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'Hazing' could subvert military reform in Armenia

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Non-combat deaths continue to plague the army and a related pattern of 'hazing' (the bullying or humiliation of conscripts), abuse and other unacceptable behaviour has sparked concern over a breakdown in military discipline and proper command conduct. This issue, and the apparent failure of the authorities to tackle the problem, has implications for both the course of defence reform in Armenia and the broader regional balance of power.

What next

With every injury and death, public confidence in the armed forces and the popularity of its leadership erode. The challenge will be to restore discipline within the ranks. Yet the real test is whether the government can regain control before this crisis becomes a serious political challenge.

Analysis

A continuing pattern of bullying and non-combat death within the army has sparked a heated and emotional debate within society at large.

Defence Minister Seyran Ohanyan is struggling to contain and correct the problem, as political pressure and public outrage mounts. In addition, the issue has triggered a widening division within the Defence Ministry itself, expressed through two rival factions, namely:

- a group of younger, more reformist, pro-Western (but not necessarily anti-Russian) officers closely aligned with Ohanyan; and
- a faction of older, more traditional military officers generally fearful of reform and resistant to change or modernisation.

The latter group is dominated by two more conservative figures: the chief of the General Staff, Yuri Khachaturov; and Inspector General Mikhail Harutyunyan, a former defence minister. However, they have little support and even less popularity among the mid-level officer corps.

Competing factions signal wider divide

Despite their fairly entrenched positions within the armed forces, the conservatives are weaker than the reformers, for three main reasons:

- *Opposition to change.* They do not represent a united group, but are aligned only in opposition to any real reform, reflecting a degree of resistance to any move that may undermine or threaten their power or authority within Armenian military structures.

Impact

- Failure to resolve a pattern of victimisation and non-combat deaths within the armed forces undermines recent progress in defence reform.
- It may emerge as a political issue ahead of the May elections, mobilising and uniting usually divergent groups.
- It could impact the tense regional balance of power, if Azerbaijan sees it as a serious loss of Armenia's traditional military superiority.

Military conservatives hold high positions but are losing ground to reformers

- *Past glories.* As senior officers, they have little if any recent or current command experience or authority. Rather, their rank and prestige stem solely from their achievements during the Karabakh war and their position within the waning patronage network of Karabakh veterans. This limits their ability to recruit any real support within the officer corps, and further distances them from the emerging power centres within today's Armenian military, such as rising figures within the peace-keeping brigade or among mid-to-senior-level officers returning from training at Western military institutions.
- *President's preference.* The conservatives' power and influence have been undermined by the implementation of more modern reforms advocated by the defence minister and his allies. Moreover, unlike his predecessor, President Serzh Sargsyan needs the support of this 'old guard' much less, and has repeatedly expressed a preference for the dynamic defence reform pushed by Ohanyan over the static status quo advocated by the Khachaturov-Harutyunyan faction (see ARMENIA: Prospects for army reform remain bleak - October 28, 2005).

Broader political context

The older generation will not easily cede their power and influence, and may seek to leverage their personal and business connections in the patronage network of the Karabakh elite to defend their positions. Although Ohanyan (and Sargsyan) is a nominal member of the same Karabakh elite, as a professional officer he has no direct personal connection to their business interests.

However, as a former defence minister, the president may be vulnerable to embarrassing allegations of military corruption by this 'old guard', stemming from his own tenure as minister.

Eroding public trust

Against this factional backdrop, a pattern of bullying-related abuse, injury and death other than on the ceasefire line in Karabakh has emerged recently as the most pressing challenge. Threatening to trigger a broader erosion of unit cohesion and a breakdown of discipline, this trend has sparked a heated and emotional debate within society at large. With each death and injury, public opinion is shifting strongly, challenging the trust and popularity of the armed forces and its leadership, which along with the Armenian Church, has long enjoyed a prominent position as a valued and respected institution within Armenian society.

Given the intensity of the issue, the challenge will be to restore discipline and impose a new 'zero tolerance' policy within the ranks. Although efforts to remedy the situation and root out the officers responsible have been bolstered by the reforms being implemented by the defence minister, including his priorities of military education and the expansion of the non-commissioned officer corps, more remains to be done in officer training and preparation, and the promotion of senior officers by merit rather than as a reward for performance in the Karabakh war over 15 years ago.

Impeding reform

The challenge is also directly testing the efficacy and success of overall defence reform, and Ohanyan's personal leadership. Ironically, the issue has emerged within the broader context of greater transparency and openness that Ohanyan himself imposed as part of his larger reform programme. In fact, the overall number of non-combat deaths within the armed forces is now smaller than in previous years. In 2011, there were just 26 such cases (of suicide, soldiers killed by their comrades, and deaths by disease or accident) compared with 43 in 2010, from a total military manpower of 46,684.

Defence reform, in bringing more transparency, is also highlighting the problem of abuse

However, in the context of recent reforms, both greater awareness and more immediate public exposure are fostering a perception that the problem has worsened. While greater attention to the problem may be leveraged to strengthen attempts to clean up the armed forces as a whole, the danger for Ohanyan is that without the necessary authority to tackle this internal problem fully, he may become a victim of the very process of transparency and openness that he has so stridently authorised.

Moreover, resistance to internal reform from rivals within his own ministry will impede his attempt to reimpose greater discipline. Ohanyan's rivals do not necessarily condone the bullying nor are they directly responsible for the non-combat deaths, but they may oppose his efforts in order to hasten his failure or weaken his authority, concerned that their own involvement in corruption or financial impropriety within the military procurement system may be exposed.

Conservative resistance to reform is part-motivated by fear exposure of misconduct

May elections

Thus, the real test is whether Sargsyan invests his defence minister with the support needed to overcome this challenge. Otherwise, as Armenia's campaign for the May parliamentary elections opens (see PROSPECTS 2012: Caucasus - November 24, 2011), this may emerge as the one issue to mobilise and unite a wide range -- from right-wing nationalists to more liberal democrats -- of challengers.

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