DODGING THE BULLET

Posted on July 17, 2015 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

Editorial, 10 July 2015

The high and mighty fretted and fulminated, the punditocracy did its high school turn with compare-and-contrast, and many Armenians wondered: "Is this the beginning of the end for Serge Sarkissian?"

Igor Morozov, member of Russia's legislative upper house, said the Electric Yerevan protests were carbon-copy of the Kiev *maidan*, and would end in a coup if Sarkissian didn't learn a lesson from Ukraine and draw the proper conclusions. Duma's Valery Rishkin advised Sarkissian to keep an eye on US ambassador Richard Mills. Former Duma member Alexander Babakov detected the fingers of US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland who had helped engineer the *maidan*. Pro-Putin scientists Sergei Markov said: "The attack on Yerevan was expected…there are probably a lot of fighters from Ukraine among the demonstrators and is being directed from external headquarters and the aim of protest organizers now is bloodshed." Finally, Vladimir Yevsseyev, head of the Caucasus department of the Institute of Post-Soviet States, had no doubt the protests "desire to avenge Russia for the Donbass." Other big names politicians such as Konstantin Kosachev and Leonid Slutsky expressed similar fears. The color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan have ruffled the Russians.

Editorial, 10 July 2015

The high and mighty fretted and fulminated, the punditocracy did its high school turn with compare-and-contrast, and many Armenians wondered: "Is this the beginning of the end for Serge Sarkissian?"

Igor Morozov, member of Russia's legislative upper house, said the Electric Yerevan protests were carbon-copy of the Kiev *maidan*, and would end in a coup if Sarkissian didn't learn a lesson from Ukraine and draw the proper conclusions. Duma's Valery Rishkin advised Sarkissian to keep an eye on US ambassador Richard Mills. Former Duma member Alexander Babakov detected the fingers of US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland who had helped engineer the *maidan*. Pro-Putin scientists Sergei Markov said: "The attack on Yerevan was expected…there are probably a lot of fighters from Ukraine among the demonstrators and is being directed from external headquarters and the aim of protest organizers now is bloodshed." Finally, Vladimir Yevsseyev, head of the Caucasus department of the Institute of Post-Soviet States, had no doubt the protests "desire to avenge Russia for the Donbass." Other big names politicians such as Konstantin Kosachev and Leonid Slutsky expressed similar fears. The color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan have ruffled the Russians.

They were all wrong, although their concern was not difficult to fathom. Armenia, in the words of Kremlin spokesmen is one of the few friends Moscow has in the region. A rare Russian cool head

was Ismail Agakishiyev of the Moscow University. He pointed that the *maidan* and Electric Yerevan were different situations, different relationship and in different economic and social contexts.

After two weeks there was still no evidence of a plot by outsiders or locals being manipulated by anti- Russia forces. Paruyr Hayrikyan and a few anti-Russian Armenians tried to hijack—farcically—the "No to Plunder" protest but they were told to vacate Baghramyan Avenue where the demonstrators had established their base.

From day one the protesters had stressed that they had no hidden agenda. They were not aligned to any political party. They were not anti-Russian or pro-West. They became angry when the Russian media drew parallels between the protests and *maidan*. They repeated they were merely protesting the untenable electricity price hike. Sarkissian, an old fox, played the game well, except for one stumble. Aware that everyone was watching, he restrained the police, particularly the voluble and quick-to-the-trigger Vladimir Gasparyan, head of Armenia's police and his deputy Valery Osipyan. The Sarkisssian mistake? He promised the state would subsidize the hike for needy families pending an audit. The callow "solution" was dismissed by the protestors: wasn't the state budget the result of taxes? It certainly isn't Sarkissian private kitty.

The Russian-owned Electric Networks of Armenia will be investigated and there will be an audit by international experts, Sarkissian said. Corruption, nepotism, excessive salaries and expense accounts, perquisites of the company executives will be investigated. As if he didn't know that these were par for the course in a state where the government has more holes than a slab of Swiss cheese. Sarkissian was doing his usual imitation of the shady Capt. Renault in "Casabalanca" who was "shocked! Shocked!" by the gambling going on at Rick's *Café Americain*.

At the end of two weeks the protestors, many of them professionals, went home. They had made their point. Even if they wanted to achieve more they couldn't because "No to Plunder" was unplanned. They had no leaders, structure, mechanism or funds. They were also painfully unqualified to run any country. Some had to return to work or to school. And they were exhausted.

But despite their "weaknesses", they grabbed more attention and international media limelight than the several mass rallies organized by the opposition parties in the past few years which had attracted as many as 10,000 people. Those rallies were "tainted" because they were organized by pols that had lost the confidence of the people. As well, they were mostly attended by pensioners who are nostalgic for the Soviet welfare state. Electric Yerevan participants, who demanded an end to the looting of Armenia, were young, often professionals, and savvy about politics. They are the tomorrow of Armenia. Electric Yerevan electrified the country for nearly two weeks. Clubs, bars, cafes and stores shut off their lights and put up signs in support.

Sarkissian was lucky this time. What about next time, and the one after? Political analyst Ruben Mehrabian of Armenian Centre for National and International Studies was to the point: "The post-Soviet system of vertical corruption does not work anymore." Homo Sovieticus Sarkissian is

yesterday's man in capitalist-oligarchic suit. His days and that of the 40 to 50 oligarchic families, who are choking their countrymen and threatening the very existence of Armenia, will have their hands full next time. The hike is a symptom of what's wrong with Armenian governance. There are thousands of such daily injustices being inflicted upon the hard-pressed (30% poverty and GDP per capita of $3,500 annually) populace. The hike was a demonstration of the government's institutionalized corruption and greed. It's just one example of the lack of transparency and accountability in the republic.

Apparently, Sarkissian and his oligarch acolytes live with the "after me, the deluge" motto. The deluge might arrive sooner than they anticipate. An observer quoted 19th century Russian writer Alexander Herzen's words: "Activists operate on the principle of 'we are not doctors, we are pain.'" The next wave of protestors might replace the "No to Plunder" signs with "Throw the Bums Out" signs, and have the desperate population behind them. As the song says: "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose."