

# WHEN PEOPLE ARE FED UP

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[Policy Forum Armenia](#), 25 July 2016

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In a written statement, the attackers—political activists and “freedom fighters” from the war in Artsakh (Armenian for Nagorno Karabagh) calling themselves the “Daredevils of Sassoon” per a medieval Armenian heroic epic poem—mentioned that they were left without options to channel dissatisfaction with the handling of the country’s affairs and achieve a meaningful change in the country’s governance. Every single nation-wide election in Armenia since 1991 has been considered fraudulent by independent observers, with the one in 2008 leading to 10 deaths of protesters daring to question the outcome. Policy Forum Armenia’s research since 2008 confirms this.

Demands of the gunmen are straightforward: (1) release of all political prisoners, including their leader Jirayr Sefilian (Lebanese-born highly decorated field commander of the first Artsakh war) and (2) resignation of Serge Sargsyan and his regime.

The statement issued by the Presidential palace on the 5th day of the events in response to these demands read much like an ultimatum of someone, who has difficulties grasping the new reality on the ground. It essentially said to the gunmen: “Lay down your arms and you will be tried by the country’s laws and Constitution.” Although some senior members of the junior coalition partner and a key Sargsyan ally in suppressing Diaspora dissent—the socialist ARF-Dashnaktsutyun—criticized the use of force by the group, few took them seriously, coming from a party that has been charged by an Armenian court for preparing to assassinate country’s first (and only) legitimately elected

president in 1993.

International response to the police compound takeover has been strong. Both the US and the EU condemned the use of force by the attackers while at the same time calling on the regime to exercise restraint in handling the situation. The Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the takeover of the police base and called on the authorities to “unblock the situation as soon as possible, release the hostages, carry out a full investigation of the incident and punish the responsible persons”.

In the meantime, the public support for the gunmen has been gaining momentum despite the regime's intimidation tactics, mass arrests, and use of force. A committee has been created—consisting of opposition politicians and independent intellectuals—to coordinate the activities of protesters in coordination with the attackers (who have cut a deal with the police to have communication with the rest of the world). The outpouring of support from Diaspora communities—largely spearheaded by the Armenian Renaissance network—continues, with rallies (albeit still small) held in some cities abroad. This is turning into a significant challenge for Sargsyan (and his ARF propagandists), something that he cannot easily resolve without putting his political career and/or life on the line.

The regime has moved full force—including using tear gas, stun grenades, and hundreds of plainclothes officers—to suppress the protests that erupted in Yerevan. Over 200 activists are reportedly in police custody following the clashes with riot police and protesters on July 20. The leader of the Founding Parliament (FP), the political wing of the “Daredevils of Sassoon”, is in hiding with a case pending against him. Another senior member of the FP, Garo [Yeghukyan](#), has been arrested and charged with aiding the gunmen. The Transparency International Armenian Anti-corruption center has asked for a cease of all foreign funding to the Armenian police amid evidence of serious abuse of power and brutality.

Events in Yerevan demonstrated a clear disconnect between the rhetoric of Serge Sargsyan's administration and the reality on the ground. The disastrous economic and social policies conducted by Sargsyan administration (which nevertheless made a few on the top very wealthy) and constant promises for political reform followed by a series of fraudulent nation-wide elections, altogether fueling the belief that nothing can be changed in Armenia via political discourse. Moreover, the dissatisfaction with the handling of economic and political affairs of the country (which are seen as the main factors behind Armenia's crippling emigration) was recently exacerbated by the discovery of massive embezzlement of funding within armed forces during the 4-day war with rival Azerbaijan in April (which ended with minor territorial losses for the Armenian side), creating a serious dissatisfaction with the regime's handling of nation-wide affairs.

The events also revealed an apparent disconnect between the army and police in Armenia. The former has been increasingly nervous about the Russia-orchestrated plan to hand over the territory liberated by Armenia in the 1991-94 war back to Azerbaijan (as issue mentioned repeatedly by the

gunmen in their statement), in what is widely believed an attempt by president Putin to lure Azerbaijan into the Eurasian Economic Union. The police, on the other hand, is believed to be primarily concerned about the growing internal instability and continues to remain loyal to the Sargsyan regime, which has provided them with all perks, including overblown size, relatively high and stable salaries, and ability to go unpunished for rampant abuse and (highly profitable business of) covering up corruption by high-ranking officials, among other misdeeds.

### **In Conclusion...**

In his endorsement of Policy Forum Armenia's report on "Corruption in Armenia", Daron Acemoglu—the Elizabeth and James Killian Professor of Economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recipient of the Bates Clark medal in Economics, and author of "Why Nations Fail: Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty"—said:

"Some say that Armenia is doomed to fail economically because of its geography or location in the world. But like so many other countries around the world and throughout history, its failure is due to corruption, unscrupulous politicians and weak institutions. It's not lack of opportunities but squandered opportunities that are at the root of Armenia's ills, and it can make progress only by confronting this fact and holding accountable those responsible for the failures."

Armenians have not had their Bastille—they have been too busy confronting external enemies for pretty much as long as they existed, without paying much attention to the enemy from within. This might just be their chance to have it, a chance to break the vicious cycle of squandered opportunities and the continuous fall into oblivion by standing tall and calling for better governance and independence from a foreign rule.

Regardless of whether or not these events will directly bring about a political change in Armenia, one thing is clear: maintaining the status quo in Armenia for Serge Sargsyan and his Diaspora partners will be next to impossible. The 30-odd heavily armed and experienced fighters surrounded by thousands of sympathetic civilians in downtown Yerevan are unlikely to go away (without creating a mayhem for the Sargsyan regime) and may just become the trigger for both political and foreign policy reform that citizens of Armenia have been longing for.

*Mr. Yeghukian is also an Executive Board member of Policy Forum Armenia.*

