



The Current Narratives about the Correlation of Democracy, Human Rights and Security in Post-War Armenia: True or False?

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The End of Armenia's Post-Revolution Honeymoon?

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Since an impressive non-violent victory of “people power” in what became known as Armenia’s “Velvet Revolution” in 2018, the Armenian government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has struggled to sustain the momentum of democratization. Although bolstered by a significant degree of legitimacy from a sweeping victory in a rare free and fair parliamentary election in December 2018, the Armenian government has floundered more recently, however, with a series of serious political missteps and policy mistakes. Armenia now faces a starkly new political reality, as the unexpected 44-day war for Nagorno Karabakh that erupted in September 2020 abruptly ended Armenia’s euphoric “post-revolution honeymoon.”

Pre-Existing Challenges to Armenian Democracy

Hindered by a lingering political crisis that is exacerbated by pronounced polarization, Armenia is now challenged to adapt to this new post-war reality, and to adjust to the unprecedented military loss to prevent outright defeat. Yet Armenian democracy faced several serious challenges well before the war, encompassing four specific pre-existing conditions:

Armenia was already at war. As early as March 2020, well before the late September 2020 military offensive by Azerbaijan, Armenia was already at war, fighting against the coronavirus. As much more than a public health emergency, however, the challenge to contain the COVID-19 pandemic was straining both state capacity and credibility. The imposition of martial law was matched by initial attempts to impose measures to dangerously restrict and restrain civil liberties. Although later eased and modified, these initial measures to monitor and muzzle media coverage were dangerous moves to curtail freedom under the pretext of security.

Structural deficiencies in democracy. A second pre-war challenge stems from the weakness and deficiencies in the structure of democracy in Armenia. Faced with a legacy of authoritarian rule and entrenched corruption, the 2018 Velvet Revolution failed to properly invest in the institutions of democracy, with a misplaced over-reliance on empowering individuals. Structurally, democratization in post-revolution Armenia is undermined by a weak and subordinate legislature unable to exercise oversight or exert legislative initiative, an especially significant shortcoming for a country with an evolving parliamentary form of government. This was matched by a judiciary that was both a legacy of the old government and a political target for the Pashinyan government.

This absence of checks and balances has only distorted the development of institutional democracy and given rise to a more informal system of governance based on an over-centralization of power in the office of the prime minister. In this context, the public policy process was also flawed by the prime minister's failure to delegate sufficient authority to either the cabinet or the parliament, thereby undermining accountability.

A lack of strategic vision. One of the more surprising shortcomings from the "honeymoon" of Armenia's "Velvet Revolution," is the lack of any clear or coherent strategic vision to guide governance and reform. Despite the innovation and inspiration inherent from the victory of the notably non-violent Velvet Revolution, once in power, the Armenian government has demonstrated a disturbing deficit of strategy and vision. As a dynamic, and not static process, democratization and reform require both vision and strategy to sustain the momentum necessary for their effective implementation.

The lack of strategic vision only continues, however, and with a related lack of direction, is now most evident across several policy areas, most recently including the failure to formulate a new post-war diplomatic strategy with clear "end state" objectives, a fallacious and stubborn commitment to retain an outdated and ineffective approach to security and defense reform, and a faulty implementation of a questionable economic reform program marred by a demonstrable suspension of efforts to systemically combat corruption, protect the investment climate and pursue economic and social measures of job creation and poverty reduction. These policy shortcomings have been matched by other setbacks, where the lack of strategic vision and absence of direction have led to a series of rather sudden policy priorities that quickly falter with little follow-through, as evident in the areas of security sector reform, the modernization of education, and the incomplete investment and inadequate prioritization of innovation and entrepreneurship, for some examples.

Tempting shortcuts. Since coming to power in 2018, the Armenian government has too often taken "shortcuts" in public policy. From the over-personalization of political trials, as seen in the case against former President Robert Kocharian, to efforts to forcefully reconstitute the composition of the judiciary, which led to a prolonged "court crisis" through 2020, the Armenian government has contributed to a perception of "vendetta politics," driven more by personal revenge and political retribution than by the rule of law. And in politics, perception is as important as reality. Further, such a reliance on the "ends justifying the means" only undermines democracy, however, and dangerously degrades legitimacy and dilutes reform.

Dangerous Precedents

Against that backdrop of four serious “pre-existing conditions,” Armenian democracy is further beset by two broader trends, each of which is directly related to the recent losses in the war for Karabakh and that continues to exert destructive pressure threatening the resilience of Armenian democracy. The first of these trends is the dangerous precedent from the perception that the recent war for Karabakh vindicates the use of force as an acceptable means to resolve essentially political conflicts. This risk of rewarding aggression and military force as credible options to settle diplomatic disputes raises serious concerns over the implications for other conflicts, ranging from Cyprus to Crimea. And by failing to challenge this precedent of allowing military means to force a resolution of conflicts, the danger is rooted in legitimizing the concept that “might makes right” in international relations.

A second dangerous trend is rooted in a related precedent involving the apparent acceptance of the military victory of two much larger, more powerful authoritarian countries (Azerbaijan and Turkey) over a small democracy. And in the case of any consolidation of the victory of these aggressive authoritarian states, such consent represents a degree of complicity and culpability. From this perspective, the international community must be cautious in allowing such a precedent to stand, especially as the wave of authoritarian repression in Azerbaijan and Turkey will only be encouraged or endorsed, to the detriment of struggling democracies like Armenia.

Conclusion

Given the combination of these pre-existing challenges and the impact of a dramatically new post-war environment, democracy in Armenia is now under assault. The dramatic gains of Armenia garnered from its peaceful revolution of 2018, which was driven by an activist population no longer defined by apathy but committed to defending democracy, were widely embraced as a welcome exception. But stability and security in Armenia are now imperiled. While much of the burden of adapting and adopting Armenian national interests to meet this new post-war reality lies with the government, the international community also has a responsibility to recommit to democratization and reinvest in reform in Armenia. The risk of regress and retreat from reform and democracy not only stands out as a danger for Armenia, but also stands apart as a threat to the international community. And for the future of Armenia, democracy protection is now as important as democracy promotion.

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