Armenia's Second Chance for Democracy

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Armenia will soon mark one year after a dramatic mass uprising, now largely referred to as the "Velvet Revolution." In April 2018 an opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan led the popular movement against the incumbent government. At first thousands, then tens of thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against a broken promise. The protests lasted for two weeks and resulted in government change. The prime minister resigned. Nikol Pashinyan assumed the position of a prime minister and formed a minority government; snap elections in December 2018 gave his party an overwhelming majority and sealed the peaceful power transition. In September 2018, the UN Secretary-General mentioned Armenia as a "fantastic example … of hope" in his address to the UN General Assembly; in December, *the Economist* named Armenia "country of the year." What happened? And what are the broader implications for Armenia's stagnant democratisation and its ongoing attempts at balancing regional cooperation?

 To understand the 2018 uprising, one needs to go back a few years. During his second (and final) presidential turn, President Serzh Sargsyan proposed a change from the semi-presidential to a parliamentary form of governance. The proposal was immediately criticised as an attempt by Mr Sargsyan to retain power personally. He could not run for a third term but could change the system and become a prime minister for unlimited terms. To counter the criticism, President Sargsyan went on record, promising not to aspire for the post of the prime minister.

 In December 2015 Armenians approved the constitutional amendments in a referendum, setting Armenia on the course of becoming a parliamentary republic. In April 2018 the transition process was complete, but Mr Sargsyan reneged on his promise. His Republican Party controlled the majority of the seats in the National Assembly (the parliament) and elected him the prime minister.

The broken promise unleashed a wave of public indignation. Call Armenians naive. But the sentiment of "not this man again, we had him for ten years" brought many people to the streets. Much can be said about how the protests unfolded, grew daily and spread beyond the capital. However, the focus of this article is on the political outcomes of the "Velvet Revolution." Serzh

Sargsyan resigned, his Republican Party was forced to appoint Nikol Pashinyan prime minister; a short period of minority government in Armenia ended with snap elections and a resounding victory for Pashinyan's "My Step" alliance, carrying 70% of the vote. The Republican Party suffered a crushing defeat, not even clearing the 5% threshold, thus failing to secure any seats in the parliament.

The significance of December 2018 parliamentary elections is hard to underestimate. Those were the first free elections Armenia had had in years; allegations of electoral fraud marred all of the previous nationwide elections[1] and referendums. The OSCE Election Observation Mission report noted that the elections "were held with respect for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust."

Of course, the elections were not perfect. Mr Pashinyan delivered election-related passionate public speeches at rallies before the official start of the electoral campaign, prompting criticism of abuse of administrative resources. Once the electoral campaign started in earnest, it became rather toxic. The primary strategy of the "revolutionary" parties was to bash the Republican Party, the main strategy of the Republican Party was scaremongering about the danger of handing the country over to inexperienced "revolutionaries." Pashinyan's camp made several unfortunate statements describing the situation as "black-and-white" (them being the white forces fighting against the black forces of the past), alluding to "counterrevolutionary" forces that needed to be completely defeated, and so on. "Whoever is not with us is against us" sentiment originated with Pashinyan's camp in stark contrast to the narrative of the spring uprising[2]. The Republican Party took the gauntlet, branded itself as the "blacks," used black colour in its electoral advertising material with a slogan "if you are concerned, vote for us." The outcome was glum. The real victim of the black-and-white standoff during the electoral campaign was the quality of the public discourse. On the upside, leaders or 11 political parties that ran in the elections participated in the first-ever televised debate, widely watched and commented on by the public.

The conduct of the elections on December 9, 2018, was praised by international and local observers, although a few problems were noted. Similarly to the previous elections, local observation missions, coordinated by Armenian NGOs provided more criticism, compared to OSCE mission observation. Their report lists some violations. Shortcomings notwithstanding, the elections were genuinely free - a major step towards consolidating democracy in Armenia.

 Nikol Pashinyan's government won with confidence. It has promised sweeping changes, an "economic revolution," optimisation of state apparatus and restoration of public assets embezzled by the previous government officials or under their patronage. A number of corruption cases are under investigation. Some oligarchs have made huge monetary or property "donations" to the Armenian government. The second Armenian President Robert Kocharyan is under arrest, accused of overthrowing the constitutional order in the bloody events of March 1, 2008, when the army was ordered to disperse protests and quell riots in the capital.

Is this a genuine democratisation? Time will show. At this point, it does look like a big step in the right direction. However, young democracies are fragile[3]. In early 1990s Armenia's democratisation project was derailed. Although the conditions now are more conducive then

shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, there is no guarantee of success. Some of the positive signs of democratisation are: significant reduction in corruption, the strengthened rule of law, increased government transparency, the positive experience people had with free elections, increased public interest in politics, and an increased sense of political efficacy. Some of the negative signs are low tolerance of criticism (both among the government and among the general public), contempt towards the opposition, and perhaps rise of populism. After all, most things the new Armenian government says do sound very much like classic populism: anti-elitism and broad appeal to "the people" as if it was a homogenous group.

Much to the irritation of the Armenians who tend to think that everything Armenian is unique, many scholars and observers draw parallels between Armenia's "Velvet Revolution," the Georgian Rose Revolution and the Ukrainian Maidan. The latter two resulted in reorienting the respective countries away from the Russian sphere of influence and closer to the West and the European Union. What do the significant political changes in Armenia mean for the future of Armenia-EU relations?

The surprising answer is: probably not much. For decades, Armenia has been trying to balance Western and Russian interests. Many thought that the "revolution" would signal a shift away from Russian influence, similarly to Georgia and Ukraine. While the relationship with Russia seems a bit tenser, there is no substantial change in the Armenian foreign policy. Prime Minister Pashinyan frequently criticised the previous government for being "too obedient" towards Russia, too soft, not able to promote a more balanced relationship based on mutual respect. But since his first day in office, he also repeatedly emphasised that Russia continues to remain Armenia's strategic partner. Pashinyan's government insists that there will be no major shifts in Armenian foreign policy.

On the other hand, since the current Armenian government seems genuinely committed to democracy, many people (public officials, experts, analysts, professionals, civil society activists and some of the ordinary people) have certain hopes and expectations regarding the EU. The EU (not the US) is seen as both the champion of democracy in this region and a source of expertise. The fact that the EU itself is very diverse in terms of democratic models and institutions of its members is an additional asset. Armenia could greatly benefit from EU help and advice, as long as it manages to continue its delicate act of balance between Russia and the West.

[1] Except 1991 presidential elections

[2] In April and May 2018 Pashinyan frequently repeated that there would be no vendettas, that it was a "revolution of love and harmony."

[3] One could also argue that democracies are fragile regardless of their age and level of consolidation.