

STATE OF EMERGENCY IN ARMENIA. POLITICAL CRISIS AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS OF FEBRUARY 2008

Aschot Manutscharjan

On February 19, 2008, nine candidates competed for the presidency of the Republic of Armenia. In this context, their election platforms and/or their affiliation to a political party played a subordinate role to Armenia's voters. As in the other post-Soviet republics, the elections in the South Caucasian Republic revolved exclusively around personalities. However, the campaign polarized the domestic-policy situation to such an extent that the country narrowly escaped civil war.

In the course of the presidential election campaign of 2008, it was already apparent that the extra-parliamentary opposition would organize protests because of real or alleged election fraud. This being so, a violent aftermath of elections seems to have established itself as a negative tradition in Armenia's political culture once and for all. According to sociological surveys, Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan (born 1954) had the best chances to succeed President Kocharian. He entered the election campaign as representative of the ruling coalition. The two parties had succeeded in winning a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections of May 2007, so that their representatives have been dominating Armenia's economy and parliament ever since.

During the election campaign, Mr Sargsyan skilfully made use of his advantage as the incumbent Prime Minister and presented himself as a doer by raising pensions and wages. Moreover, he promised to double not only Armenia's budget but also the average monthly pay by 2012. His main opponent was Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrossian (1991-1998), who once again competed for the highest office of state. Under President Ter-Petrossian, Armenia had under-gone a severe financial crisis. Furthermore, the economy had collapsed, and large parts of the population had fled abroad as a result. Three biting cold winters without electricity were as well remembered as existential poverty and mass unemployment. It was not without reason that the media showed the pictures from these dark years over and over again during the election campaign. However, they did not succeed in proving personal enrichment against Mr Ter-Petrossian and his government. The former president explained his return by saying he was the only one who could replace the 'corrupt regime of criminals' from Nagorno Karabakh, adding that he was plagued by a 'sense of guilt' as he was responsible for this government coming into power in the first place. At his numerous rallies, Mr Ter-Petrossian heated up the political atmosphere in Armenia. He tried to convince his supporters and audiences by announcing a 'national civil revolution'. The only ones who would have to fear his victory were the

government and a few dozen family clans that were robbing the country and turning citizens into slaves.

The Nagorno Karabakh issue experienced a renaissance during the presidential election campaign of 2008. Mr Ter-Petrosian, one of the candidates, made Nagorno Karabakh one of the key items in his election campaign. He sharply criticized the Karabakh policy of President Kocharian and Prime Minister Sargsyan. He accused the two politicians, who both hail from Nagorno Karabakh, not only of pillaging Armenia but also of betraying the country's national interests. In fact, this Armenian exclave only played a subordinate role in the election platform of Mr Ter-Petrosian: He did demand that the Karabakhi Armenians be granted the right to self-determination; apart from that, however, all he did was to announce vaguely a 'search for a compromise solution of the problem'. Mr Ter-Petrosian accused the Armenian government of intending to hand Nagorno Karabakh over to Azerbaijan sooner or later.

Another subject of Mr Ter-Petrosian's election campaign was the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire and in Turkey (1915 to 1923). In that context, he advised the executive branch to abandon waiting for Turkey to acknowledge the genocide, and to disregard any criticism from Ankara.

According to the international election observation committees, there were hardly any irregularities on February 19, 2008, the day of the poll. In their statements, they talked about an election process that came close to European standards. However, members of the opposition reported brawling, threats, and manipulations.

Of the 2.390 million people entitled to vote, 1,671,027 (69 percent) went to the polls. Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan succeeded in winning with 52.86 percent of the vote. Although his competitor, Levon Ter-Petrosian, obtained no more than 21.5 percent, he accused the government of vote-rigging and straight away declared himself the winner.

The success of Mr Sargsyan confirmed opinion polls that had predicted the victory of the candidate of the ruling party, which in fact had won last year's parliamentary elections hands down. According to Professor Gevork Poghosyan, director of the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, most Armenians wanted no domestic earthquake or revolutionary upheavals. Besides, he said, the protest voters were expressing their discontent with the state of lawlessness, the power of the bureaucrats, and the corruption in the country. Conversely, Mr Ter-Petrosian's uncompromising election campaign had startled many people and mobilized the supporters of stability and, therefore, the government. Moreover, the 'social memory' of the voters had played a major role in the defeat of Mr Ter-Petrosian, he said. They did not want to 'elect the past'.

As Levon Ter-Petrossian apparently could not bring himself to concede defeat, he kept trying to rally his supporters with populist slogans. The populist launched a targeted hate campaign, thus demonstrating that he was hell-bent on going either 'to the bitter end' or the 'victory of the revolution'. In its decision of February 24, 2008, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Armenia confirmed the legitimacy of the presidential elections and dismissed any complaints. On March 1, 2008, special forces of the ministry of internal affairs and the army stormed the tent camp of the opposition, which erected barricades and engaged in street fighting with the police. The sad record of the conflict: ten people were killed, among them two soldiers.

Under the provisions of Armenia's constitution, President Kocharian called a state of emergency for 20 days – i.e. until March 21 – in the entire republic that same night. In his decree he prohibited any strikes, rallies, or other demonstrations in the country. In all Armenian regions, supporters of Mr Ter-Petrossian were arrested and questioned. The media were ordered to publish official information only or suffer punishment. Any party propaganda not previously approved by the government was prohibited. The papers of the opposition parties, independent information organs, and internet platforms were subjected to censorship, so that they stopped publication or were forced by the government to do so. The most popular radio station in Armenia – Radio Liberty from Prague – was once again prohibited, as it was in Soviet times.

On March 21, 2008, President Kocharian lifted the state of emergency and tried to explain his line of action: 'Democracy must be able to defend itself against the pressure of the street.' On April 9, 2008, President Serzh Sargsyan was inaugurated. But it was only a question of time until the new president would compare the Kosovo case with the Karabakh problem: 'What is it that distinguishes us from the Kosovo?' And: 'Why are the Kosovo Albanians allowed to declare their independence while we are not? Or does the international community of states wish Nagorno Karabakh to be cleared of Armenians and the territory handed over to Azerbaijan?' With these words, the new president did not leave any room for doubts that, as head of state, he would continue to champion the Karabakhi Armenians' right to self-determination. Armenia even promised military support to the area, if necessary. At the same time, however, the President asserted that Armenia was still standing by a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Besides, Mr Sargsyan stated that he would also defend the second key concern of Armenian foreign policy – the demand that the Armenian genocide in Turkey be acknowledged by the international community. 'Armenia must continue to champion this matter in order to achieve historical justice.'

Contrary to the expectations of the extra-parliamentary opposition, the riots and the state of emergency in Armenia did not make it to the front

pages of the international press. Apart from that, there was no international criticism of the state of emergency because the foreign representations accredited in Armenia correctly judged the political situation and reported to their governments accordingly. After all, Mr Ter-Petrosian's targeted provocations of the government were primarily a personal retaliation campaign against Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharian. Western diplomats said that Mr Ter-Petrosian's uncompromising 'fight to the end' did not exactly demonstrate 'democratic' behaviour.

Nevertheless, the violent break-up of demonstrations, the wave of arrests, press censorship, and the restrictions of the freedom of opinion were a heavy setback for the process of democratization in the Caucasian republic. If the political situation is not corrected, Armenia will risk relapsing into an authoritarian regime once again. It is not least because of this that the ruling political class and the government were not interested in analyzing the causes and backgrounds of the crisis openly. There were no political discussions on TV; only a few quality papers criticized those responsible for the political decisions. And the government-controlled media concealed the country's domestic problems and democratic deficits anyway. Independent Armenian experts advised the new president to draw lessons from the political crisis and to establish a new basis for the state by means of a consistent reform policy. Otherwise, there would be a risk of Armenia ending up as a 'failed state'.

Any reversal of this trend primarily depends on the uncompromising attitude of the new president and his fight against corruption. If it fails, Armenia will turn into a semi-authoritarian system, with corresponding geopolitical consequences. At the moment, the small Christian state of Armenia still enjoys international popularity because of its former democratic progress and tragic history. To keep this popularity, President Sargsyan must strengthen the fundamental rights of his citizens, e.g. freedom of opinion, assembly, and the press, and fight corruption sustainably.