

DIFFUSE OPPOSITION SARKISSIAN'S BEST WEAPON

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 **Editorial**, 31 January 2016

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The quote goes some ways to explain the failure of Armenia opposition parties to influence Armenia politics or to unseat the remarkably successful, yet apparently unpopular, President Serge Sarkissian.

While some of the president's critics believe he has a choke-hold on power because of his party's expertise in staging fraudulent elections, the fact is there's more to Sarkissian's success than electoral chicanery.

A crucial reason for the regime's unchallenged dominance is its access to financial and human resources as well as the Republican Party's organizational skills. Being the incumbent, Sarkissian also enjoys predictable advantages. Meanwhile, the opposition is diffuse and weak. The regime's strategy is simple: to stay in power. The opposition story is complicated: it has to go through loops, compromises, and unwieldy alliances.

The shortcomings of the opposition are many.

During the two terms of the Sarkissian presidency, the opposition failed to produce a single charismatic leader who could inspire the populace and embody the drive for democracy. The

politician who came closest to be considered a credible alternative to Sarkissian was Raffi

Hovanissian of the Heritage Party, but following the disputed results of the last elections, rather than lead his followers to force a reversal of the results, he crumbled and rushed to Moscow presumably to tell the Russians that he had been robbed. He returned empty-handed. And when he met Sarkissian, his language and manners were that of an apologetic teenager approaching the school principal. He gravely disappointed his followers.

The opposition has relied too often on mass rallies as spark plugs for regime change. At these public gatherings, usually in front of the opera building, party leaders seemed to be inspired by the arias reverberating from the interior of the building: they indulged in ad hominem and in interminable coloratura orations for cheap applause. The spectators--mostly senior citizens nostalgic for the Soviet days--wanted change which would improve their standard of living. As people who pine for the "good old days" of the Soviet system they are not agents of change. After listening—for several hours--to harangues and virtuoso demagoguery, they melted away to go home disappointed.

As in past occasions—in parliament or in public –the verbose politicians at the opera rallies had failed to offer comprehensive programs (social, economic, political and organizational) that could have captured the imagination of the voters, particularly the activists, intellectuals, students, labor, and progressive thinkers. The rallies had become the aim rather than the means for change.

Other chinks in the opposition's armour: some "opposition" politicians are oligarchs who have become pols so as to maintain their business network and to protect their privileges. Versed in the accepted lingo, they talk the talk but don't walk the talk. Raised under communism, they have a notional familiarity with democracy. As well they see themselves as entitled elite, like the Soviet nomenclatura, while the citizenry is perceived as hoi polloi. That the politician is elected to serve the public can be a bizarre idea in such an authoritarian milieu.

Yet another opposition weakness: the opportunists among them are only too eager to become silent partners to the regime so as to benefit from Sarkissian's largess. The electorate, aware of the farce, is distrustful of the rent-a-politician mob.

Some observers believe Echmiadzin's alliance with the ruling party and the oligarchs has hurt the opposition. But that argument has an opposite mirror image: while some people have voted for Sarkissian because of his close ties to Echmiadzin, others could have voted for the opposition for the same reason. Catholicos Karekin II's lifestyle and management are no secret to the citizens of Armenia.

A glaring weakness of the opposition is that it's under-resourced and has no depth. The only time an opposition leader (Gagik Dzaroukian) dared to challenge Sarkissian the rebel oligarch's wealth was threatened by unknown elements. Seeing he could lose his mini-empire, Dzaroukian asked for peace with the obvious promise that he would not make waves.

Twenty-five years after independence, the opposition parties remain amateurish when it comes to

organization matters. For example, there has never been an election where the opposition was represented in all or almost all polling stations. In the recent constitution referendum, the anti-Sarkissian faction was represented in only 1,200 of the 2,000 polling stations.

The opposition is also hamstrung by the electorate's relative lack of political sophistication. As well, far too many citizens believe regime change could translate to revolution/chaos at a time when the Azeris are making almost daily incursions into Armenian territory.

A political party requires an engaged electorate. The economic and social hardships have demoralized the populace, driving away promising people who could have contributed to the formation of a progressive government.

Diaspora's indifference to the opposition has hurt the anti-Sarkissian factions. There has been an absence of support from the Diaspora for the opposition. As long as Armenia is safe and some progress is being made, the Diaspora seems to forgive the regime's trespasses.

Finally, the elephant—or the bear—in the room: the road to Armenia's presidency goes through the Kremlin. The opposition needs President Putin's nod but as long as Sarkissian doesn't make rash overtures to the West, Putin will not try to replace him.

Related to the above is Russia's dominance of Armenia and Armenia's need for Russian protection against Azerbaijan and Turkey. The electorate is cognizant of the fact that some opposition leaders are anti-Russian. With storms swirling around the Transcaucasus and the Middle East, the Armenian citizenry is in no mood for the so-called color revolutions or an opposition takeover which could pit Russia against Armenia.

