

Armenia

The Inedited Pages of Recent History (2002–2018)

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The Armenian “Velvet Revolution.”

SOURCE: <https://www.iarmenia.org/armenian-velvet-revolution/>.

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MODERN ARMENIA became an independent state on 28 May 1918, following the changes triggered by World War I and the Bolshevik Russian Revolution. After only two years of independent existence, Armenia was “rescued” by the Red Army from the Turkish danger and incorporated into the Soviet totalitarian empire. Following more than 70 years of “Soviet captivity,” Armenia got separated de jure from the Metropolis by declaring its independence on 21 September 1991. However, it remained de facto within the Russian sphere of influence, becoming the only Russian foothold in the South Caucasus after Georgia “failed” by signing the Association Agreement with the EU on 27 June 2014.

The Russian military presence on the Armenian territory ever since the Soviet age, the Armenian-Russian “strategic partnership,” the association with the CIS, Russia’s role in regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the country’s dependence on Russian energy resources and the Russian labor and economic market—these are all factors that determined Armenia to more or

less tacitly accept a vassal status to Moscow, contrary to its national interests. More recently, this was highlighted when Yerevan was not able to follow the European aspirations of the Armenian people and withdrew from the EU integration process, during the meeting in Vilnius (28–29 November 2013), taking advice from Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moreover, Armenia signed the Association Agreement with the Eurasia Economic Union on 10 October 2014, in Minsk, during the CIS Summit.

More than that, the collective mentality of the common people had been impregnated with both the idea that Armenia owed its existence to Russia, and the fear that, without Moscow's support, it would be "swallowed up" by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Throughout its history, Armenia has never known a democratic parliamentary regime, but only totalitarian Soviet "popular democracy," going straight and suddenly from the Middle Ages to the modern era after its incorporation into the Soviet Union, as it happened to most ex-Soviet countries. On the other hand, its detachment from the Soviet empire, in 1991, did not occur by means of a revolution—not even a "velvet" one that could have caused a radical change of the political regime. Although the Communist Party of Armenia (CPA) was abolished, party workers and members regrouped in the new political parties that were established shortly afterwards. It was therefore inconceivable to talk about an Armenian civil society in the true sense of the word, and thus about a democratic mindset. Actually, this applies to all former Soviet countries.

As a result, the political power was transferred from the hands of the central Soviet nomenklatura to the local totalitarian nomenklatura of each former Union republic. For all these reasons and in the absence of any historical democratic experience predating the totalitarian communist regime, the ruling elite of Armenia, strongly attached to its Soviet recent past, began the long and difficult transition towards a democratic parliamentary regime, under the close supervision of European organizations specialized in building the rule of law—the European Council and the OSCE in particular, especially after Armenia was accepted as a member of the European Council, in 2001.

For these reasons, democratic reforms advanced quite difficultly, as the old totalitarian mentalities presented a real and hard-to-remove obstacle in their path. At the same time, however, the civil society began to develop, and Western democratic values started to permeate Armenia, including through the Armenian diaspora in Western Europe and the USA, which had become more interested and engaged in the democratic transformation of their country of origin.

This process changed the balance of power in society, resulting in the early 2000s in strong confrontations between the representatives of neo-communist nomenklatura and those of the democratic forces and the civil society.

Presidential Elections

DURING THE first half of 2003, the political climate in Armenia became incendiary, given the campaign for presidential elections (19 February/5 March) and parliamentary elections (25 May), as well as their disputed results—the main events dominating the domestic politics.

A total of 11 candidates entered the race for the election of a new president, the main favorites being Robert Kocharian, the head of state; Stepan Demirchyan, the chairman of the People's Party; and Artashes Geghamian, the leader of the National Unity Party—the last two representing the opposition. Elections took place in a climate of fear and terror after the political assassination of Tigran Naghdalian, president of the Armenian Public Television, on 28 December 2002.

Perceived as the potential winner, Robert Kocharian had the benefit of significant administrative resources given by the so-called “power effect” and the support of over 10 political parties and public organizations, including the Republican Party, representing the government, led by Prime Minister Andranik Margharian, and the extreme nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the oldest party, branching out into the Armenian diaspora. Externally, the president had the support of Russia, the only strategic ally of Armenia. This alliance was highlighted on the occasion of his visit to Moscow during the electoral campaign (16–18 January 2003), which was an important signal given to Armenian voters, pro-Russian and Soviet-nostalgic in their majority.

The opposition began its preparations for the presidential elections in the summer of 2002, negotiations between political parties leading to the creation of an electoral coalition known as the “Alliance of the 16,” established on 3 September 2002. The egos of the political leaders and totally different doctrines of the component parties were the main obstacles in the designation of a unique candidate for the presidential election. As a result, the opposition went into the elections with two candidates, the best-ranked in the polls, around which many political forces merged, basically creating two electoral poles. The opposition's tactic was to prevent Robert Kocharian from winning the elections in the first round, with the firm belief that their best placed candidate would achieve victory during the second round.

Presidential elections in 2003 represented the fourth ballot election since the independence granted in September 1991, and the first one after the admission of Armenia as a member of the European Council, in January 2001. Also significant is the fact that these were the first elections held after the wave of political assassinations which had targeted major political figures of the country, the most notable being the terrorist attack against the Parliament building, on

27 October 1999.¹ The elections were also an important test for the progress of democratic practices in Armenia, since the previous presidential elections had been tainted by serious irregularities and lack of compliance with international standards. In 1996 and 1998, severe violations had been reported by OSCE/ODIHR, including the lack of accurate lists of voters, irregularities in organizing the elections, abuse of state resources, involvement of the military in the voting process, the presence of unauthorized people inside the polling stations during the counting of the ballots, and discrepancies in writing the minutes of proceedings. Consequently, over 1,000 foreign observers and several thousands of local observers announced their presence, in order to monitor both the campaign and the elections in 2003.

The Results of the Presidential Elections

DURING THE first round, neither of the candidates received the required majority. On 20 February 2003, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the preliminary results of the presidential election. Official data showed that out of the 1,418,811 votes cast, President R. Kocharian had received 707,155 or 49.84%, slightly below the majority needed to win in the first round, while his strongest opponent, Stepan Demirchyan, received 400,846 votes, i.e. 28.25%. The official final results were announced five days later, showing a slight decrease for both candidates—the president got 49.48%, while his rival got 28.22%, which did not amount to any significant differences in the presidential race.

Based on these results, the Central Election Commission announced the second round of the elections to be held between the top two contenders, on 5 March. The preliminary results of the second round, announced by the Central Election Commission on 6 March 2003, showed that R. Kocharian had won the election with 1,044,801 (67.52%) of the votes, while Stepan Demirchyan had received 503,136 votes (32.48%). The official final results were released five days later, but they did not significantly alter the percentage.

The second round of the elections showed, much as the first round, that many errors and irregularities had been committed during the voting process. For example, there were 72 polling stations that reported more ballots than voters. The official results of a polling station were different from the report received by foreign observers after the counting of votes, although there hadn't been any subsequent recount of ballots. Kocharian won by a large majority in 69 of the 71 polling stations in which foreign observers had noted that there were more ballots in the polls than voters during the second round.

The Parliamentary Elections and the Constitutional Referendum

ON 25 May 2003, parliamentary elections were scheduled. They completed a full electoral cycle that had started with the local elections of 22 October 2002 and continued with the presidential elections of 19 February/5 March 2003. Previous legislative elections had been held in October 1999.² The National Assembly, i.e. the Armenian Parliament, has a unicameral structure consisting of 131 deputies. According to the Election Code, 75 members are elected in keeping with a proportional representation system and 56 by majority ballot.

The Central Election Commission registered 21 parties and electoral blocs that were running in the race. The campaign officially started on 21 April, ending 48 hours before the election. Out of the 21 candidates, only four of six parties and blocs had a real chance to exceed the 5% electoral threshold and thus become members of the future Parliament.

The actual electoral race was to be held between the pro-presidential and the opposition parties. It is worth mentioning that after having won his second term, President Robert Kocharian wished for the parties that had supported him (the Republican Party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Country of Law Party and the Liberal Democrats) to win the election and form the parliamentary majority, in order to ensure domestic political stability and the implementation of his election program.

In terms of political power, most opposition parties joined, for the first time in the recent history of Armenian parliamentary elections, a single electoral bloc known as Justice (Ardarutiun). Its backbone consisted of the former presidential candidate Stepan Demirchyan, president of the People's Party; Aram Sargsyan, leader of the Republican Party; Vazgen Manukyan, president of the National Democratic Union; and Aram Sarkisian, president of the Democratic Party. Eight other parties, smaller in their electoral share and influence, were also part of the Justice bloc. The opposition presence in the Parliament would be the most significant event to occur within the previous ten years in Armenia, *as until 2003 there had been no parliamentary opposition*.

Unhappy with the negative situation recorded during the presidential elections, international organizations including the OSCE/ODIHR and especially the Council of Europe expressed greater concern for the electoral confrontation on 25 May. Thus the number of foreign and domestic observers was significantly higher; serious efforts were made to eliminate the irregularities detected during the previous elections, and additional aid was provided, in order to ensure more transparent ballot boxes.

Along with the parliamentary elections of 25 May 2003, a referendum was held on the revision of the Constitution of Armenia, adopted back in 1995.³

The draft constitutional amendments, presented as the president's legislative initiative, were unanimously adopted by the National Assembly during a special session. They brought the following main changes: ensuring the rule of law; the separation and balance of powers; reducing the number of MPs from 131 to 101; mandatory Armenian citizenship for the prime minister and the cabinet members; the independence of the judicial system; expansion of powers for the Constitutional Court; the dissolution of the Parliament by the president, in case of prolonged inactivity of the legislature; the Parliament's right to make political statements, a right which had been stripped away since 1990; the cessation of the president's prerogatives as chief executive, his authority being limited to specific presidential powers.

The members of the National Assembly groups and factions had different positions on the constitutional reform package. Thus, the pro-presidential forces believed that they represented "a serious step forward," while the opposition contested the new constitutional reform and urged the people to vote against it at the planned referendum. The Venice Commission of the European Council had truly cooperated with the group of experts on issues related to constitutional amendments packages, yet they found there were substantial differences between its first and the final version, subjected to the referendum, especially in terms of the president's rights and attributions.

The Results of the Parliamentary Elections and the Constitutional Referendum

ON 31 May 2003, the Central Election Commission released the final results of the parliamentary elections and the constitutional referendum.⁴ According to their report, only six political forces had managed to exceed the threshold in the proportional system and accede to the new Parliament. In compliance with the final results, the 75 seats were distributed as indicated below:

- the Republican Party, 23 seats (31.18%);
- the Justice bloc, 14 (18.03%);
- the Country of Law Party, 12 (16.38%);
- the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, 11 (15.15%);
- the National Unity Party, 9 (11.65%);
- the United Workers Party, 6 (7.61%).

The majority ballot system ensured that 54 seats were occupied from a total of 56, and in two electoral divisions the elections were repeated due to numerous irregularities. The Republican Party and the Country of Law Party managed

to get 9 and 6 seats, respectively, by the majority system, while the rest of the seats went to independent candidates. According to the Central Election Commission, a number of 1,234,546 electors had cast their vote, from a total of 2,442,062 eligible voters.

The Central Election Commission recorded 56 complaints about the voting process for both election systems, and these complaints were further sent for analysis and resolution.

Regarding the constitutional referendum, the Central Election Commission announced the following results:

- 1,216,581 voters participated in the polls, out of the total of 2,334,993 eligible voters;
- 563,205 people voted for constitutional amendments and 550,668 against them.

In order for the referendum to be validated, a 2/3 participation rate was required, meaning 750,000 of the total registered voters on the lists. Following the results, the constitutional amendments were rejected by popular referendum, which represented a serious political setback for President Robert Kocharian and the forces supporting him.

The Formation of New Structures of Power and the Appointment of the New Government

THE THIRD legislature of the Armenian Parliament (i.e. the National Assembly) convened on 12 June 2003.⁵ Following negotiations between the Republican Party, the winner of the elections, the Country of Law Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, all of pro-presidential orientation, the Memorandum establishing a political coalition that would lead Armenia in the next four years was signed on 11 June 2003.⁶

According to the Memorandum, the National Assembly (the Parliament) leadership positions were distributed as follows:

- president: the representative of the Country of Law Party (Artur Baghdasarian);
- vice-presidents: representatives of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Republican Party (Tigran Torosian and Vahan Hovhannisyán, respectively).

Artur Baghdasarian, the president of the new Parliament, was elected with 92 votes in favor and 6 against, while vice presidents Tigran Torosian and Vahan Hovhannisyán obtained 95 votes in favor and 84 against.

On 20 June 2003, the Parliament validated the new Armenian cabinet of ministers and its governing program for the following four years.⁷ However, ‘vali-

ation' is an inaccurate term, as there hadn't been any real vote of confidence. According to the Constitution, the prime minister announced the government lists and program to the Parliament, and, provided neither was challenged within 24 hours by at least half of the total number of MPs, both were to be deemed as approved. And this is exactly what happened. The opposition, represented by the legislative groups of the Justice bloc and the National Unity Party, did not attend the session of the National Assembly that was to appoint the new government.

The structure of the new cabinet and its portfolio distribution had not changed fundamentally. A comparative analysis with the previous cabinet structure reveals that most of the ministers (11 out of a total of 16) had not changed, but maintained their posts—Prime Minister Andranik Margharian included. In other words, the new power in Yerevan was actually the same as the former one. The prime minister presented the government program for the following four years, which was in fact a synthesis of President Robert Kocharian's electoral platform and the campaign programs of the three parties that formed the coalition government.⁸ The government program was violently disputed and considered a "disgrace" by the opposition MPs, who indicated that key areas of the economy had been left out of the government strategy.

The Deterioration of Armenian Relations with pan-European Institutions

SERIOUS INFRINGEMENTS recorded during presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as accusations formulated by the opposition on the issue of faked results, determined European institutions such as the European Council, the OSCE and the EU to consider that Armenia did not meet international standards for democratic elections, which was a great disappointment, considering that free and fair elections are the foundation of democracy and the rule of law.⁹

Due to this situation, Armenia's relations with pan-European institutions entered a difficult period, with direct consequences on both the cooperation with these institutions and the country's image abroad. An immediate consequence of these reports was the proposition of Bernard Schreiner, European rapporteur for Armenia, formulated during the APCE summer session, to deny mandate recognition for new members of the Armenian National Delegation to the Council of Europe. A similar position was adopted by the OSCE PA to Armenia, during the session held in the Netherlands. The vice president of the National Assembly in Yerevan, Vahan Hovhannisyan, was denied the right to speak in the PA, and the second member of the Armenian delegation, representing the opposition, was only given a deliberative vote.

Internal Political Developments After the Elections

THE DYNAMICS of the domestic political situation in Armenia was closely related to the balance of power resulting from the presidential and parliamentary elections, which took place during the first half of 2003.¹⁰ President Robert Kocharian and the parties supporting him managed to remain in power for yet another term. The price of their victory had been the crude violation of democratic standards during elections, which was severely punished by the Euro-Atlantic organizations. Deciding to further observe Armenia, these organizations urged the Yerevan authorities to amend the existing legislation and reform the electoral system before the following elections (to be held in 2007). For the first time in post-Soviet Armenia, the political opposition had managed to enter the Parliament (the National Assembly) and establish two parliamentary groups, Justice and National Unity. Although not very numerous (24 members) and divergent in their opinions, they would have the opportunity to be heard on both the national and international political arena.

The confrontation between government and the opposition increased during the first months of 2004, under the influence of the Orange Revolution victory in Georgia. The opposition called into question the Parliament's vote of no confidence in the president, their initiative being rejected by the majority coalition, which led to a boycott of the National Assembly sessions for an indefinite period. Simultaneously, the opposition acted to diversify their forms of protest, frequently organizing protest meetings across the country, in order to eliminate the "illegitimate" power.

The explicit goal of the opposition and especially of its parliamentary members was to remove the current political power and restore constitutional order by means of free and democratic elections, held before the term. Achievement of this goal was made possible by a referendum regarding the vote of no confidence against the head of state, which was supposed to take place by 16 April 2004 in accordance with the decision of the Constitutional Court, adopted shortly after the presidential election, amid massive popular demonstrations. For the success of their approach, the Justice bloc needed broad and active support from the population, and towards this goal they announced that rallies would start again in Yerevan and across the country, in order to explain their plan and methods for changing the power.

On 2 February 2004, as expected by the opposition, the parliamentary majority rejected—with 81 votes in favor and 4 against—the legislative initiative of the Justice bloc to amend the Referendum Law, which was to allow the organization of a referendum regarding the vote of no confidence against the president. After the negative vote of the Parliament on the confidence referendum, MPs of both parliamentary opposition groups decided to boycott the National Assembly sessions indefinitely, which marked the beginning of a severe political crisis in Ar-

menia. The decision was announced in a joint statement, released on 3 February 2004. Besides boycotting the legislative sessions, the two parliamentary opposition forces announced they would also resume protests across the country, the first major event being held on 19 February 2004, in the capital of the Armavir region, near Yerevan. The forms of protest, according to the expectations of the opposition, included civil disobedience and blocking the main roads.

The Chronicle of a Revolution Foretold

THE BOYCOTT of parliamentary proceedings by the two opposition groups continued despite the efforts of Parliament leaders to achieve reconciliation and start a dialogue between the Parliament majority and the minority.¹¹ The opposition mainly focused on organizing frequent meetings across the country, in order to check the popular state of mind, raise awareness and get the much-needed support to trigger the action of removing the Karabakhian clan (President Robert Kocharian and Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan) from the state leadership. Opposition rallies, held in a relatively peaceful atmosphere, usually gathered between 500 and 3,000 people, depending on the share of population in the cities where they were held.

The speeches of the Justice bloc leaders were particularly focused on accusing the government parties of various deeds, including “political assassinations” by means of perpetrators not yet discovered, the terrorist attack in the Parliament (27 October 1999), the election fraud in 2003, the suspicious privatization of strategically important economic targets, the sharp rise in prices for basic goods, the deplorable social and economic situation, the high level of poverty (87% of the population), the sharp social polarization, the questionable morality of politicians, and other such issues.

The image of the participants at the opposition meetings was disturbing: people in ragged clothes, without coats, barefoot and looking hungry etc. They were protesting not only against their poor living conditions, but simply because they had lost all hope.

The radical wing of the Justice bloc, represented by the Republican Party, led by Albert Bazeyan and Aram Sarkisian, the fiercest opponents of the Karabakhian clan, called for a democratic revolution, claiming that the change of power was to occur in a matter of weeks. There was even a deadline set for the overturn: 13 April 2004. The actual actions were to take place between 9 and 12 April 2004. The tactics of the opposition consisted of long-term picketing the Presidency headquarters by thousands of demonstrators coming from Yerevan and across the country, and holding it under siege until President Robert Kocharian’s resignation was to be obtained.

The opposition announced they would fight against the authorities only by peaceful means, as they feared that the power could make use of force. Therefore, in the rallies, the opposition leaders made repeated calls to the police, urging them to not stand against the people, and not to fight the current, because they would bear the consequences. Despite the leaders' calls for calm at the rally organized on 28 March 2004, in Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia, there were clashes between opposition and government supporters, resulting in arrests and criminal proceedings against activists of the Justice bloc. The authorities continued the repression in the following days, with 50 members of the People's Party and 47 of the National Unity Party being molested and detained without warrant. One of them was Suren Soureniants, a leading member of the Republican Party.

After overcoming disagreements and disputes regarding possible tactics for the fight against the power, the two leaders of the parliamentary opposition, Stepan Demirchyan and Artashes Geghamian, managed to reach a consensus on 5 April 2004: together, they held a press conference, stating that the political forces they represented would meet with voters on 9 April 2004, at 16:00 hours, in Liberty Square in Yerevan, for a national meeting, with the primary goal of returning the power to the people.

The day before the national meeting with voters, Robert Kocharian gave an interview to the Armenia 1 Public Television.¹² It was articulated as a warning to political opponents about the straining of the domestic situation, showing that incitement to violence was primarily a threat to the opposition itself, and could turn against it like a boomerang. The head of state acknowledged that the events in Georgia had influenced political developments in Armenia, but stated the conditions were different in the two countries. On the other hand, on 8 April 2004, Artur Baghdasarian, the Parliament spokesperson, consulted with opposition leaders, aiming to defuse the domestic political tension. However, the consultations failed, as the opposition's proposals were rejected. The opposition believed that a dialogue with the power was only possible provided the latter accepted to organize a vote of no confidence against the president.

The Climax of the Opposition Protest Rallies against the Power

9 APRIL 2004 marked the beginning of extensive opposition protest rallies aiming to remove the illegitimate president, to organize free and democratic elections and to lead the country out of its social and economic crisis.¹³ Liberty Square in Yerevan became the favorite spot of the opposition

for organizing protest demonstrations, which were scheduled every day at 16:00 hours. At the meetings held on 9, 10 and 12 April 2004, the number of participants ranged from 15 to 50,000 people, according to organizers' estimates. Data disseminated by authorities showed a much lower level of participation. Opposition leaders were not satisfied with the number of participants, which had been below their expectations.

The measures taken by the authorities to discourage opposition supporters from leaving their home cities and coming to Yerevan included checks on public transport and blocking the access roads to the capital of Armenia, in the hope that the magnitude of these events could be limited. The authorities continued to illegally arrest heads of the local organizations of opposition parties, including lawmakers and other demonstrators. Thus, from the onset of actions until 13 April, over 250 people were detained, arrested and subjected to investigation—including four Parliament members. The opposition informed the secretary general of the European Council and the PACE president about these political repression acts and human rights violations.

At the meeting held on 9 April 2004, the opposition gave the coalition a deadline, i.e. 12 April, to bring on the Parliament agenda the legislative initiative of amending the referendum law and organizing a motion of no confidence against the president. The Parliament majority rejected the opposition's ultimatum and, in doing so, the only possibility of a dialogue that could have eased this domestic political crisis. Under the new conditions, the opposition decided to continue its protests, which would only end with the resignation of the country leadership. The meeting of 12 April 2004 turned into a march that went all the way from Liberty Square to the Presidency headquarters. Protesters were met by an impressive deployment of security forces, who prevented them from approaching the Presidency and the Parliament building. Opposition leaders called on the president of the National Assembly to talk to the people. They asked the chief of police to come with an explanation for having blocked access to the Presidency, and requested TV stations to broadcast these events live. Their appeals were either rejected or ignored. The Parliament leadership decided to suspend the plenary sessions of the National Assembly during the week.

The march ended without any results, so the organizers urged demonstrators to remain in the streets overnight. However, the troops intervened in force, the demonstrators were dispersed and Bagramian Avenue was reopened for traffic. Once again, arrests were made, targeting meeting organizers, journalists and demonstrators. The Republican and National Unity Party headquarters were searched without warrant, three Parliament members were detained for questioning, and one of them was charged with illegal possession of weapons. Several people were injured during the clashes, police officers included.

After dispersing the protesters and arresting some of them, the presidential spokesman declared that the Armenian authorities would take all the necessary measures stipulated by law in order to prevent any other possible manifestations of political extremism.¹⁴ According to his statements, the opposition was to blame for the incidents, as they had adopted an aggressive attitude, launched calls for a change of power by force and organized rallies and actions without the competent authorities' approval.

A new rally was organized by the reunited opposition on 16 April 2004.¹⁵ According to organizers, participation amounted to approximately 15,000 people, although the newspapers only estimated a number of 5,000. The speeches of the opposition leaders resumed two main themes: the departure of Robert Kocharian and his henchmen, and the restoration of constitutional order in Armenia. They rejected any form of dialogue with the power until the guilty parties would be punished for rigging the presidential elections in 2003 and repressing the demonstrations of 12/13 April 2004.

The previous day, the three parties forming the ruling coalition had issued a statement calling the opposition to negotiate—this being considered the only alternative for political dialogue. The ruling coalition emphasized that the irreconcilable politics of the opposition could have dangerous consequences for the country. Their refusal to enter a dialogue could only reduce the possibilities of relaxing the internal political situation in Armenia. During a meeting with journalists, President Robert Kocharian said he could not allow 1% of the population to mislead the entire Armenian community and force the authorities to accept populist measures that could be “catastrophic” for the whole country. The head of state warned that the authorities' response to actions of the opposition should be the appropriate one. The only way out of this situation was for the opposition members of Parliament to resume their duties without formulating any conditions.

On 21 April 2004, there was a new rally of the united opposition, attended by 7,000–12,000 people. The speeches of the opposition leaders were focused on the same issue: the president's resignation. They also requested the resignation of the attorney general and of the minister of defense, blamed for opening criminal cases against the Justice bloc and for the 2003 presidential election fraud. The Justice bloc accepted Parliament Speaker Artur Baghdasarian's proposal to take part in political consultations with the parliamentary majority, which represented a first step towards a dialogue between the government and the opposition.¹⁶

Rejecting the accusations of the power about not supporting the political dialogue, leaders of the Justice bloc met on 26 April 2004 with representatives of the ruling coalition. During the first round of consultations, MP Victor

Dallakyan, the justice secretary, presented a document containing ten proposals that once achieved could create the proper conditions for organizing the referendum for the motion of no confidence against the head of state and generate civic consensus. The head of the parliamentary group of the Republican Party, Galust Sahakyan, considered that the wording in the opposition's proposals was biased and unacceptable. Its change could however provide some basis for discussion, since the proposals were actually achievable.

After two rounds of negotiations, the opposition withdrew from the consultations, using as a pretext the fact that the parliamentary majority hadn't taken into account two of their proposals, namely the people's right to free movement and the postponing of the debate on the draft law on public assemblies (adopted in the third and final reading during the session of 28 April 2004).

On 27 April 2004, a new protest demonstration of the opposition took place in Liberty Square in Yerevan, attended by approximately 12,000 people. The speakers pointed out that the opposition was giving the power a new deadline, i.e. a week, to meet their claims. The secretary of the Justice bloc called on the people to join the fight against turning Armenia into a "police state." Aramazd Zakaryan, a member of the Political Council of the Republican Party, arrested on 11 April 2004, went on hunger strike. He was accused of seeking a change of power through violence and of slander against officials. The press secretary of the Ministry of Justice declared that Zakaryan's health condition was normal.

PACE Summons Armenia to Fulfill Commitments

ACCORDING TO a report discussed in the PACE plenary session, on 28 April 2004, Armenia had to meet commitments made on its admission in the European Council, as well as to improve its domestic political situation. The deadline was the summer session of the European Parliament. Otherwise, penalties had to be applied and they could review the status of the national Armenian delegation to PACE.¹⁷

Among other things, the authorities were asked not to obstruct public meetings and to refrain from any measures infringing the freedoms guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. At the same time, officials were required to transparently investigate human rights violations during recent events, including attacks against journalists, and to inform the European Council on the legal measures taken against the culprits. The report also demanded the release from custody of people who had been arrested for participation in rallies, and the cessation of administrative detention, while modifying the existing legislation.

The Relative Calming of the Internal Situation

THE JUSTICE bloc and the National Unity Party issued a statement expressing their willingness to start a dialogue with the authorities, particularly with President Robert Kocharian and Prime Minister Andranik Margharian. The opposition's reaction was, of course, a consequence of the recent PACE resolution, as well.¹⁸ According to the statement, the opposition intended to accept Speaker Artur Baghdasarian's proposal of resuming political consultations on 6 May 2004. The opposition had previously announced that they would cease the protests in Yerevan for a period of 10 days, "in order to enable the authorities to implement the requirements of the European Parliament." Opposition leaders had not excluded, however, organizing new demonstrations in several other regions across the country.

During the first round of consultations, following the suppression of the protest on 13 April 2004, the opposition and the ruling coalition reached an agreement to continue the dialogue that had been initiated, and to set an agenda of issues. The joint declaration, signed by representatives of both sides, emphasized the need for a new political climate in the country. Victor Dallakyan, secretary of the Justice bloc, stated it had been agreed to find a convenient way for both sides to organize the referendum regarding the motion of no confidence against the president, and this was to be placed on the agenda of the consultations.

The opposition Justice bloc issued a statement showing that Armenian authorities had continued to ignore the PACE resolution, and performed new administrative arrests among opposition members.¹⁹ After the protest rally on 21 May 2004, 16 people received various forms of administrative punishment following emergency judicial proceedings, which lasted no longer than ten minutes. A joint statement, signed by the Justice bloc, the National Unity Party and the Communist Party of Armenia, stated that "the repressive measures taken by the Kocharian regime could not suppress the people's fight for justice and dignity."²⁰

On 4 June 2004, the opposition held another protest meeting, even if this had not been approved by the municipality. The number of participants was 15,000, according to organizers, and 7,000, according to authorities' data. Aram Sargsyan, one of the opposition leaders, specified that the opposition would only stop protests "in case of war with Azerbaijan."

At the demonstration meeting on 16 June 2004, Stepan Demirchyan, leader of the Justice bloc, stated that the opposition would not give up its protest demonstrations, but would continue to fight for justice, "until the final victory."²¹ During the same meeting, Aram Sargsyan, leader of the Republican Party, stated: "Today, the first phase of the national program of struggle for the

restoration of law and order in the country has come to an end. Now we need to raise a new wave of protests, more powerful, which will certainly lead to the final victory.” Only 600 people attended this last protest rally!

President Robert Kocharian’s Statement at the PACE Summer Session

ON 23 June 2004, the Armenian president gave a speech in the plenary of the PACE summer session.²² Referring to the domestic political crisis, he said:

The opposition, encouraged by the results of the Georgian Orange Revolution, has tried to implement a similar scenario in Armenia, where facts were actually different from those in the neighboring country. History has shown time and time again that revolutions inspired by foreign models never have the expected results. In order to gain attention, the opposition organized protest demonstrations and called for civil disobedience, forcing the police to restore order, but without any significant harm to the participants. Such police operations are always regrettable, but the authorities have an obligation to protect society from political extremism. The ruling coalition parties have made repeated offers of cooperation and dialogue to the opposition, but all these have been rejected. Armenia’s obligations to the Council of Europe are a task of both the authorities and the opposition, and I regret that some opposition MPs drew PACE in discussions that led to discrediting the ruling coalition. I am convinced that the national Parliament, rather than the Council of Europe, is the best place for this.

The Failure of the Opposition Struggle against the Power

VICTOR DALLAKYAN, the secretary of the Justice bloc, asserted that during the parliamentary recess in 2004 the opposition would continue their meetings with voters, both in Yerevan and across the country.²³ In his opinion, the national movement initiated by the united opposition was a process to be completed in several stages. In summer, the opposition parties would reorganize their forces and strengthen regional structures, which would play a decisive role in the new wave of demonstrations expected to take place in September–October 2004.

Although they continued to boycott the proceedings of the Parliament in the autumn session of 2004, and further on, at the beginning of 2005, the actions of the opposition fell into obscurity. Moreover, some parliamentary political forces and members of the public blamed the failure of Justice and the National Unity Party on the lack of a united opposition program and also on their lack of firmness in dealing with the leaders of the country.

After a pause of more than eight months, the parliamentary opposition announced its intention to resume fighting in order to restore “constitutional order,” in the spring of 2005. Both the Justice bloc and the National Unity Party expected to restart the so-called meeting with the electors across the country and in Yerevan, within the following two months. This time, however, the two forces announced that they would operate separately. On 19 February 2005, Artashes Geghamian, the National Unity Party chairman, unilaterally declared that his party was free of the agreement reached in 2004 with the Justice bloc, which in fact meant the end of their cooperation in the struggle to remove the regime in Armenia. The Justice leaders rapidly reacted to these changes in the position of Artashes Geghamian. Thus, Vazgen Manukyan stated that if Geghamian felt strong enough to carry out the revolution on his own, the bloc would watch him very carefully.

According to Geghamian, “the Revolution,” conceived as a “large popular movement,” was inevitable in Armenia as the people had run out of patience and they would rise against the authorities. The causes of this uprising included the starvation of the population, large scale corruption, the turmoil caused by criminal elements, as well as the authorities’ failure in both domestic and foreign policy. Unlike the National Unity Party, the Justice bloc declared they would continue to act within the legal framework in order to overthrow Robert Kocharian’s regime. Stepan Demirchyan, leader of the bloc, was reluctant in using the term “Revolution” and rephrased it as “restoring the constitutional order,” which was to be achieved only by peaceful means, without any shock for the population.

Unfortunately, subsequent developments showed that following the separation of the two opposition leaders, the political representation they had expected remained a mere dream.

The End of Robert Kocharian’s Autocratic Regime

THE PRESIDENTIAL elections were held on 18 February 2008. They put an end to the regime of Robert Kocharian, who had held the position of president of Armenia for two consecutive terms.²⁴ Nine candidates, the likely ones, joined the incumbent, among them Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan,

Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the first president of Armenia, Artur Baghdasarian, the former speaker of Parliament, leader of the party State of Law, the largest opposition party, and Vahan Hovhannisyan, deputy speaker of Parliament from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF).

Ter-Petrosyan had announced his candidacy since 26 October 2007, as an independent, in a speech accusing Robert Kocharian of institutionalizing a mafia-style regime responsible for widespread corruption which had allegedly stolen at least \$ 3–4 billion in the last five years of his presidential term. Sargsyan's candidacy was supported by his comrade, Robert Kocharian, the incumbent president, and Gagik Tsarukyan, whose Prosperous Armenia party had the second-largest number of deputies in the National Assembly.

The election results recorded Serzh Sargsyan's victory in the first round with 52.86% of the votes, followed by Ter-Petrosyan with 21.5% and Artur Baghdasarian with 16.67%. Despite numerous irregularities and violations of the electoral laws reported by the opposition, on 24 February 2008, the Central Election Commission communicated the final results of the elections, which were not much different from the preliminary ones: Serzh Sargsyan—52.82%, Levon Ter-Petrosyan—21.5% and Artur Baghdasarian—17.7%.

Levon Ter-Petrosyan and the opposition parties challenged those results, accusing the power of election fraud and calling supporters to a rally on 20 February in Yerevan. The protests lasted until 1 March 2008, with 15,000 to 100,000 people participating, when the clash between law enforcement and protesters reached its climax.

Then the police intervened brutally, the result being at least 10 dead (8 protesters, 1 policeman, 1 soldier), 200 injured, 100 arrested and 63 vehicles burned. In the last days of his term, President Kocharian decreed the introduction of a state of emergency in Yerevan for a period of 20 days, followed by mass arrests, the harassment and house arrest of important opposition leaders, the censorship of mass media outlets including the electronic ones (the internet), and the prohibition of any anti-government protests.

Armenia in the post-Kocharian Period

IN THIS particularly tense situation with acts of bloodshed, Serzh Sargsyan took over as president, being sworn in on 9 April 2008. The new president also benefited from two consecutive mandates according to the constitutional provisions. Serzh Sargsyan, as a disciple of his mentor, Robert Kocharian, did not show himself in the best light, continuing the authoritarian regime of the latter.

Even more, wishing to imitate Vladimir Putin, Sargsyan initiated a constitutional reform meant to ensure his continuing grip on power, this time as prime minister, after the end of his second term, in the year 2018. Thus, through the constitutional reform approved by a referendum, organized on 6 December 2015, Armenia was transformed from a semi-presidential republic into a parliamentary one. The president was deprived of the right to vote and the presidential institution was limited in its duties, becoming mainly a decorative one. The head of state is elected by Parliament for a single term of 7 years, without the right to belong to any political party.²⁵

The National Assembly or Parliament had maintained its unicameral character, but the number of deputies had been reduced from 131 to 101 and the uninominal system had been abolished, the deputies being proportionally elected on party lists.

The first parliamentary elections that benefited from the new constitutional changes were those of 2 April 2017, and they were on time. 2,585,134 citizens entitled to vote were registered, and 1,577,323 of them went to the polls. They elected 101 new members of Parliament through the proportional system, joined by four designated representatives of the national minorities.²⁶

According to the final results, 4 political forces, two parties and two electoral alliances entered the Parliament, as follows:

- the Republican Party: 771,247 (49.12%), 58 deputies;
- the Tsarukyan Alliance: 428,965 (27.32%), 31 deputies;
- the Way Out Alliance: 122,49 (7.77%), 9 deputies;
- the Armenian Revolutionary Federation: 103,173 (6.57%), 7 deputies.

Four deputies were representatives of the Russian, Assyrian, Yazidi, and Kurdish national minorities. On 2 March 2018, after the end of Serzh Sargsyan's second term, the National Assembly in its new composition elected Armen Sargsyan President of Armenia.

The Armenian “Velvet Revolution”

RELATIVELY SOON, the Republican Party launched the idea of nominating Serzh Sargsyan for the position of prime minister, the reason behind his amendment of the Constitution through the 2015 referendum, following Putin's model, in order to ensure his stay in power.

On 14 April 2018, the Republican Party decided to nominate Serzh Sargsyan for the position of prime minister, a decision supported by the coalition partner, ARF, and by the Prosperous Armenia party as well.

In this political context, on 31 March 2018, Nikol Pashinyan started peaceful protests under the slogan “My Step,” first in the city of Gyumri, after which he

passed through several localities on the way to Yerevan, where he arrived on 13 April. There, he organized a small meeting in French Square, attended by about 100 people, some of them putting up tents.²⁷

On 16 April the campaign “Take a step, reject Serzh” began. On 17 April, when the election of the prime minister was scheduled, the protesters tried to block the entrance to Parliament, but the police stopped them.

After the election of the former president as prime minister, the number of protesters continued to grow exponentially, reaching about 50,000, as demonstrations spread throughout the country, despite the arrests made by the police. As the number of protesters increased, the new prime minister called on the leader of the protest movement to come to the negotiations, but he refused, saying that the only thing to discuss was the resignation of the prime minister.

Under pressure from the incumbent president, who had a talk with Nikol Pashinyan during the rally, he agreed to have a meeting with the newly elected prime minister on 22 April 2018, at 10:00. The discussion lasted for about 3 minutes, as Pashinyan asked Sargsyan to resign. Instead, the prime minister threatened him, saying he had “learned nothing from the lessons of 1 March,” referring to the protesters killed by the police in the post-election affrays of 2008, when the presidential elections had been won by Sargsyan and challenged by the opposition as being rigged.

Immediately after announcing the results of the conversation between the two, the demonstrations engulfed the whole of Yerevan, with tens of thousands of protesters occupying Republic Square. The police arrested 232 people on the evening of 22 April, Nikol Pashinyan and two other leaders of the protesters among them. The protests were resumed the following day, 23 April, with members of the Armenian Armed Forces joining in for the first time, as confirmed by the Ministry of Defense. Nikol Pashinyan, released in the meantime, immediately joined the demonstrators in Republic Square.

Under the pressure of the street, a news post was published on the official website of the prime minister announcing that Serzh Sargsyan had resigned, his position being taken over by the former Prime Minister, Karen Karapetyan, as interim prime minister. Just two days after his resignation, the former governing partners, the Prosperous Armenia Party and the ARF, declared their support for the movement of Nikol Pashinyan, withdrawing from the ruling coalition.

Subsequently, things began to precipitate. Thus, on 28 April, Nikol Pashinyan met with the president of Armenia, Armen Sargsyan, the ARF leaders, the former ruling party and with the representatives of the second largest political group in Parliament, Prosperous Armenia. In an interview given on the same day, President Armen Sargsyan welcomed “New Armenia” and the chance for “a truly democratic state.” All those forces announced that they would support Pashinyan’s candidacy for the position of prime minister and the ruling

party would neither block his election nor present their own candidate for that position.

Despite the promises made, the Republican Party blocked Pashinyan's election in the first round on 1 May 2018, by a majority vote, although they did not submit any candidate of their own.

After that episode, the anger of population increased even more, with Yerevan and the other big cities being paralyzed by protesters. In this situation, which gained unprecedented magnitude and given the presence of over 150,000 people in Republic Square, the Republican Party was forced to accept to support Nikol Pashinyan's candidacy. Thus, on 8 May 2018, Parliament elected him as the new prime minister, with the vote of 59 deputies, 42 voting against.²⁸

Thus began and unfolded the 2018 Armenian Revolution, still known in Armenia under the name of #Merzhir Serzhin, which means #Resignation of Serzh. As evidenced by the abovementioned facts, it consisted of a series of anti-government protests which took place in April and May 2018, organized by various political and civil groups, led by Deputy Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the Civil Contract Party.

Initially, the protests and marches took place in response to the intention of former President Serzh Sargsyan to extend his power through a mandate as prime minister, and also against the ruling Republican Party. These social-political movements were called the "Velvet Revolution" by their leader, Nikol Pashinyan, because they mirrored the revolts with the same name in two other former Soviet republics, Ukraine and Georgia, which took place in 2004.

Installing the New Democratic Power

THE ELECTION of the opposition leader in the position of prime minister was equivalent only to half a victory of the Armenian revolution, as Nikol Pashinyan's coalition had only 9 seats in Parliament, which did not give him the possibility to promote his political program.

As a result, he had to force the organization of early parliamentary elections, taking advantage of both his immense popularity and the euphoria of the population created by the unprecedented victory against the authoritarian regime of the former ruling Republican Party.

To this end, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan resigned on 16 October 2018. As the National Assembly failed in two attempts, namely on 24 October and on 1 November 2018, President Armen Sargsyan dissolved Parliament and called extraordinary parliamentary elections for 9 December 2018, in order to appoint a new prime minister.

In the early elections, 2,573,779 citizens with voting rights were registered, and the turnout stood at 1,261,105.²⁹

11 political forces, 9 parties and 2 political alliances were registered in the electoral race. Out of those, only 3 managed to cross the 5% electoral threshold and enter the Parliament, as follows:

- My Step Alliance: 884,864 votes (70.42%), 88 seats;
- Prosperous Armenia Party: 103,801 votes (8.26%), 10 seats;
- Bright Armenia Party: 80,047 votes (6.37%), 7 seats.

The former ruling party, the Republican Party, obtained only 59,083 votes, 4.70% respectively, failing to cross the electoral threshold and enter Parliament, which had never happened in its history. The same thing happened to its traditional ally, the ARE, which obtained only 48,816 votes or 3.88%.

According to Art. 96 of the Electoral Code of the Republic of Armenia, 16 and 11 additional seats were granted to the parties Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia respectively, in order to fulfill the condition whereby the other parties must hold one third of the House, in case the winning party obtained more than 2/3 of the total number of seats. Thus, at present the Parliament has 132 deputies instead of 105 (including the ones from the minorities), distributed as follows:

- My Step Alliance: 88;
- Prosperous Armenia Party: 26;
- Bright Armenia Party: 18.

The 4 representatives of the minorities were included in the list of the My Step alliance.

On 14 January 2019, President Armen Sargsyan nominated Nikol Pashinyan, the candidate of an absolute parliamentary majority, for the position of prime minister, and on the same day he received the confidence vote of the National Assembly.



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Abstract

Armenia: The Inedited Pages of Recent History (2002–2018)

The ruling elite of Armenia, strongly attached to its Soviet recent past, began the long and difficult transition towards a democratic parliamentary regime. The democratic reforms advanced quite difficultly, as old totalitarian mentalities represented a real obstacle in their path. At the same time, however, a civil society began to develop, and Western democratic values started to permeate Armenia. This process changed the balance of power in society, generating in the early 2000s a strong confrontation between representatives of the neo-communist nomenklatura, on one side, and those of democratic forces and civil society, on the other. The authoritarian regimes of presidents Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan held Armenia captive until 2018. Former President Sargsyan's latest attempt to extend his power, following Putin's model, by taking over the position of the prime minister, caused a huge wave of discontent. At the head of those social movements was the publicist and politician Nikol Pashinyan, under whose leadership a real "Velvet Revolution" took place in Armenia, which led to the ousting of the Republican Party, to early parliamentary elections and, finally, to a truly democratic political regime, open to reforms and to the modernization of the country.

Keywords

Armenia, Soviet captivity, elections, "Velvet Revolution," democracy, rule of law