

## New style of protest spreads to Armenia

Tuesday, July 30 2013

Demonstrations continued outside the Yerevan municipal offices yesterday, demanding the resignation of Mayor Taron Margaryan and other officials. After a week of well-organised public protests by mostly first-time civic activists with no political affiliation, the mayor has 'suspended' a 50% rise in public transport fares. The decision is widely seen as a victory for a vocal group which may now challenge the authorities on a range of other controversial policies. This non-party movement is pushing aside the formal party-based political opposition, which is increasingly viewed as out of touch, marginal and ineffective on issues of public concern.

### What next

Stability will be undermined by the government's unwillingness or inability to address unresolved drivers of discontent, including underlying disparities of wealth and income, and pronounced inequalities. A new, more potent wave of discontent with the authorities may now appear, driven by economic rather than political demands from a new group unconstrained by any connection with partisan politics, aiming to impose a new degree of accountability on the government and articulating a broader and deeper civic commitment to reform.

### Analysis

On July 19, the Yerevan mayor signed a municipal directive imposing a sharp increase in public transport fares. Effective the next day, bus and minibus fares rose by 50% to 150 drams (37 cents); trolleybus fares doubled to 100 drams. The next day, youth activists organised an impromptu series of actions aimed at mobilising public discontent against the sudden and hefty increase.

This was more serious than previous civic campaigns, for three main reasons:

- The protests were largely spontaneous and well-timed, with a pronounced air of outrage and dissent among many ordinary citizens. This was in stark contrast to earlier campaigns involving fewer activists seeking to trigger and direct public outrage. This time, it was public support that mobilised the protests, the number of participants expanding daily.
- The base of support was broader and more diverse. Several dozen well-known public figures backed the campaign, stopping their cars to offer free rides, as part of a coordinated alternative 'car pool' initiative that was well promoted via social media.
- A clear and concise agenda of reasonable demands was presented in an assertive campaign, bolstering the efficacy and appeal of the protesters. Even the civil disobedience tactic of urging passengers not to pay the higher fare was not directly confrontational, as they were asked to pay the previous fare.

Public support grew daily and received widespread coverage by the traditionally subservient media. The municipal authorities retreated five days later. In a written statement on July 25, Margaryan suspended the increase.

### Weak, half-hearted defence

### Impact

- The government's retreat on bus fares will invigorate a new breed of self-confident civic activists.
- More public challenges may come, after the government's demonstration of weakness.
- A conflict may be looming within the authorities between hard-line senior leaders and moderate reformers aligned with the premier.

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Public anger against fare increases was spontaneous and broad-based

From the start, the government's handling of the issue was weak and, as protests erupted, its defence was half-hearted. Seeking to deflect responsibility and perhaps redirect public outrage, the authorities sought to bring in bus operators to defend it. Several argued it was the inevitable consequence of the recent rise in the cost of imported Russian natural gas (see ARMENIA/RUSSIA: Dearer gas seems inevitable - April 22, 2013). Nearly two-thirds of the 48 transport companies operating in Yerevan rely on compressed gas. However, with powerful officials and 'oligarchs' owning outright or controlling many of the bus companies, they had little public sympathy. As consumer rights activist Babken Pipoyan argued, the companies have long enjoyed a lucrative market position based on their links with the government.

The process itself was also criticised. Margaryan ordered the increase in a directive on July 19 with no debate in public or at the city council. Opposition councillors from the Barev Yerevan bloc, which is affiliated with the opposition Heritage party, noted that Armenian law requires a directive to be made public first.

### Empowered by social media

As elsewhere (see INTERNATIONAL: Street protests have lasting effects - July 25, 2013), social media tools were used to organise and mobilise supporters. Local activists launched their own webpage to coordinate the car pools. Created by web developer Grigor Yeghiazaryan and others, the new portal included nearly 270 separate entries for online announcements by drivers offering free rides, and soon reached more than 6,600 Facebook 'likes'. According to Yeghiazaryan, the website had an average of 12,000 visits for every day of the protest.

### Conflict within

The protests brought into the open long-standing divisions within the ruling Republican Party (HHK), as hard-line senior officials strongly criticised the activists. HHK Deputy Chairman Razmik Zohrabian even accused them of links to foreign countries seeking to destabilise Armenia. Galust Sahakian, another prominent HHK leader, quickly lost credibility when he condemned the protests while admitting that his own family owned a significant stake in several of the more lucrative transport lines.

Although such a heavy-handed response was quickly muzzled, senior police officials threatened to break up the protests by force. Some activists were arrested but quickly released after another group converged on the vehicle taking them away.

As the protesters were careful not to cross certain limits, never impeding access to municipal offices, their growing popular support only marginalised those officials calling for a more forceful response. In part sensing that degree of popular support, moderates within the government adopted a public stance in support.

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Heavy-handed government response contrasts with protesters' moderation

With public statements by Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan almost welcoming the protests as a sign of an increasingly influential civil society, the reform wing sought to take control of the government's response. However, at the weekly cabinet meeting on July 25, the prime minister was careful not to endorse their demands openly. The hard-liners receded into the background -- which was important for the embattled premier and his team, whose political power has been eroding for some time.

### Deeper drivers of discontent

In light of Armenia's pronounced inequalities, higher prices for food, electricity and other basics will exacerbate social instability and may also trigger a renewed wave of public protest. The deeper drivers of discontent will be accelerated by the Armenian government's inability or unwillingness to embark on deeper reform.

Utility tariffs rose on July 7, the price of 1 cubic metre of gas rising to 156 drams from 132 and 1 kilowatt of electricity to 38 drams from 30. Taxi fares increased by 100 drams, with most taxi services raising the minimum fare to 1,000 drams from 600.

### **Sustaining the momentum**

The challenge for the protesters will be to find a way to sustain momentum for the rest of the summer. The outlook is promising: the new activists face a combination of existing issues ranging from a litany of controversial policies over the environment to urban planning, and new issues, such as Armenia's negotiations with the EU for an association agreement and the related deep and comprehensive free-trade area.

Many of the protesters have already continued activities after the government's retreat, reflecting a new sense of self-confidence and empowerment. On July 26, several hundred youth activists continued to demonstrate outside the Yerevan municipality for systemic changes in public transport.