CAN ARMEN SARKISSIAN SAVE ARMENIA?

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By Kapil Komireddi, Spectator World, 3 January 2022

Armen Sarkissian, the president of Armenia, is incandescent with rage. “Five thousand brave and selfless Armenian soldiers were killed in this war,” he tells me at his office, referring to last year’s conflict with Azerbaijan and Turkey. “There must be accountability for their deaths.”

Sarkissian strikes me as the only Armenian politician whose anger comes with a constructive program of national revival. The man once described by Zbigniew Brzezinski as the “Vaclav Havel of the Caucasus” radiates no grievances against foreign powers. Where other politicians complain endlessly about being abandoned by allies or stabbed by foreign powers, Sarkissian appears to be animated by the cold Naipaulian belief that that “the world is what it is”: nations that are nothing, that allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.

The most remarkable fact about Armenia is that it exists at all. Few countries have survived more suffering through the ages than this tiny Caucasus republic located at the strategic intersection of Europe and Asia. Armenia converted to Christianity in 301 AD, before any other state in the world, and its history ever since has been a chronicle of interminable strife. Competing empires reduced it, in Gibbon’s unforgettable phrase, to a “theatre of perpetual war” for a millennium. The Russians deluged it from above. The Arabs and Persians savaged it from below. And the Turks, having swallowed up all of historic Armenia’s western flank, inaugurated the twentieth century with the slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians.

2020’s war with Azerbaijan and Turkey over Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnically Armenian territory gifted a century ago to Azerbaijan by the Kremlin, has shattered the relative stability that followed Armenia’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The economy, bruised by the pandemic, is crumbling. Blood continues to run on its disputed borders. The national morale is shaken. Tens of thousands of ordinary Armenians are pouring out of the country for opportunities abroad, reviving the tragic tradition of expatriation among a people who have seldom known protracted periods of peace and prosperity in their own land. Armenia’s population is just under three million. Its sprawling global diaspora — a legacy of the genocide perpetrated by Turkey — is thought to exceed twelve million.

In June, Armenia conducted snap parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the activist turned politician who supervised the war effort, was unexpectedly returned to power. But the impression of closure conveyed by the result concealed the deadly divisions coursing through the country. In Yerevan, young men complained bitterly that they had been betrayed by their own leadership. “I kept going with my friends to sign up to fight every day when the war started,” a medical student told me. “Every time, we were told, ‘go home, we are winning.’ It was just a lie meant to fool us and make us think that the government was in control of the situation. We were completely unprepared.”

How do you rebuild a nation devastated by foreign aggression and demoralized by infighting?

"You begin by looking inwards," Sarkissian tells me. "You ask yourself difficult questions and make necessary changes." And one change that is indispensable to healing the national psyche and securing Armenia's future, according to Sarkissian, is constitutional reform. This can seem like an odd fixation, and I was skeptical of Sarkissian's argument until I traveled through Armenia this past summer. The war has exposed not only Armenia's military deficiencies but also the fatal defects in the national charter that governs Armenia's unlikely democracy. The current constitution, written in 2015, was designed to safeguard the interests of individuals, not the prospects of the nation. And unless Armenia can entrench the idea of accountability, create co-equal branches of government and subordinate individuals to institutions, it will remain vulnerable to populism, intrigue and chaos.

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh came unexpectedly, in the early hours of September 27, 2020, when Armenian positions reported heavy shelling from the Azeri side. By the first week of November, Azeri troops were punching into Shushi — the mountainous linchpin of Armenian defense. When Pashinyan agreed last November to cede substantial tracts of territory held by Armenia as part of an armistice mediated by Russia, a mob stormed the prime minister's office fully intending to lynch him. He survived. But the election that followed did not so much heal the national rift as harden it.

Sarkissian has emerged as a unifying father-of-the-nation figure in a land unraveling under the burden of loss and recrimination. For years Armenia's most respected statesman on the international stage, he was elected three years ago to the largely ceremonial presidency. When war broke out, he activated his extensive international connections to drum up support for Armenia. Three separate sources told me that India had come close to airlifting a cache of arms to Armenia. But the war effort was so poorly managed that the administration in Yerevan, operating without a command structure, was unable to figure out how to receive the materiel.

Sarkissian maintains that this period of "national depression" can be converted into an opportunity for a "national revival." To recover and rebuild, however, Armenia would have to eschew its historical habit of searching for "saviors" and assume responsibility for its own future — for no amount of foreign support can revitalize a nation that refuses to utilize its own strengths. "Azerbaijan surpassed us in large measure because it has oil revenues," he tells me one afternoon. "What will be the value of oil in a generation's time? In two generations?"

Sarkissian's belief in the sanctity of self-reliance and striving, his faith in the perfectibility of the self and his contempt for self-pity, are not ideological reflexes. They are beliefs absorbed from his own life. Sarkissian grew up in extreme hardship. He was ten when his father died of cancer. His mother, Zhenya, widowed in youth, worked three jobs to give Sarkissian and his sister, Karine, a semblance of a normal life. The Soviet Union offered no avenue for unconnected individuals to rise above their station. But Sarkissian realized he could be the master of his own destiny the moment he was enrolled at school: "The classroom was the only capitalist space in the Soviet Union," he tells me. "It was pure competition."

And he was so competitive that Soviet grandees showered him with awards and accolades, decorated him with the prestigious Lenin Prize, and even acceded to his request to travel to England in 1984 as part of an exchange program. Sarkissian was taken first to Sussex, where he was expected to spend four months learning English; he mastered the language in two and moved to Cambridge. As a young theoretical physicist, he did research work alongside Stephen Hawking. What he most fondly remembers about his first exposure to the West, however, is the absence of hierarchies in science. The Soviet Union panegyrized the notion of equality; the scientists in England practiced it. The faculty at Cambridge, which included several Nobel laureates, treated Sarkissian as a peer and consulted him as an equal.

After returning home, Sarkissian helped develop an advanced version of the video game Tetris; the fortune it made in the West was pocketed by Soviet officials. When the USSR finally disintegrated, Sarkissian, by then based in the UK, was asked to open the newly independent Armenia's first international mission in London. It was a provisional arrangement. But Sarkissian's flair for diplomacy — he went on to open half a dozen embassies across Europe — earned him enough respect at home that he was invited in 1996 to become Armenia's prime minister. Sarkissian laid the foundations of the country's intelligence services and advanced a radical proposition intended to dissolve old animosities in the solvent of commerce: an oil pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey running through Armenia. His tenure, however, ended before he could sell the idea to his counterparts in Baku and Ankara.

A year into the job, en route to Yerevan from a meeting in Washington, Sarkissian made a quick stop in London to conclude negotiations on an outstanding deal with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The chairman of the bank, Jacques de Larosière, an old friend, was alarmed by the amount of weight Sarkissian had shed since their last meeting. "Armen," de Larosière said, "I will sign this deal only if you get yourself checked up."

The next morning, Sarkissian was diagnosed with advanced cancer. Armenia was newly independent and required stability. So Sarkissian kept the news of his illness to himself and scheduled chemotherapy around his work. One evening, however, he spied his son keeping a watchful eye on him while he received treatment — a scene that instantly exhumed memories of his own harrowing childhood, when he had seen cancer devour his father. Sarkissian immediately made arrangements for a handover. He resigned, moved to London and began intensive therapy.

Upon his recovery, he deployed his skills as a scientist and mathematician to build a lucrative career as a private businessman during the telecoms revolution. He also did stints in between as Armenia's ambassador to the UK — making him one of the longest-serving representatives of any country to London. He returned so frequently to the post that Queen Elizabeth branded him "the champion of all ambassadors."

What makes Sarkissian seem indispensable to many Armenians today is his deft handling of the

Velvet Revolution — an upheaval that ranks second only to the war in the Armenian pantheon of recent political turmoil. In the spring of 2018, hundreds of thousands of protesters poured into the capital. Led by Nikol Pashinyan, then an anti-corruption activist and parliamentarian, they demanded the resignation of Armenia's longtime president, Serzh Sargsyan. Barred by law from a third term, Sargsyan had rewritten the constitution in 2015, transferred executive power to the prime ministership, and engineered his election to the newly empowered office when his presidential term ended in 2018.

The brazenness of the power grab provoked a mass uprising. Everybody expected tanks to roll into the capital, as they had a decade before. It was Sarkissian, according to supporters of the revolution, who averted a massacre. "Without him, we would have had a repeat of 2008, when tanks were brought to the center of Yerevan and ten people were killed," says Arman Babajanyan, an independent lawmaker who participated in the Velvet Revolution.

Sarkissian, sounded out for the presidency in the hope that he would endow an ornamental office with gravitas and dignity, had repeatedly spurned the offer. But the requests intensified — and with them the promise to let him steer Armenia's foreign policy. He relented in 2018. Sworn into office just days before the protests erupted, the new president announced to his staff one morning that he was going for a stroll to Republic Square, the beating heart of the revolution. His advisers and security balked at the idea; they could not protect him from the crowd outside.

"Maintaining peace and preventing violence were my highest obligations to my nation," Sarkissian tells me. "It would have been a cowardly abdication of my duties had I stayed in the palace." Accompanied by a pair of guards, he emerged into streets awash in almost a quarter of a million people. Armenians at home watched in disbelief. Souren Zohrabyan, one of the country's most respected bankers and a fervent early supporter of the revolution, remembers his elderly mother breaking down in tears upon seeing Sarkissian on the television. "This sort of thing just never happened in our history," he says. As Sarkissian inched his way up to Pashinyan, the muted jeers that had greeted Sarkissian intensified into loud cheers.

The Velvet Revolution had sought to uproot an entrenched oligarchic order in a small nation. Its success depended on more than fury on the streets. It required also the assent of power brokers at home and the acquiescence of great powers abroad. If the old guard believed that Sarkissian would protect their interests, they were disappointed. Sarkissian returned to his office and worked the phones. He reached out to the head of the Armenian church, held talks with the Europeans and the Americans, and conducted delicate diplomacy with the Kremlin, which had profound misgivings about uprisings in its backyard.

Sarkissian's aides tell me that the president, frustrated by the *ancien regime*'s refusal to accept reality, threatened to resign if order was not restored before Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, observed each year on April 24. That ultimatum paid off. Sargsyan quit days later, and

Pashinyan was elected to the prime minister's office within a week — all without any loss of life. The Velvet Revolution was not preordained to be peaceful. It was Sarkissian's intervention that kept the peace.

Armenians tell the cautionary tale of the warrior who slays the dragon and then becomes the dragon. Pashinyan, having mobilized the masses against the accumulation of executive powers in the prime minister's office, quietly inherited those powers. The promise of constitutional reform implicit in the revolution he spearheaded has fallen by the wayside. It is too early to call the prime minister an authoritarian — he governs with a legitimate democratic mandate — but even his loyal aides concede that he is inimical to deliberation, allergic to opinions that contradict his own and that he has incrementally concentrated decision making in his own office.

It may well be that Pashinyan is motivated more by the desire to be an effective administrator than by the impulse to drape himself in power. But the practical consequences of Pashinyan's failure to prioritize constitutional reform, and his unwillingness to devolve power to other branches of the government, proved disastrous for Armenia during the war. When I interviewed him last year, Pashinyan described the war to me as an "existential threat" to Armenia. Yet his insistence on being the sole decider of the response to that threat on every front, military to diplomatic, did not serve his country well. His skill at dislodging the old regime did not translate into wartime leadership. A tenacious domestic street fighter, he simply lacked the dexterity to marshal international support for Armenia or negotiate with foreign powers.

Might the outcome have been different, Armenian officials and sympathetic observers abroad wonder, had Pashinyan put forward his nation's most valuable diplomatic asset to press Yerevan's cause at the negotiating table in Russia? Preserving the sovereignty of Armenia, an ancient civilization marooned by covetous powers, has always required a command of statecraft that, not to put too fine a point on it, the prime minister does not possess. As a foreign diplomat in a neighboring country who watches Armenia closely and interacts with its leadership explained to me:

> Pashinyan is an exceptional figure in world politics for what he has achieved in this part of the world. He is sincere and idealistic, but he can be incredibly persistent and stubborn. Sarkissian is in a different league. He's a scientist. He's a capitalist, but he didn't have his fingers in the pie here. He made his fortune by working hard in the West, a Soviet Thatcherite who wants to turn Armenia into the Israel of the Caucasus. He cultivated really strong relationships as a diplomat. With the exception of Erdogan and Aliyev and maybe Imran Khan, he can get a meeting with almost any world leader. For a tiny country, that is a huge asset. He was just not utilized during the war. He tried to do his best — he reached out to everybody — but he was sidelined and constrained within Armenia. The prime minister ran the show. And it was, I am sorry to say, a disaster from start to finish. Sarkissian's office had no real authority. If he had had a say in how the war was run and how the peace was negotiated, I can confidently say that country would not be suffering so much today.

Voters in towns and villages in Armenia lamented to me that their president was not on the ballot at the last election. This perhaps explains the reluctance of Pashinyan, a once assertive leader now submerged in insecurity, to grant greater powers to the presidency via constitutional amendment. Sarkissian, for his part, is maximizing the minuscule authority vested in his office. Between consoling families of the fallen — and of those taken captive by the Azeris — his hours are devoted to forging new relationships abroad and luring innovators and investors to Armenia.

Last autumn, Sarkissian convened the third Summit of Minds, a two-day conference modeled on Davos that drew foreign politicians and business titans to the spa town of Dilijan, as part of his program to turn Armenia into a major destination. A day after the summit, he flew to Saudi Arabia, where he was received with full ceremony by Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the de facto ruler of the kingdom. The visit was made historic by virtue of the not unimportant fact that Saudi Arabia and Armenia do not have diplomatic relations. It was another example of Sarkissian using his extensive personal friendships cultivated as a private businessman to the benefit of his beleaguered country.

Perhaps the only head of state who is also a scientist, Sarkissian has embarked on an ambitious initiative to foster a technological revolution at home. The physical foundations of his plan are being laid just outside Yerevan at Advanced Tomorrow (ATOM), a cyber and scientific innovation hub comparable to Israel's start-up village Yokneam Illit and Bangalore's Electronic City. He spent the winter touring the Middle East, Europe and Asia to sell the idea to heads of state and investors.

Cajoling major IT and tech companies to help develop global centers of mathematical modeling, AI and machine learning inside Armenia has been relatively easy: the Armenian diaspora, one of the most prosperous and influential in the world, has been eager to help. The true difficulty lay in convincing Yerevan to tear down the obstructions that exist purely to create an unfair advantage for Armenia's tiny ruling elite, who preside over a maze of regulations designed to protect them from competition from diaspora Armenians.

Sarkissian's conception of "nation" extends beyond the frontiers of Armenia to encompass the global Armenian community. What is today Armenia was, after all, once marginal to Armenian life, which flourished in lands now held by Turkey. The Armenian identity — its literature, culture, cuisine, lore — was developed outside Armenia. Historically, Armenians built and administered other people's countries for them. Constantinople's most revered architect, for instance, was an Armenian — as was the founder of the Turkish political theater. Today, however, such expertise cannot be put to Armenia's aid. For one of the requirements for service in government is uninterrupted residence in Armenia for several years.

Sarkissian is aghast that all his outreach to draw talent to Armenia is in the end frustrated by "absurd and meaningless regulations." A luminary of the diaspora such as Noubar Afeyan, the founder of Moderna, must spend a minimum of five years living exclusively in Armenia before he can quality for service in the Armenian government. Yerevan would like his vaccines and philanthropy, but not his

skill or service. "Armenia is a small country, but a global nation," Sarkissian tells me. "And this pettiness is depriving future generations of Armenians. It's madness." Opening up the government to the diaspora is among the constitutional reforms Sarkissian is championing.

By convention, changes to the constitution take effect only when a new president is sworn in. Sarkissian has just over three years left in his seven-year term of office. Armenia, by his own admission, cannot afford to wait that long. So is Sarkissian willing to resign in order to expedite the implementation of the reforms? "Being the president of Armenia has been the greatest honor of my life," he says. "But I did not accept this job to feel honored. I accepted it to serve Armenia. And I will not stay in it a second longer if it means impeding Armenia's progress."

Kapil Komireddi is the author of Malevolent Republic: A Short History of the New India.

Comments



Vrej Nersessian – 2022-01-18 14:24:27
The article by Kapil Komireddi "Can Armen Sarkissian save Armenia' the blunt answer is he cannot. From the day Armenia became an independent country he has been part of that country's elite occupying the post of Ambassador, Prime Minister and President. This recent attempt of reimagining, rebranding himself as a credible leader is a shame. It is embarrassing that a political figure whom Zbigniew Brzezinski had named 'Vaclav Havel of the Caucasus'(like Alexander Miyasnikian who was name the 'Lenin of the Caucasus') who had worked with Prof. Stephen Hawking, whom the Queen of England had called 'the champion of all ambassadors' has not received the same accolades from his own people. He was appointed President by Serzh Sargsyan, witnessed the corruption and sleaze,but never once supported the present Prime Minister in his efforts to clean up the corruption. On the contrary being partial to truth, flouting public discontent by scorning the Prime Minister's ability to do so. He has no grievances against foreign powers because his inactivity as ambassador,Prime Minister and now President were all self-serving opportunities which he fully exploited. No country in the world allows a person holding double citizenship to put his name forward for election for Prime Minister or President.