Language

Inspired by electoral protests elsewhere, a number of Armenian NGOs tried to mobilize to contest the rigging of presidential elections in both 2003 and 2008 and engaged in voter education and electoral monitoring. Despite findings by the Constitutional Court in favour of opposition candidates' complaints about the unfairness of the poll, and a degree of external monitoring that criticised the electoral process, public mobilization to demand new elections, including marches and a tent city, were crushed by the regime both times.

The 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018

Ten years after the anti-government protests in 2008 were violently suppressed, and Serzh Sargsyan came to power as President, a wave of nonviolent resistance succeeded in ousting him in 2018. Unlike the earlier protests in Armenia (and other ex-Soviet states) the 2018 uprising did not occur in the context of a rigged general election, but was a popular revolt against constitutional and parliamentary manoeuvres to perpetuate autocratic rule.

Sargysan was an authoritarian leader with close ties to Vladimir Putin, and Armenia is closely allied to Russia. The 'Velvet Revolution' erupted to prevent him trying to cling onto power after his presidential term (of a maximum of ten years) ran out. He was unpopular with many Armenians, who also feared he was making a bid to stay in power for life. He changed the constitution through a rigged 2015 referendum to make the Presidency largely ceremonial, and to give real power to the Prime Minister. He then resigned as President in 2018, when his term came to an end, and was scheduled, with the support of his Republican Party of Armenia, which had a parliamentary majority, to become Prime Minister.

This manoeuvre was resisted by the 42-year old ex-journalist and opposition parliamentarian, Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the very minor Civil Contract party. He began a protest march on 31 March from Gyumri (the second main city in Armenia) to the capital, Yerevan. Few initially joined his march. But by the time he arrived in Yerevan on 13 April, thousands of university and high school students, angry about corrupt political rule, had taken to the streets. Despite public anger, parliament voted Sargsyan into office as Prime Minister on 17 April. The protests then spread to most sectors of the population of 2.9 million. Pashinyan was arrested by the authorities on 22 April, after talks with Sargysan fell through, but was released just a day later, when Sargysan resigned - soldiers had now joined the national protests. The Republican Party of Armenia in parliament blocked a move to elect Pashinyan Prime Minister and on 1 May secured the parliamentary election of their own candidate. Pashinyan then called for a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience: there was a blockade of Yerevan on 2 May, when 12 year-old school children sat down in the streets, and the country was paralyzed for several days by what was in effect a general strike.

The Republican Party then capitulated to public pressure and agreed to stop voting as a bloc in parliament, and Pashinyan was elected acting Prime Minister on 8 May. He formed a cabinet from a mix of politicians from different parties and individuals with long experience of government - his Foreign Minister was a career diplomat. Pashinyan had to govern for several months without a parliamentary majority and to go through the regulatory steps for calling a parliamentary election. But he had survived in parliament through his overwhelming popular backing, demonstrated by his supporters winning over 80 per cent of the vote in municipal elections in September 2018. Pashinyan was able to call a snap election which was held in early December 2018. His coalition bloc (the My Step Alliance) won over 70% of the vote in an election where only about 49 per cent of the electorate went to the polls. The Republican Party of Armenia failed to win any seats. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which monitored the election, reported that (unusually by the standard of earlier Armenian elections) the elections were held fairly and respected basic political freedoms.

Pashinyan stood on a platform of promising to stamp out corruption and promote economic reform. Although he declared a desire to improve cooperation with the EU and the USA, he did not propose any fundamental change in the economic and military links to Russia. Armenia is part both of the Eurasian Economic Union, tied to Russia, and of a regional military alliance with Russia, which has a military base inside the country. Commentators have noted that Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' was very different from the earlier 'Colour Revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, where western NGOs and western governments gave active support to the protesters, and victory for the opposition suggested moving away from Russia towards alliance with the EU and the west. Putin's decision not to

intervene to prop up Sargysan was clearly influenced by these geopolitical considerations, as well as the social breadth of the support for Pashinyan.

The success of the revolution could be seen as a shift in power, from the elite 'old guard' brought up under Soviet rule, and accustomed to use force and corruption to consolidate their dominance, to a younger generation. The protesters were intensely proud of their national heritage, often wrapping themselves in the national flag as they took over the streets, but were also seeking a more just and decent politics and society.

When Pashinyan became Prime Minister in 2018 he indicated a desire to end the long-running conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh. This was part of the republic of Azerbaijan in the Soviet period, but has a majority Armenian population. The break up of the USSR in 1991 led to bitter fighting between the Armenian majority (demanding the territory ahould become part of Armenia) and the Azerbaijani minority. Both the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments also took part in the fighting. Up to 30,000 had died and many others had been forced out of their homes before a cease fire was agreed in 1994, and the region has since been controlled by Armenian troops, but remained formally part of Azerbaijan. Pashinyan appeared to take a more militantly nationalist position when he called in 2019 for Nagorno Karabakh to be reunited with Armenia. Since then there is evidence Azerbaijan has been preparing for military action to recapture the region. Fighting broke out again in 2020, with clashes on the border in July in which at least 16 people were killed, and more serious fighting began again in late September. By 9 October 300 people had been killed, and the governments of both countries had been called to Moscow for talks on ending the fighting. Subsequent cease fires proved precarious.

Armenia has been less well covered than most other electoral protests in post-Soviet states. But see:

Cooper, Marc, Armenia's Revolution: A Flickering Light in a Darkening Europe *[1]*, The Nation, 07/12/2018,

Cooper celebrates this under-reported 'velvet revolution' that 'boiled up from the streets' and was not influenced by outside forces. He notes that although there had been limited protests in the previous decade on specific economic, environmental or gender issues, no one expected a major political revolt.

See also: Avedissian, Karina, 'A real revolution? Protest leader Armen Grigoryan on what's happening in Armenia', *Open Democracy*, 30 April 2018.

Feldman, Daniel ; Alibaši?, Haris, The Remarkable 2018 "Velvet Revolution": Armenia's Experiment Against Government Corruption *[2]*, Public Integrity, Vol. 21, issue 4, 2019, pp. 420-432

Feldman attended a conference on anti-corruption organized by the new government in 2018 with judges, prosecutors and investigators. The focus of the article is an examination of how far the nature of the rebellion (and its wider context) might be expected to promote a more democratic government committed to end corruption. After making comparisons with other countries, they provisionally conclude that the prospects for a transition to a government respecting the rule of law are positive.

Grigoryan, Armen, "Armenia First": Behind the rise of Armenia's alt-right scene *[3]*, 04/09/2019,

Grigoryan argues that a 'kleptocratic regime' has been ousted by the revolution, but a more radical conservative agenda is being promoted in this new context.

Grigoryan, Armen, Armenia's Path to Democratization by Recursive Mass Protests *[4]*, Caucasus Survey, Vol. 7, issue 2, 2019, pp. 157-175

The article compares the 2018 revolution with earlier unsuccessful political protests in Armenia since 2003-4, to try to determine what made success possible. Grigoryan also makes comparisons with some other examples of regime change, and considers the implications of the nature of the 2018 revolution for post-revolutionary politics and society.

Hoellerbauer, Simon, Armenia and the Velvet Revolution: The Merits and Flaws of a Protest-based Civil Society *[5]*, Foreign Policy Research institute, Geopolitics, 19/02/2019,

The author argues that comparison with the 'Colour Revolutions' are misleading since these were promoted by civil society organizations and opposition parties and focused on regime distortion of elections. Success in Armenia did demonstrate the power of civil society, but relied on 'grassroots organizing via social media' rather than on official NGOs, which are widely distrusted. The 2018 revolution drew on experience of earlier protests focused on limited issues. Hoellerbauer also speculates about future prospects for democracy under Pashinyan without a strong civil society to hold him accountable, and in the light of Armenia's dependence on Russia and the problem of the 'frozen conflict' over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ishkanian, Armine, Democracy Building in Post-Soviet Armenia *[6]*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 206

Critical assessment of western support for civil society groups, noting that it can create a backlash and needs to be considered in the historical, social and cultural context of the country involved. Also makes comparisons with other post-Soviet states.

Lanskoy, Miriam ; Suthers, Elspeth, Armenia's Velvet Revolution *[7]*, Journal of Democracy, Vol. 30, issue 2, 2019, pp. 85-99

The authors, both from the National Endowment for Democracy, note that political revolution in other post-Soviet states have been followed by 'back sliding'. But they note how Armenia differs from Georgia and Ukraine. After exploring the background and context of the 2018 revolution, they conclude with a relatively optimistic assessment of the prospects for the Pashinyan government after the December 2018 election.

See also:

Valerie J. Bunce; Sharon L. Wolchik, Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries *[8]*, (D. II.1. Comparative Assessments [9]), pp. 190-98 for useful summary and detailed references.

Links
[1] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2018/armenias-revolution-flickering-light-darkening-europe [2] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/remarkable-2018-velvet-revolution-armenias-experiment-against-government-corruption [3] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/armenia-first-behind-rise-armenias-alt-right-scene [4] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/armenias-path-democratization-recursive-mass-protests [5] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/armenia-and-velvet-revolution-merits-and-flaws-protest-based-civil-society [6] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2008/democracy-building-post-soviet-armenia [7] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/armenias-velvet-revolution [8] https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2011/defeating-authoritarian-leaders-post-communist-countries [9] https://civilresistance.info/taxonomy/term/37