exercising their right to form a government in the country in the 1996, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013 presidential elections and thus represents the corrupt regime of Serzh Sargsyan, rather than the people of Armenia (Pashinyan, 2020). These contentions would be followed by the claim that the opponents of the referendum as "anti-state" forces due to their opposition to breaking with "people government"- led Armenia's authoritarian legacy (Eurasianet, 2020). Overall, the narratives of "people's government" and "proud Armenians" have been frequently used to legitimize government's policies and even shield it from unwanted opposition, by framing every 'sabotage' against the government a step against the Armenian people (Factor, 2019).

Arguably, such a discourse would contribute to the development of an "Us"/" Them" binary that involves the semantic strategies of positive Self-presentation and negative Other - presentation. In Pashmina's speeches, this binary poses "Us", the essentially good and revolutionary protagonists, against "Them", the leftovers of the old regime and counter-revolutionaries who are poised to hinder democratic reforms and exert devastating influence over the country.

In this way, Us/Them polarization is a key legitimation strategy – an argumentative technique that rhetors employ to scapegoat and target the rivals for actual and potential shortcomings and wrongdoing (Oddo, 2011).

Interestingly, Pashinyan has put forth hundred facts about "new Armenia" emphasizing the accomplishments in raising living standards by increasing salaries, promoting economic rejuvenation, increasing military capabilities, fighting against corruption and ensuring judicial independence, as well as promoting homecoming of immigrant Armenians (Pashinyan, 2019b).

Arguably, in contrast to Saakashvili's invariably ambitious discourse on "missionary," European and powerful Georgia, Pashinyan's one has been limited to strictly socio-economic and domestic political issues. That said, while Saakashvili would hail the "Rose Revolution" as "mental revolution", there has been a strong tendency for Pashinyan's discourse to revolve around "economic revolution."

"The economic revolution has begun," said Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, presenting the program in parliament on February 12, 2019 (Eurasianet, 2019b). "I am announcing the start of the nationwide economic revolution in the Republic of Armenia. The Armenian people won in the fight against corruption, impunity and clan management, and the Armenian people will win in the fight against poverty and unemployment" (Eurasianet, 2019b).

The government plan promises a "significant decrease" of the severe poverty in Armenia and a "significant decrease in unemployment by 2023" (Civilnet, 2019). Small businesses would be exempt from taxes; public sector salaries would be increased. The plan gave a few specific targets: that GDP would increase by five percent a year, exports would be increased to over 40 percent of GDP by 2024, and solar energy would make up 10 percent of the country's total consumption by 2022 (Civilnet, 2019).

Remarkably, Pashinyan markedly departed from his predecessors' strong tendency of citing unfavorable external conditions, ranging from the closed borders with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey, to the absence of effective land communication with the rest of the world as the core excuses for economic failures (Abrahamyan, 2019). Rather, he finds the new economic model "*with an inclusive economic system meaning that all the citizens of the Republic of Armenia will have equal opportunities, accessibilities, liberties to carry out economic activities and be equal in the eyes of the law and tax services" pivotal to achieving the long-desired "economic revolution" (Pashinyan, 2019b).*

Thus, Pashinyan deems an economic turnaround feasible even amid Armenia's full-scale integration into the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) that he would previously hail as an impediment to Armenia's economic development (Aravot, 2017).

It is worth to note that articles 4 and of the treaty on the EAEU obligates member states to create common market of goods, labor and services and have their economic policies complied with the goals and principles of the EAEU (Treaty on the EEU 2014, art. 4, 5). According to article 25, there is a common regime of trade of goods with third parties (Treaty on the EEU 2014, art. 25). All these stipulations suggest that Armenia is considerably constrained to boost trade and broader economic cooperation with the EU.

It is perhaps for this reason that some observers have greeted Pashinyan's claims of "economic revolution" with skepticism, noting that the scope of economic opportunities and international trade would be inevitably constrained by the EAEU membership (Grigoryan, 2019).

Arguably, well acknowledging the dire constraints stemming from Armenia's Eurasian economic integration, Pashinyan seeks to offset unfavorable external conditions by fostering domestic economic reforms. In essence, the narrative of the "economic revolution" along with Pashinyan's "2050 economic vision" that envisages Armenia's GDP's 15-fold growth by 2050 (Eurasianet, 2019c) seeks to keep the flame of post-revolution enthusiasm and his popularity alight amid possible setbacks and economic hardships.

Clearly, there is no magic bullet for getting the Armenian economy on its feet and the economic recovery has much to do with significant improvements in country's political and legal landscapes leading to the rule of law, judicial independence, and accountability of elected officials. Meanwhile, the social and economic discontent of the Armenian population prompted Pahsinyan to place a heightened emphasis on "economic revolution," largely treated as the next stage of the 2018 "Velvet Revolution."

New Government, Old Constraints: The Case of Foreign Policy

Given former opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan's critical stances on Armenia's plight in Russia-led unions, it would be easy to resort to speculations about possible foreign policy changes and Armenia's advancement towards the EU. Notably, in the fall of 2017 Pashinyan-led "Yelk" parliamentary faction submitted a bill proposing Armenia's withdrawal from the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union – framed as a dormant union detrimental to country's interests (Terzyan, 2019c, p. 101). Furthermore, Pashinyan would denounce the Russian policy towards Armenia on all sides, stressing particularly the 'cynical interventions in Armenia's domestic affairs. Therefore, "the fear that joining the EAEU will result in serious threats to the sovereignty of Armenia, has become stronger" (Aravot, 2017).

Yet, from the very beginning of his tenure Pashinyan fundamentally changed his stances on the EAEU and on the Armenian-Russian partnership.

During the first meeting with the Russian President Pashinyan particularly noted: "We have things to discuss, but there are also things that do not need any discussion. That is the strategic relationship of allies between Armenia and Russia ... I can assure you that in Armenia there is a consensus, and nobody has ever doubted the importance of the strategic nature of Armenian Russian relations" (Reuters, 2018). Moreover, he confirmed Armenia's commitment to deepening further integration in the Eurasian Economic Union, framing it as beneficial to the country: "Armenia is eager to see the furtherance of integration processes in

the Eurasian Economic Union. We are ready to do our best to further develop the integration-targeted institutions and find new ways and mechanisms for cooperation" (Terzyan, 2019c, pp. 101-102).

The dramatic changes of Pashinyan's discourse suggest that the power transition in Armenia has not led to revising Armenian-Russian relations and reversing Armenia's membership in the Russia-led EAEU.

Furthermore, Pashinyan has invariably stated that Armenia's foreign policy would not undergo U-turns, and therefore, the status of Russia as 'indispensable ally' would remain uncontested. Therefore, Armenia would seek further rapprochement with its 'big brother': "The Republic of Armenia is not going anywhere…and the Armenian-Russian strategic friendship will be deepened and developed ahead…One of our primary objectives is to build on the Armenian-Russian friendship and raise the Armenian-Russian relations to a new level… I promised that the Armenian-Russian relations would be upgraded, and today I want to tell you that after giving it the required formalities, we will inform you about a joint Armenian-Russian humanitarian project, which is unprecedented in the Third Republic's history following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It will come as an unprecedented instrument of partnership and vivid evidence that we are going to consistently upgrade our relations" (Pashinyan, 2018c).

Moreover, in contrast to his initial criticism of Russian "cynical interventions in Armenia's domestic affairs" and their adverse effects on democracy promotion in Armenia, Pashinyan firmly denied the notion of Russian authoritarian diffusion: "…I want to speak about something that used to be the case in Armenia over the past many years. For instance, the authorities often behaved in such a way that many negative domestic phenomena used to be attributed to Russia. Why did this happen? Just because the corrupt authorities wanted to shake off the responsibility for their deeds as if they were not guilty, and there were some external forces prompting them to be corrupt…" (Pashinyan, 2018c).

Essentially, there has been little emphasis on Armenia's Europeanness and European foreign policy aspirations in Pashinyan's-led discourse. In response to a question regarding a Russian-European balance, Pashinyan noted: "I don't think it's right formulation – to have balance as a goal. The most important goal of our foreign policy is to make our independence stronger and stronger, to defend our sovereignty and security etc." (Euronews, 2019). Meanwhile, studies show that the emphasis on security smoothly leads to Russia's treatment as indispensable security ally (Aberg, Terzyan, 2018, p. 168).

Essentially, the persistence of troubled relations with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey further feeds the narrative that the security alliance with Russia is pivotal to building Armenia's resilience against hostile neighbors.

Clearly, it would be unrealistic to expect major breakthroughs in Armenia's troubled neighborhood following the "Velvet revolution." Moreover, Pashinyan's emphasis on Nagorno Karabakh's inclusion in the negotiations with Azerbaijan, as well as his contention that "Artsakh is Armenia, and that is it" has been met with Azerbaijani leadership's rejection and the assertion that "Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijan" and that "Azerbaijan will restore its territorial integrity. Responsibility for the consequences lies with the Armenian side" (Asbarez, 2019).

Such statements are testaments to persisting hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan with no considerable sign of de-escalation of the long-standing confrontation in the aftermath of the "Velvet Revolution." Meanwhile, the lessons of failed Armenian-Turkish rapprochements suggest that there can be no significant development in Armenia-Turkish relations until at least the de-escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. This assumption is based on Azerbaijan's vast opposition to Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, which proved instrumental in thwarting it (Terzyan, 2018, p. 165). Turkey is well aware of Azerbaijan's approach to the "Armenian issue" and is highly unlikely to take any measure that would upset bilateral strategic ties.

Overall, the perception of the foes as hostile, belligerent and destructive has largely remained unchanged in Armenia's political discourse (Terzyan, 2018). This comes as no surprise, as the structural conditions determining these conceptions have not changed, leaving the double blockade imposed on Armenia intact.

In contrast to Georgian revolution leader, who would regard democracy promotion and Europeanization as a recipe for security, consistent with his predecessors, Pashinyan seems to prioritize the security alliance with Russia as a critical bulwark against difficult neighbors. Not surprisingly, he has regarded the military partnership with Russia as a major factor for Armenia's security (Tass, 2018).

As a result, in contrast to neighboring Georgia's "vocal centrality", the Armenian government has offered a drastically different vision of its role in the EU-driven socio - political order by consciously choosing to appear marginal (Delcour, 2019). The comparative analysis of two neighboring countries' positioning vis-à-vis the EU, provides insights into

the dominant perceptions of Georgia as a frontrunner aspiring to EU membership and Armenia as a hesitant partner of the EU (Delcour, 2019, p. 15). This comes down to Armenia's continued centrality in the Russia-led socio-political order.

Overcoming the Authoritarian Legacy? The Case of Anti-Corruption Policy.

The question as to whether the "Velvet Revolution" produced real reforms goes into determining its implications for the fight against rampant corruption. The latter has long inflicted huge suffering on the Armenian population, by condemning Armenia to a vicious circle of underdevelopment, bad governance, and inability to implement reforms.

Unsurprisingly, Pashinyan's government targeted the fight against corruption as a top priority. Namely, the anti-corruption efforts prompted Pashinyan's government to criminalize illicit enrichment (Calliher, 2019). The government pushed for a series of high-profile trials against former senior officials, most notably ex-president Robert Kocharyan former high-ranking officials Manvel Grigoryan, Aram Harutyunyan, Seyran Ohanyan and others. This extended to former defense minister and outstanding former ruling Republican Party member, Vigen Sargsyan, who was charged with "abuse of power," as well as to former Chief of Police Alik Sargsyan - charged with covering up illegal post-election crackdown on opposition protesters in Yerevan in 2008 and with destroying evidence of the "overthrow of the constitutional order" led by then President Kocharyan (Giragosian, 2019, p. 5). However, these arrests and investigations have not yet led to court rulings. Essentially, Pashinyan's fight against corruption has so far focused on punishing former government's members or associates. The question remains as to if the anti-corruption measures will move beyond selective prosecution of former officials to the unequivocal application of "zero tolerance for corruption" principle.

This, in turn comes down to the furtherance of democratic reforms, leading to the advancement of good governance practices and eradication of the systemic corruption in Armenia. Some critics have been skeptical about the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms in Armenia, positing that while the government embarks on "crowd-pleasing affairs," much needs to be done to address the more systemic problems that the new government inherited (Kucera, J. and Mejlumyan, 2019).

Clearly, political elite's robust commitment to eradicating systemic corruption is indispensable. The case of Romania demonstrates that the political will to defeat corruption may well make up the absence of a tradition of the rule of law and democracy. More

specifically, the European Union pressure, along with the electoral pressure and the political will of the domestic political elite combined to ensure the establishment of the rule of law and defeating corruption in the Romanian judiciary (Ritsei, 2010).

Essentially, the EU's positive input cannot be underestimated. Following the launch of an EU-Armenia dialogue on judicial reform in September 2018, the EU expressed its willingness to provide further support for comprehensive judicial reform based on a justice reform strategy (EEAS, 2019a).

Delcour (2018) aptly notes that Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" took place at a time when the EU seemed prepared to support democratisation and political reform more actively (Delcour, 2018, p. 19). More specifically, the launch of a visa dialogue with Armenia may give a strong impetus to reforms in the country owing to the increased conditionality as part of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (Delcour, 2018, p. 19).

In recognition of the post-revolution Armenian government's reform efforts, the EU almost doubled its support to Armenia in 2019 (EEAS, 2019b). The EU has emphasized the necessity of reforms that would lead to the rule of law, fight against corruption and respect for human rights, along with independent and accountable judicial system (EEAS, 2019b). The EU allocated an additional €25 million in the context of its 2019 Annual Action Plan of assistance for Armenia (EEAS, 2019a).

Overall, even though Armenia has improved its position in an annual survey of corruption perceptions around the world conducted by Transparency International (Azatutyun, 2020), the consistent fight against systemic corruption remains an urgent priority. Clearly, there can be no significant economic turnaround or democratic breakthrough amid corrupt judiciary and prevailing 'culture of corruption'. Thus, the fulfillment of the new government's reform agenda significantly depends on its ability to defeat systemic corruption and eradicate corrupt behavioral practices.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to existing literature on the post-revolution nation-building dynamics in post-soviet societies by examining the case of Armenia. Based on the previous discussion, there are three main concluding observations to make regarding some of the outputs of the "Velvet Revolution."

First and in terms the new government's new discourse, the latter has revolved around the notion of "proud Armenians," who established "people's government" capable of carrying out an "economic revolution." The narrative of "people's government" has been frequently employed to distance the incumbents from their non-democratic predecessors, and even to shield them from unwanted opposition, by framing every 'sabotage' against the government a step against the Armenian people. Meanwhile, the promised "economic revolution" aims at keeping the post-revolution enthusiasm high.

Second observation relates to the foreign policy implications of the domestic change. In effect, the "Velvet Revolution" has not extended to Armenia's foreign policy landscape and there have been no major shifts in the conceptions of friends and foes. Consistent with his predecessors' approach, Pashinyan keeps treating the security alliance with 'indispensable ally' Russia as a critical bulwark against neighboring Azerbaijan's and Turkey's hostilities. That said, the Armenian revolution has not led to revise the dominant narratives of friends and foes in Armenian political thinking, as the structural constraints underlying these narratives have remained intact.

Third observation relates to the main outputs of the new government's reforms. The fight against corruption merits special attention and is critical to achieving progress in other areas. The findings show that rampant corruption remains a significant problem. The situation is of serious concern in judiciary and law enforcement authorities, that have been long operating with impunity. The situation is compounded by lingering effects of deep-seated 'culture of corruption'. Thus, the fulfillment of the new government's reform agenda significantly depends on its ability to defeat systemic corruption and eradicate corrupt behavioral practices.

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