
AFTER 100 DAYS, WHAT'S NEW IN THE 'NEW ARMENIA'?

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August 17 marks 100 days since Nikol Pashinyan became prime minister of Armenia by bloodlessly overthrowing the crooked old regime. The self-styled Velvet Revolution captured the world's attention and gave Armenians, cynical after so many years in a stagnant country, hope.

Pashinyan plans to mark the occasion by returning to his revolutionary roots, holding a rally in Yerevan's Republic Square. This was the site of his nightly rallies in April, some of which attracted more than 100,000 supporters, which ultimately convinced former leader Serzh Sargsyan to step down.

I feel really happy for the opportunity to meet with you again in the square where we all together conducted the revolution of love and solidarity, Pashinyan said in a Facebook video address inviting Armenians to the rally. It's important to have a conversation about what has happened in Armenia in the last 100 days and what's going to happen in the near future.

Three months into the new Armenia — as Pashinyan calls it — Armenians, for the most part, seem to like what they see. A broad anti-corruption campaign is targeting business, mostly connected to members of the old administration charged with evading taxes. Another campaign is bringing criminal charges against former officials for one of the darkest events in recent Armenian history, the killing of peaceful protesters in 2008. Government posts are occupied by fresh, uncorrupted faces.

We have solved our main task in this 100 days, which was ensuring the normal functioning of the country in the post-revolutionary period and the continuous development of the economy, Pashinyan said in an August 16 preview of his rally speech.

But there are also growing concerns — that the anti-corruption campaign is selective and lacks a long-term goal, that the 2008 prosecutions are too politicized, that the young government members are inexperienced amateurs. Some of Pashinyan's core, socially liberal supporters are unsure about the new government's commitment to their causes.

But those concerns are mainly limited to the chattering classes. Reliable opinion polls are scarce, but anecdotal data suggests Pashinyan's popularity remains strong. T-shirts depicting his profile, along with his signature baseball cap, are still common sights.

An informal survey of pensioners and others idling away a recent afternoon on park benches next

to Republic Square found unqualified support for Pashinyan.

There's a point to life now, said Ara Martirosyan. I'm 60 years old, and for 30 years it's like I wasn't living. They were stealing all of our wealth and we need to deal with that. They were billionaires and we're beggars. It's not fair.

Martirosyan allowed some concerns about the youth and inexperience of much of Pashinyan's new government. Maybe some of them aren't ready, he said. But they're making the right steps. They work for the people now, and if they start to be corrupt, the KGB will deal with it.

Fighting corruption

The dual campaigns against corrupt businesses and former officials have been savvy political moves, said Anahit Shirinyan, a Yerevan-based fellow at the British think tank Chatham House. Pashinyan's government needs to demonstrate quick results, and fighting systematic tax avoidance, embezzlement and misuse [of public funds] is one way to do it, she told Eurasianet.

The anti-corruption campaign has targeted a number of businesses — mainly associated with members of the former government — which had allegedly been shirking taxes or avoiding inspections. The State Revenue Committee also has announced it will monitor that small businesses issue sales receipts, to ensure they are recording revenue accurately. Several members of the formerly ruling Republican Party have been targets of high-profile investigations into their apparently ill-gotten wealth. A televised raid on the home of a Republican member of parliament, showing his pet tiger and preserved food that schoolchildren had sent to soldiers on the front lines, shocked the nation.

There has been some resistance: Eleven large business groups, including some associated with the families of members of parliament, wrote an open letter to Pashinyan complaining about the crackdown, saying it violated previous arrangements with the authorities. Pashinyan responded forcefully on his Facebook page, calling on consumers to boycott the robbers and the corrupt, who want to prove [...] that illegality is better than lawfulness.

Pashinyan also has pointed to the anti-corruption campaign in his efforts to attract new foreign investment, one of his key campaign promises. At a July 27 business summit in St. Petersburg, Pashinyan argued that, thanks to the campaign, all kinds of obstacles have been eliminated for foreign investors.

But some have questioned whether eliminating obstacles is enough, and whether rounding up corrupt officials is a crowd-pleasing move without a broader development strategy behind it.

The anti-corruption campaign is a crucial part of our economic plan but it is not enough, said Artak Manukyan, an economist in Yerevan. Creating a new economic model based on fairness is important — without this you can't have positive long-term economic expectations — but bringing in investment requires much more.

There have been efforts to attract investment, in particular from Armenia's global diaspora. No new significant ventures have been announced, but officials say they are working on it. Diaspora minister Mkhitar Hayrapetyan recently toured diaspora centers in the United States: Los Angeles, New York, and Boston.

I assured our compatriots that in the new Armenia no old traditions exist; anyone, no matter who

he is, can never demand a 'share' from another's business, to exert pressure on the courts, Hayrapetyan told Eurasianet.

The ministry also has launched a grant program to bring startups to Armenia, offering awards of up to \$30,000 and working space for promising proposals in order to boost the startup ecosystem in the country. The ministry also is mooted the idea of diaspora bonds to channel money that wealthy diasporans currently put into charity towards supporting the Armenian state budget instead.

The first signs from the new government have been positive, with the government announcing a focus on increased tech and public-private partnerships, said Areg Gevorgyan, business development manager at the startup incubator Innovative Solutions and Technologies Center. There's a big change in the willingness of investors to invest in Armenia again. Literally a week after the revolution, I got a call for a \$10 million project from a diaspora Armenian. This message was we are sure that our investments are secure and we believe in the revolution.

Reckoning with 2008

The investigations into the events of March 1, 2008, have made an even bigger splash than the anti-corruption campaign. Former president Robert Kocharyan was arrested, a former defense minister has been declared wanted, and another senior military official charged, all on counts related to the violent response to demonstrations against fraudulent election results that brought Sargsyan to power.

The prosecutions have been widely popular. It's not only justified, they haven't gone far enough, said Martirosyan, the pensioner. Ninety-nine percent of people in Armenia hate the old government, said Arkady, another man spending the afternoon in the park, who asked that only his first name be used. They were all criminals.

Pashinyan has gained political capital from the prosecutions, Shirinyan said. For the majority, it's a real test for the government. March 1 broke the backbone of the Armenian political society. But she added that she didn't consider them to be politicized. Not to pursue this case would also be a political decision, she said. People would be saying, 'We had 10 dead and nobody is punished.'

Ruben Carranza, who runs the Reparative Justice program at the International Center for Transitional Justice, an New York-based NGO, recently visited Armenia and met several senior officials, including Pashinyan, to discuss the prosecutions.

Carranza said he saw the recent charges against Kocharyan and other high-profile officials of the former regime as almost a response to [the] expectations of Pashinyan's supporters. While it's important to respond to expectations, it's equally important to manage these expectations, satisfying demand for justice in a broader sense, he said.

In meetings with the new government, Carranza said he stressed that while it's one thing to investigate individuals, it's important to help people understand that abuses committed by an individual are connected to larger networks of corruption and human rights violations. One question that comes out of these prosecutions right now is if the evidence justifies charging these former officials. To [Pashinyan's] credit, I think that there's an understanding of that, said Carranza. He was very conscious that these prosecutions were not seen as acts of revenge.

Amateur hour?

One of the most eye-catching features of the new government has been the youth of some of its highest-ranking figures. Hayrapetyan is 27, Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan and Pashinyan's chief of staff Eduard Aghajanyan are both 29. The government has presented this as primarily a caretaker team until a new government is formed after elections, which are expected in the next few months.

The new leadership tends to prefer loyalty more than bringing in established professionals, and after the election they will be under more scrutiny, Shirinyan said.

Still, the relative inexperience of many of the key figures has occasioned some complaints that the team is too green to handle the challenge of guiding Armenia through the difficult straits it's in. Foreign policy has been a particular sore spot. During a high-profile visit to Brussels, Pashinyan appeared to have unrealistic expectations about what aid Western countries would provide, prompting many in Yerevan to cringe.

Konstantin Ter-Nakalyan, the editor of the commentary website blognews.am, said he had yet to make up his mind whether or not [Pashinyan] is good but he has a bad team, or both Pashinyan and his team are a catastrophe and pose a threat to national security, he wrote in a Facebook post. That Nikol's team is a natural disaster is already an axiomatic fact, so I want to believe that we are dealing with the first option.

One of the more notable personnel moves was Pashinyan's Civil Contract party's nominee for Yerevan mayor: Hayk Marutyan, a well-known comedian with little political experience.

The current interim government is here to mobilize for the parliamentary elections and consolidate its agenda, said Sona Ghazaryan, an activist who led one of the youth movements that supported Pashinyan. But I was somewhat disappointed by their choice of mayoral candidate — this should be a revolution of ideas, not of personalities.

But supporters of the government say that the experience of the old administration was not helpful.

The problem is that there were very experienced rogues, experienced corrupt officials, under Sargsyan, said First Deputy Prime Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, himself 35, in an interview with Voice of America's Armenian service. "So, is it better to bring in inexperienced newcomers, who have good values and will do everything ... to implement these values? Or is it better to be a hostage of experienced rogues and corrupt officials? For me, the answer is obvious.

Grigor Yeritsyan, the executive director of the Armenian Progressive Youth NGO, another protest leader, agrees. In my opinion political experience is less relevant right now than commitment to values, he said. We need values to change our country. Young people and particularly young women are not part of the corrupt system that's been in place for decades — they have no institutional memory of the kleptocracy that was in place. This is a judgement-free, forward-looking generation now taking charge. Of course experience is also important, but that can be learned.

Youth is served

Young people were among the key leaders of the uprising that brought Pashinyan to power, and Yeritsyan said he has been pleased with the new government's engagement in youth issues. We had never had a deputy minister at our events before but [Deputy Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs Kristine Asatryan] has been with us two or three times now, he said. This signals to us that the government is now willing to work with the youth. The government has indicated that it intends to walk back the Nation-Army Concept, a package of legislation aimed at bringing the military into more parts of society. It was the subject of student protests last year because it attempted to weaken university students' right to postpone military conscription. But newly appointed National Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan has said that the concept and its associated policies have been failures.

Many of Pashinyan's young, liberal, supporters have been disheartened by the government's response to a mob attack on LGBT activists in a village in southern Armenia. The episode posed a tricky political dilemma for the government, which has to not only keep the support of liberals but of the country's large socially conservative majority. The government has for the most part kept quiet, other than a statement from the ombudsmen's office six days after the incident.

Some activists have alleged that the attacks are part of a pattern on the part of revanchist members of the old government to rile up conservatives against Pashinyan. The previous government is now putting pressure on Pashinyan's government and spreading false information, said Mamikon Hovsepyan, a leading LGBT activist. Their main strategy is connecting the government with issues the public are largely opposed to, chief among these being issues relating to LGBT rights.

Nevertheless, Hovsepyan said his allies remain supportive of the new authorities. As a government, they haven't really pushed through any changes in terms of policy, he said. But the LGBT community is more or less positive. The government no longer makes hate speech, which is a very important shift. In addition, there are a lot of LGBT-friendly members of government and some of them condemn attacks against LGBT [people] on their personal social media accounts — something that was unthinkable under Republican leadership.

Of course, 100 days is too little time to accurately assess a government's performance, and most supporters say they remain optimistic even if they've seen relatively few results so far.

I'm patient but I'm also practical, and I know the government needs to start showing us tangible results, said Yeritsyan, the youth activist. People want larger salaries, opportunities and the right to live a better life. Optimism cannot feed you forever.

We hope it will be better, but we can't be 100 percent sure, said Arkady, one of the men idling in the park. But we can say 100 percent: Whatever happens will be better than the last government.

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