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## THE COUNTERREVOLUTION IS COMING TO ARMENIA

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Maxim Edwards

The country's new government wants to root out corruption [ ] the ancien régime isn't giving up without a fight.

Agents from Armenias National Security Service raiding a property outside the town of Etchmiadzin on June 16 were astonished by what they discovered. Alongside rifles and a vintage car collection was canned food earmarked for Armenian soldiers serving on the front line in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Agents alleged that the property owner had been using these military rations and food donated to troops by schoolchildren to feed animals in his private zoo.

For war-weary Armenians, 30 percent of whom live beneath the poverty line, the scene was enraging. The owner of that property was Manvel Grigoryan, an influential former military commander and lawmaker from the Republican Party of Armenia, which dominated the countrys politics since 1999. Even the party, which governed Armenia until protests this April, had to admit it was disgusted. Grigoryan was charged with embezzlement and illegal possession of ammunition. Armenias Velvet Revolution saw thousands take to streets and squares across the country under the slogan Take a step, reject Serzh. They were protesting longtime ruler Serzh Sargsyans attempt to pivot from the presidency into the prime ministers office, which was newly empowered thanks to a controversial referendum in 2015. After 11 days of protests, among the largest in the nations post-Soviet history, Sargsyan resigned. Nikol Pashinyan, a former journalist turned firebrand opposition politician who leads the Civil Contract party, was swept into power, becoming prime minister in May. He has been the face of Armenias revolution ever since. His slogan dukhov (with courage) appears on baseball caps and T-shirts, sold in downtown Yerevan as readily as tourist trinkets.

Pashinyans other watchword is anti-corruption. With the help of new ministers and advisors, many of them from civil society, the first 100 days of his rule saw high-profile arrests at a dizzying pace, including those of Sargsyans brother and bodyguard. Controversially, a criminal case has been brought against former president Robert Kocharyan for the events of March 1, 2008, when Armenian police violently attacked civilians protesting the rigged presidential election by which Sargsyan came to power. Eight protesters and two police officers were killed.

Pashinyan has done more than rock the boat; hes vowed to redraw the entire social and political structure of corruption-ridden Armenia. The question now is whether the countrys ancien régime

will leave without a fight.

It now seems the old guard is playing hardball. Last week, more protests broke out in Yerevan after Armenias Republican Party-dominated legislature passed a bill that would hinder attempts to hold snap parliamentary elections. An early vote, which Pashinyan and his allies are widely expected to win by a landslide, could well worry Republican Party politicians, who stand to lose control over a key institution. For now, it seems like a compromise has been found. This week, Pashinyan announced that he will resign in the coming days with a view to fresh parliamentary elections in December [REDACTED] Armenian law permits parliament to dissolve only if its deputies fail twice to elect a new prime minister.

Its quite a gambit; the risk remains that Republican Party deputies could instead elect another, less confrontational prime minister, forestalling elections. Some parliamentary groups such as Prosperous Armenia, which supported last weeks controversial bill, have since reaffirmed their support for Pashinyans plan for early elections.

Gen. Grigoryans head was one of the first to roll after the revolution: He and his family had unquestioned authority over Etchmiadzin, where his son Karen was mayor. This small city, about 12 miles from Yerevan, is Armenias spiritual capital and the seat of the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church. During the revolution, local lawyer Diana Gasparyan was among those protesting in the city, where she stood with a banner reading We support the anti-corruption agenda! When Grigoryans son finally resigned in June, Pashinyan appointed Gasparyan interim mayor of the city [REDACTED] first female mayor in Armenias modern history. It was the most important day in my life, she recalled.

When I became mayor, we analyzed tenders given out by the local government, Gasparyan said in her spacious new office in the towns Soviet-era mayoral building. We found that for years, only companies linked to Grigoryans family had won tenders: for construction work or even for serving food in kindergartens. That dynasty ruled in all spheres.

The anti-corruption spotlight turned to Taron Margaryan, Yerevans mayor since 2011, who resigned in July after weeks of protests outside City Hall and the embarrassment of aerial photographs of his mansions appearing online. (Aren Mkrtchyan, the creator of a viral video detailing Margaryans alleged embezzlement, is Pashinyans advisor on corruption.) In mayoral elections held late last month, a candidate from Im Qayle (My Step), a loose alliance of pro-Pashinyan civic activists, won 81 percent of the vote, a bellwether for the mass support the revolutionary agenda still enjoys.

When it came to elections, Armenias journalists were used to covering ballot stuffing and tough guys dressed in black loitering around the polling stations [REDACTED] forms of manipulation that were absent in the municipal vote. Some even called the election boring. But for Christine Barseghyan, the manager of anti-corruption projects at Hetq, Armenias leading investigative journalism outlet, it was anything but. Weve worked as investigative journalists for 17 years but often felt that our investigations ran up against walls, Barseghyan said. We had small victories, but systemic victories were rare [REDACTED] days, we sense a real interest toward our work, and officials fighting corruption come to us not just for help, but for advice. A recent poll of Armenian public opinion by the International Republican Institute reveals the extent of that mass support: 82 percent of respondents see the change in government positively, and 81 percent believe the handling of corruption has improved in the last six months.

But the mood of optimism in Yerevan today is tempered by caution: namely, the fear that public expectations of Pashinyan are so high they can only go downhill. The rhetoric during the transition of power was entirely against the old regime, reflected Alexander Iskandaryan, the director of the Caucasus Institute, a Yerevan-based think tank. That was smart. A positive program would have divided people, whereas nobody is consciously for nepotism or corruption.

The old regime thought they could survive on bribes and apathy, but you cant maintain that forever, Iskandaryan said. But neither does high popularity. The legitimacy it brings is useful only if you use it for something [REDACTED] unpopular reforms. What will the [new government] do when support decreases? The fight against the corrupt and the fight against corruption are different things. The latter is more complex. Removing 30 corrupt individuals will not change society.

High-profile arrests of notorious oligarchs such as Grigoryan went down well with a public thirsting for change in the early days after the Velvet Revolution. Im not sure how educated the public has been about anti-corruption; Armenians mostly see corruption as oligarchs plundering the country, said Anahit Shirinyan, a Chatham House Academy fellow specializing in Armenian politics. Shirinyan added that Grigoryans arrest was particularly symbolic, as many Armenians saw it as confirming their suspicions that corruption in the military was a security risk [REDACTED] that had mounted ever since the Azerbaijani military regained land in Nagorno-Karabakh in clashes in April 2016. Many in Armenia have come to see that Four-Day War, as its now known, as the beginning of the end of Sargsyans rule.

However, the fact that some key oligarchs remained untouched by the investigators left Pashinyans government open to charges that the arrests were selective. One telling absence was Gagik Tsarukyan, a powerful oligarch who a leaked 2006 U.S. Embassy cable said had personal tastes that would make Donald Trump look like an ascetic. Tsarukyans Prosperous Armenia Party still has an extensive network, and Pashinyan may still require the support of its members of parliament.

This cant just be about bad oligarchs, said Armine Ishkanian, an associate professor in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. Corruption in Armenia has been widely accepted from universities to hospitals and everywhere in between. This has to be seen partly as a sociocultural problem—remedied by a bottom-up as well as a top-down approach.

Probably around 80 percent of the population is in some way involved with petty corruption, Barseghyan said. You cant arrest and imprison all those people.

The government will soon have to make other hard decisions. For the countrys activists, all eyes are on Amulsar, a mountain in southern Armenia where the British firm Lydian International plans to open a gold mine. Environmentalists say the project risks polluting Lake Sevan, landlocked Armenias largest lake, ruining the local tourism industry. Lydian disputes their claims. If the mine is closed, maybe 600 workplaces could be lost. But if its opened, it could destroy 2,000 more, said Harun Arsenyan, an activist from the nearby spa town of Jermuk. Arsenyan and his comrades have been camping out here, at the start of a dusty road to the mining site in Vayots Dzor province, for just over 100 days.

Emil Sanamyan, a fellow at the Institute of Armenian Studies of the University of Southern California, believes that whatever its reservations, the revolutionary governments hands are tied on Amulsar. I expect the government to resume the project, even after elections, as otherwise therell be multimillion dollar fines to pay, Sanamyan said. This will be one of Pashinyans biggest tests, because it concerns foreign investors. And as were against their money, they wont give up easily, Arsenyan added. It will be a catastrophe if he doesnt side with us.

Such high hopes in an Armenian government from activists are largely unprecedented. The country presently ranks 107th in Transparency Internationals Corruption Perceptions Index. The organizations Global Corruption Barometer in 2017 found that Armenia was the world leader in not reporting corruption: 77 percent of respondents said that reporting incidents of corruption was socially unacceptable, while 67 percent said they would not do so even if they had witnessed it firsthand.

Even if Armenians did start dutifully reporting corruption, are the authorities up to tackling it? Experts prescribe institutional overhaul, particularly of law enforcement. As Sona Ayvazyan, the executive director of Transparency Internationals Armenia office, put it: At the moment we have five or six different law enforcement bodies dealing with corruption cases, but their remits overlap and they arent specialized in corruption. Ayvazyan believes that Armenia needs a unified anti-corruption enforcement agency, and that the current uncoordinated efforts against corruption are inefficient.

But in Armenia today, the distinction between successful business owners who happen to enter parliament and politicians who abuse their office for personal gain is a fuzzy one, explained Yerevan-based political analyst Mikayel Zolyan.

These people were like feudal lords, Zolyan said. What we have now is more than an anti-corruption struggle: Its a struggle against Armenias deep state. In April, these people lost formal rule, but they still have informal power: They own huge chunks of the media. But they cant just leave and side with Pashinyan [Pashinyan] all part of the same semi-criminal networks. The best they can do is negotiate a place for themselves in the new order.

Back in Etchmiadzin, the locals have little to say about their general who fell from grace. A few months is not a long time, sighed one trader at a marketplace a few streets from Grigoryans opulent townhouse. Were still waiting for our golden age.

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