

SERZH SARGSYAN - ARMENIA'S APRIL FOOL?

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By Bruce Tasker, Yerevan, 20 December 2009

Armenia's political infighting moves up a gear, as international pressure increases on the Sargsyan / Nalbandian team to sign on to the 'Karabakh Deal'. 

Throughout the past two years I have repeatedly forecast that Kocharian will be awaiting the moment to pounce on his Karabakhi comrade Serzh Sargsyan. That process is now well under way, in Armenia and throughout the Diaspora, with Kocharian's political allies jockeying for position and with the Kocharian and Sargsyan commercial powerhouses already at each others throats.

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Kocharian has always understood that Sargsyan would be under pressure as he struggled to resolve the Karabakh problem, but combined with the untimely Armenian / Turkish reconciliation process the pressure has become intolerable and Sargsyan's position appears to be worsening by the day.

Kocharian intends to keep the pressure building, as the protocols move along the rocky road to ratification, knowing that despite the Sargsyan / Nalbandian rhetoric, the Armenian / Turkish reconciliation process and Karabakh are inherently inter-related. Sargsyan is increasingly aware that the moment he puts his pen to the Minsk Group paper, not only will domestic and Diaspora Armenian outrage grow, but State Department smiles will turn to smirks, together with those of the European Union, OSCE, Azerbaijan, Turkey and most importantly, Russia. ***The international community will drop Sargsyan in favor of Kocharian.***

Kocharian's domestic anti-Sargsyan thrust comes predominantly from Gagik Tsarukian's Prosperous Party, already raising yellow flags against Sargsyan in Parliament, whilst Gagik himself is head to head with Sargsyan's oligarchs. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) or Dashnaktsutjun Party is close behind, purporting to represent a new hope for Armenia, but in practice raising Kocharian's prospects by chipping away at Sargsyan in Armenia and throughout the Diaspora. Kocharian personally chooses to humiliate Sargsyan at every opportunity, including jetting around in the Presidential airplane and holding up state business whilst Sargsyan's Prime Minister waits for hours on the Zvartnots tarmac. Sargsyan has rightfully become the brunt of Dashnak criticism, but it was Kocharian who fabricated Armenia's economic boom, illicitly stripping Armenia of most of its billions of dollars worth of state assets in the process and it is Kocharian who is responsible for most

of Armenia's present day problems. Kocharian came to power with Dashnaksutsiun support and the party stayed with him throughout his ten year tenure, knowing the Republic was destined for economic collapse and political turmoil. ***Kocharian deserves the major part of the blame, but he goes untouched by the Dashnaks.***

The US has given Sargsyan until March 2010 to reach agreement with Azerbaijan on Karabakh; conveniently accommodating a time window to save the Armenian / Turkish protocols before Armenia's next April 24th genocide day and importantly, to again relieve Obama from US Presidential recognition of the Armenian genocide. Sargsyan and Nalbandian recently claimed their efforts to reach agreement on Karabakh as a tremendous foreign affairs achievement, based on the 'Madrid Principles'. Then, realizing that Armenians will no longer swallow his repeated deception; realizing that Armenians will no longer fall for more of his nonsensical '***no-preconditions***' jargon, the Sargsyan strategy moved in yet another direction. He now insists he will never capitulate on Karabakh, and his MFA Nalbandian goes even further stating: '***The Karabakh issue is an absolute non-starter for Armenia***'.

Sargsyan will draw out the Karabakh issue to the very last moment, pressing for more and more compensation, but increasingly aware of growing Armenian outrage and the impending turn around by his international friends. He is also becoming increasingly aware that he may never see the lion's share of the ever-growing compensation package he is demanding. Each passing day without resolution of the Turkish and Azerbaijani issues represents a greater threat to Sargsyan's authority. The time may well come when he could decide his only option is to renege on his highly priced (and in many cases already paid for - WB/IMF/ADB) Karabakh resolution promises, and by consequence terminate the Armenian / Turkish reconciliation process. He would then become a national hero, but at the cost of facing an all-out onslaught from the Kocharian camp, supported by an angered international community, especially the US, the EU and Russia, who irrespective of their official lines, would each blame Sargsyan for the breakdown.

On the home front, as Sargsyan juggles with his Turkish and Azerbaijani headaches, determined to burden Armenia with as many credits and other costly commitments as possible, the Armenian state system is in complete tatters. The budget coffers have been empty for months, but the Sargsyan and Kocharian oligarchs continue their tax-free businesses as usual, now supported by multi-million dollar WB/IMF-backed state handouts to help them through Armenia's deepening economic crisis. Conversely, the less well connected 'small and medium business enterprise' sector, hit hardest by the recession, is being pressured by the tax authorities to take on onerous WB/IMF-backed bank loans to pay for months of up-front tax payments. Billions of Dollars of international loans to Armenia's illegitimate regime will do little to resolve Armenia's financial crisis – ***They will make the crisis worse and burden Armenia with massive external debt.***

Levon Ter-Petrossian has stated that his Congress would reactivate as soon as Kocharian makes his move to return to Armenian politics. He has also seen the warning signs and knowing that Sargsyan

has essentially been doing little more than trying to best play the losing hand passed on to him by his predecessor; and knowing that Kocharian is the greatest threat to a hopeful future for Armenia; he has implied cooperation with the Sargsyan camp. That LTP olive branch would not have been extended without LTP and Sargsyan having reached a reasonable level of understanding; an indication the action is decidedly heating up.

April 2010 will be critical for Armenia, irrespective of which way Sargsyan eventually decides to move. But with the lack of an alternative option, the Sargsyan / LTP partnership, although a bitter pill to swallow, would inevitably be far better than a third term Kocharian presidency and total dominance of his Karabakhi clan over Armenia.

Bruce Tasker

Armenian Parliamentary Expert (2004)

A Brit in resident Armenia since 1994

Still 'Blowing the World Bank Whistle'

