GOODBYE PREZ. SARGSYAN; HELLO PM SARGSYAN

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Editorial, 6 October 2015

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If you are President Serzh Sargsyan you decide to amend the country's Constitution to make it more "democratic".

Why the sudden concern in democracy when throughout your two terms you've had less than passing interest in the rule of law? Why the interest in democracy when you and your fellow oligarchs have stomped over people's rights and bilked them as a birth right? Why a concern in democracy when your gangster buddies resort to violence at the drop of a black leather jacket?

Take Ruben Hayrapetyan (Nemetz Rubo) —please. The poster child of the oligarchy's contempt of law has made a habit of using muscle and bullets to have his way. And more than once he has walked away with impunity.

Last August Hayrapetyan beat and abducted Arsen Avetisian, majority shareholder and CEO of the defunct Air Armenia. Avetisian suffered a broken nose and other injuries. In 2012 Hayrapetyan beat up a doctor working for the Pyunik football club which is controlled by Ruben the Fist. Last year he verbally and physically attacked a Pyunik player. Three years ago, at Yerevan's Harsnakar restaurant

(owned by the Hayrapetyan family), the oligarch's "body guards" beat an army medic (Vahe Avetyan) to death. Two years ago, another goon and friend of President Sargsyan, Syunik Governor Suren Khachatryan (known as Liska) killed Avedik Budaghyan. Prosecutor Gevork Kostanyan, shuffled the decks, and the killer went unpunished. Incidentally, Hayrapetyan is the head of the Football Federation of Armenia and a heavyweight at Sargsyan's ruling Republican Party. On Sept. 21, veteran Smbat Hagobyan of the Hayazn (Defenders Alliance) was severely beaten by an unknown gang in downtown Yerevan following an anti-Sargsyan rally. He suffered a fractured bone, scalp and soft tissue injuries, in addition to a broken nose.

Levon Zurabyan, leader of the Armenian National Congress—an opposition party—says the president's plan to amend the Constitution is designed to extend the president's reign. Zurabyan's accusation is credible. A key component of the amendment will reduce the power of the president to nothing more than a ceremonial level and boost that of the prime minister to the apex of the state. During his two terms, Sargsyan has ruled with an iron fist. Now that he is approaching the end of his second term—he can't run for a third term—slippery Sargsyan intends to diminish the power of the president and transform himself through convoluted rule changes into…a newly-minted PRIME MINISTER. A hop from one dais to another. A recycled president. **Capo di capi** by any other name.

The intricate somersaults that Sargsyan has cunningly plotted to legitimize his latest ambition would leave even a jaded international constitutional expert in awe.

According to the polls, conducted by group opposed to the reforms, 60% of Armenian citizens are against the amendment. A referendum is scheduled for Dec. 6 when the citizens will officially express their views. Judging by the corruption, the bribes and threats at election time, it would surprise no one if Sargsyan gets the "yes" vote to his proposal.

That Sargsyan is concerned in a more democratic Armenia is patently false. As another opposition spokesman (Gagik Jhangiryan) said: "In our country the government consecutively isn't formed by the people. It turns out that the main law of the country isn't applied practically. In that case why are you changing it? It isn't a theoretical judgment or a lecture. The Constitution isn't applied also in the economy. The main conclusion is that instead of changing dozens of provisions of the current Constitution, we must apply them: we have never lived according to the current Constitution. We must apply it to see its drawbacks."

To convince his reluctant citizens that his amendments are good for Armenia, Sargsyan has sought the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval from the European Commission for Democracy Through Law, also known as the Venice Commission. The canny president has even approved several suggestions the commission has made. But getting a letter of approval from European experts isn't worth the paper it's written on when the laws—like the ones in the current Constitution—are applied only when they are in Sargsyan's interest.

The president's amendments have the backing of his Republican Party, the Prosperous Party

(established by Sargsyan stooge Dodi Gago), the Armenian Revolutionary Federation… They are opposed by the Armenian National Congress, Heritage Party and several others. But the pro and con political parties are irrelevant. Sargsyan and his Republican Party will have their way… just as dictators Erdogan changed jobs to become president of Turkey and Vladimir Putin “stepped aside” for a term and appointed his puppet Medvedev to “lead” the country. Serjik is in good company.

Armenia's Constitution's Chapter 1, Article 1, says that Armenia is a sovereign, democratic, "socialagan" (սոցիալական) state and that it's governed by the rule of law. It's not sovereign. It's not socialagan (?). It's not governed by the rule of law. And Sargsyan's amendments will not make it democratic.