

International Crisis Group Armenia: Picking up the Pieces

Armenia's flawed presidential election, the subsequent lethal crackdown against a peaceful protest rally, the introduction of a state of emergency and extensive arrests of opposition supporters have brought the country to its deepest crisis since the war against Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh ended in 1994. The situation deprives Serzh Sarkisian, scheduled to be inaugurated as president on 9 April 2008, of badly needed legitimacy and handicaps prospects for much needed democratic reform and resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict alike. Unless the U.S., EU and others with significant diplomatic leverage over the regime in Yerevan exert pressure, Armenia is unlikely to make progress on either. The Sarkisian administration must urgently seek credible dialogue with the opposition, release prisoners detained on political grounds, stop arrests and harassment of the opposition and lift all measures limiting freedom of assembly and expression. Unless steps are taken to address the political crisis, the U.S. and EU should suspend foreign aid and put on hold negotiations on further and closer cooperation.

On 1 March 2008, police and security troops broke up a peaceful demonstration that had been going on continuously in Yerevan's Liberty Square to protest the announced official result of the 19 February presidential election. Clashes with demonstrators intensified later in the day, and the violence, involving firearms, arson and looting, left seven civilians and one police officer dead. More than 450 people were reportedly injured, including several dozen police and troops.

Outgoing President Robert Kocharian reacted by declaring a sweeping twenty-day state of emergency, which suspended many basic civil rights and temporarily banned independent media reporting. The authorities used the claim that an attempt, involving a vague "international conspiracy", had been made to topple the government as justification for arresting over 100 opposition figures. Though the state of emergency was officially lifted on 21 March, President Kocharian signed a new law into effect four days earlier placing new controls on political manifestations.

Sarkisian, prime minister since 2007, is Kocharian's hand-picked successor, but questions about his election and its violent aftermath will undermine his authority. The 19 February election was marred by serious irregularities, and the subsequent use of excessive force and wide arrests by the authorities has caused a deep rift in society. Unless opposition figures are freed, dialogue resumed and justice pursued, this division will deepen.

Armenia's democracy has in most respects been in retreat for over a decade. Some constitutional and legal reforms have been undertaken, but they are mostly formalistic and the exception. The rule has been flawed elections, concentration of power in the hands of the executive, an army and security services which enjoy virtual impunity, a court system subservient to and manipulated by the gov-

ernment, and increased government censorship and control of key media outlets. Though the economy has performed relatively well and poverty has decreased, corruption and cronyism still seriously restrict sustainable, equitable growth.

Armenia needs to address the electoral violence as well as more fundamental questions regarding the country's governance. If the incoming presidency takes the right course, the EU and U.S. need to help foster reconciliation and deeper institutional reform. Their reaction to the flawed election and lethal crackdown, however, has been inadequate. The international community needs to send a stronger message to ensure that Armenia remains a democratic state, with a functional opposition that does not live in fear, and where basic human rights, including the right to freedom of assembly and expression, are guaranteed.

To avoid a crisis of legitimacy and the concomitant political instability, the Armenian authorities should:

- release persons detained due to their political activity and cease arrests and threats against the opposition, including against the runner-up in the 19 February election, former President Levon Ter-Petrosian;

- authorise an independent investigation, with international participation, into the 1 March violence and follow through on the pledge to punish police officers who illegally used weapons against civilians;

- revoke the amendments to the law on freedom of assembly adopted during the emergency rule and allow peaceful protests in locations where they will not cause a threat to public order;

- lift remaining media restrictions and refrain from new restrictions on the media or access to the internet;

- investigate claims of violence and attacks against political party vote monitors at polling stations and initiate criminal proceedings against perpetrators; and

- pursue a credible dialogue process with the opposition in an effort to lower political tensions.

To defuse tensions, the Armenian opposition should:

- agree immediately and without preconditions to enter into dialogue with the government;

- impress upon supporters that protests which aim to stir unrest, such as blockading government buildings and impeding the work of government ministries, will not be condoned; and

- appeal the Constitutional Court's decision on the elections to the European Court of Human Rights and consider the same course with respect to other court decisions when all domestic remedies are exhausted.

To facilitate a way out of the impasse, the EU and U.S. should:

- encourage all major Armenian political forces to engage in direct negotiations to find ways to defuse tensions and speed reconciliation; and

- deliver clear messages to the Sarkisian administration that business

Letters To The Editor

Genocide Denial - U.S. Policy Stamped In Blood

In April 2006, I encountered Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in an Alexandria, VA restaurant. I approached Dr. Rice who was accompanied by First Lady Laura Bush and a secret service cadre. As I shook her hand, I broached the subject of genocide by commenting on my family's support of action in Darfur. She replied, "I have been there." Moving to the topic of the Armenian Genocide, I told her I was in Washington to urge my congressional delegation's support of a reaffirmation of the Armenian Genocide — a horrific event every American Armenian connects to. She simply stared back at me - and, without further comment, departed.

This February, I was again in Washington to promote Genocide reaffirmation. I met with first-term Colorado Congressman, Doug Lamborn. Mr. Lamborn, a former Colorado State Representative, had cosponsored a state resolution supporting Genocide recognition. As CO District 5 Representative, he cosponsored H. Res.106 in February 2007. However, that October, he withdrew his name. I wanted to know why!

During my meeting with Representative Lamborn, he told me he had rejected multiple State Department attempts to persuade him to withdraw from H. Res.106 because he understood the historical facts of the event. The turn came with an unsolicited call from General David Petraeus. He told Representative Lamborn that his support of the Armenian Genocide resolution threatened the safety of our troops in Iraq because of Turkey's view of this sensitive political issue.

When I heard Mr. Lamborn's explanation, I was stunned. All I could think was how could this happen in America — a country once viewed around the world as a beacon of moral justice. That America had actively and officially assisted my great grandmother Haiganoosh sue the Ottoman Empire for its government directed murder of her husband. My great grandfather, Dr. Nahabed Abdalian, an American educated medical doctor, ordained minister, and naturalized

American citizen was murdered by Turkish gendarmes in Gurin, Turkey. In 1897, the U.S. Consulate in Sivas completed its investigation of his murder and provided an official recounting to the U.S. State Department and my great grandmother. (UCLA Professor Richard Hovannisian obtained a microfiche copy of this handwritten document and Tufts Professor Lucy Der Manuelian assisted me in its transcription.)

This present-day official Genocide denial policy (i.e. use every word but genocide) is our community's legacy initiated by President George Herbert Walker Bush. The slippery slope was strengthened and reaffirmed by President William Jefferson Clinton who personally intervened to subvert passage of a House Genocide reaffirmation resolution. President George Walker Bush has grown genocide denial into an Administration-wide policy, aided by the sheepish compliance of our 110th Congress. As my own experience confirms, President Bush's denial zeal has permeated into every pore of government — even reaching into the highest levels of our traditionally non-partisan military command. Another consequence of his proactive denial is the currently diminished Administration-proposed financial support package for the blockaded Republic of Armenia.

While both parties have been complicit in denigrating the first Genocide of the 20th Century, a change of course could come with our 2008 Presidential election. Senators Clinton and Obama have pledged to reaffirm the Armenian Genocide (Senator McCain would presumably maintain the current policy of denial). I would urge every American-Armenian to reflect on our presidential history of Genocide denial as they cast their vote this November.

And should our next President come to office with a pledged policy of Genocide reaffirmation, it is our community's duty to our history to press for that commitment to be honored.

Pamela Barsam Brown
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Correction

Editor:

I was surprised to see my name in a lengthy, rambling letter by Harout Bronozian, published in the March 29 issue of Massis.

While I respect everyone's right to have their own political opinion, I find it unacceptable that falsehoods and insults are used to make a personal point. As they say in Armenian, "hayhoyanke pasdi sov e."

Bronozian is wrong when he writes: "Harut Sassounian's Lincy Foundation was another organization that quickly congratulated Sargsyan." First of all, The Lincy Foundation is not mine. It does not belong to me. I am just an employee there. Secondly, The Lincy

Foundation, as a non-profit, does not get involved in political issues. No message was sent in the name of The Lincy Foundation.

Finally, Bronozian writes "One wonders what Sassounian will get in return?" I would like to state that, contrary to Bronozian's insinuations, I have no interest in getting anything from anyone. I resent Bronozian's innuendo.

Bronozian is well advised to stick to expressing his own opinion rather than making false and insulting accusations about others.

Sincerely,

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Publisher,
The California Courier

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