

OPPOSITION NO THREAT TO PASHINYAN

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Karen Mkrthchyan, Yerevan, 17 July 2020

A recent Armenia poll shows Nikol Pashinyan does not enjoy the same popularity as he did during the "Velvet Revolution" of 2018 or during the Parliamentary elections that followed. While the expected decline in popularity may be bad news for Pashinyan, he can find solace in the fact that the opposition parties pose little challenge to his government.

It has been two years since Pashinyan became prime minister. While two years may be long enough for people to expect fundamental changes from Pashinyan, it is too soon for them to forget the years of corruption, plunder, and the gag-rule of the former regime. The Republican Party, led by Serzh Sargsyan, is too discredited to challenge the government. While the euphoria around Pashinyan may have subsided, people are still jubilant that they have finally gotten rid of the prolonged oligarchic mafia rule of the Republican Party. To the people, anyone is better than them. The Republican Party has no chance of returning to power and any attempt to form a united opposition to Pashinyan's government will fail because it would be rejected by the public. Such has been the fate of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)-Dashnaktutyun. Rejected by voters in previous elections for its dubious deals with the Republican Party and for twice forming a coalition with them plus its murky past will be remembered by the public whenever the ARF criticizes Pashinyan.

Rather than attempt to better its image as an extra-parliamentary opposition, the ARF have continued to get into bed with the same unpopular forces to launch attacks against the government and the parliamentary opposition. In a miscalculated move, the Dashnaks have expressed support for former President Robert Kocharyan who has been charged with overthrowing constitutional order related to the events of March 2008. In 2018, in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, ARF leader Hrant Markarian did not rule out cooperating with Kocharyan should the former president decide to return to politics. This is not surprising, as ARF had been a part of Kocharyan's coalition government. ARF's role in the Sargsyan's coalition has not been forgotten either.

To make matters worse, certain ARF leaders were among the first to join Vazgen Manukyan's public-political club "Vernatun", created to form a united front against Pashinyan's government. Manukyan is the president of the National Democratic Union, once a prominent political party that held seats in the parliament from 1995 to 2003. Manukyan also served as Armenia's first prime minister in 1990-1991 as well as defense minister in 1992-1993. He was removed as chairman of the Public Council of Armenia following allegations of political bias, prompting him to start a campaign against Pashinyan. Joining ARF at Manukyan's Vernatun were leaders from the Republican Party as well as Viktor Soghomonyan, chief of office of Kocharyan, among others. Dashnaktutyun's eagerness to support Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the largest parliamentary opposition (Prosperous Armenia), despite accusations of corruption and vote-buying by Tsarukyan, have gained it even more negative publicity and hurt its chances of making a political comeback. Their anti-government declaration,

made jointly with Arthur Vanetsyan's "Hayreniq" (Homeland) and Arthur Ghazinyan's "Mek Hayastan" (One Armenia) political parties have not gone unnoticed either.

Arthur Vanetsyan is perhaps Pashinyan's biggest regret. Having made head of National Security Service of Armenia by Pashinyan and President of Armenian Football Federation, Vanetsyan was one of the most popular faces of Pashinyan's government and enjoyed immense popularity. His subsequent fallout with Pashinyan made him the poster-boy of the anti-Pashinyan camp, resulting in the formation of his political party. Other than the spread of propaganda and misinformation, Vanetsyan, without a strong team, comes across as a one-man army and poses no serious threat to Pashinyan. He is the beast of Pashinyan's own making who eventually fade into oblivion.

Other prominent political party leaders who once enjoyed great popularity have long ago faded away. First President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Pashinyan's former mentor, doesn't have any political standing. His political outfit, the National Congress, has failed to find a charismatic leader to draw crowds after Pashinyan's exit from the party. The Heritage Party has also faded away.

The newly-formed National-Democratic Axis hopes to appeal to the nationalism of the public, but without a clear-cut roadmap and with lack of ideas that would resonate with the populace, its chances of making progress seem dismal. Among them are members of the Sasna Tsrer group. Their failure to get a substantial percentage of the votes in the parliamentary elections shows they have failed to retain the support they enjoyed when they undertook the armed occupation of a police Station in Yerevan in 2016. The anti-Russian stance and ultra-nationalistic rhetoric of some of its members have not resonated with young voters.

Parliamentary opposition is comprised of two parties--Gagik Tsarukyan's Prosperous Armenia and the Bright Armenia Party led by Pashinyan's former opposition colleague Edmon Marukyan. While Prosperous Armenia is a remnant of the former political order and a coalition partner of the former regime, Bright Armenia has failed to explain its position to the citizens who expect to see a clear pro-Pashinyan or anti-Pashinyan position. Marukyan offers neither, claiming to keep his party out of either camp. In the largely-polarized political arena, Bright Armenia's position on matters concerning Pashinyan on one hand and Sargsyan-Kocharyan-Vanetsyan on the other have left many unhappy, accusing the party of looking for a "third path", as it had done during the days of the "revolution". Marukyan's decision to be in opposition to Pashinyan's government, despite having worked together in the former "YELQ" block against the former regime, hasn't gone down well with Pashinyan's supporters. Bright Armenia's refusal to join the united opposition against Pashinyan, as well as continuous criticism of some of Pashinyan's policies have resulted in the party gaining support from neither of the two camps. Yet, it has been the only party that has on several occasions claimed to form the next government after Pashinyan. Without an ideology-based political agenda, Bright Armenia will have a difficult time explaining its position to voters who accuse it of being anti-Pashinyan when the party is critical of the government, as well as a "pocket opposition" when it refuses to join the united attacks against Pashinyan.

Prosperous Armenia, led by oligarch Tsarukyan is the largest political opposition in the National Assembly. Of late, the party has been at the centre of attention after its leader, accused of vote-buying and fraud, called for the resignation of the government for mismanaging the pandemic. With several of his colleagues and associates arrested, Tsarukyan, who was stripped of his diplomatic immunity by the National Assembly but was able to evade arrest, is facing charges that can put behind bars if he is found guilty. With his record of collaboration with the former criminal regime, Tsarukyan--the only major oligarch in politics--cannot mount enough popular support to topple Pashinyan. Secretary-General of Prosperous Armenia Party Naira Zohrabyan's recent jibe against Diaspora Armenians has angered Armenians in Armenia and the Diaspora further alienating the already ailing party. Her subsequent attempt at damage control has not yielded substantial results.

With the recent cowardly attacks on Armenian territory by Azerbaijan, one can perhaps find solace in the fact that the Armenian opposition parties have joined the government in forming a united front against Azeri aggression and are using their local means and international connections in fighting Azeri propaganda.

Whatever the political differences at home, when it comes to defending the motherland, everyone--regardless of political or religious orientation--must unite with the government. The government and the opposition have successfully displayed that.

Even though the opposition parties do not pose serious immediate threat to Pashinyan's government, he should not take his supporters for granted.

There are no comments yet.