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The ‘revolution of millionaires’ in Armenia is turning increasingly tense

Tuesday 6 September 2022, by [KHUDOYAN Knar](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2022).

A new protest movement over the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh has a lot in common with Armenia’s “old regime”

“The sultan wants to annihilate us / Arise, my child, I beseech you.”

These are the lyrics from a 19th century song that recalls Armenian militia fighting against the mass murders of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Today, the words have been dusted off and [remixed](#) to support Armenian protesters demanding the resignation of the country’s prime minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The protesters, waving the flags of Armenia and the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, follow a white pickup truck through Yerevan’s central streets, shouting “Armenia without Nikol” and “Nikol is a traitor”. Led by youthful protesters at the front, they often wear black T-shirts with crosses on them, serving as a reminder of camouflage fatigues worn by Armenian soldiers during fighting against Azerbaijan.

Now a month old, the protests began when two opposition parties, led by former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, left parliament and took to the streets on 27 April in protest at Pashinyan’s ongoing peace negotiations with Azerbaijan and [opening the border with Turkey](#).

Protest leaders have repeatedly warned the Armenian public that Pashinyan, if not overthrown, will concede Karabakh Armenians’ right to self-determination in the negotiations with Azerbaijan, and that Turkey could refuse to recognise the Armenian Genocide as part of the ‘normalisation’ talks with Armenia.

Pashinyan appeared to [raise the possibility of concessions](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh in April, saying that “today the international community tells us again: ‘Lower your benchmark on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh a little’.” Yet protest leaders have not offered an alternative for Armenia’s foreign policy, instead leaving these questions to the temporary government which will follow if their campaign succeeds.

Anthropologist Aghasi Tadevosyan told openDemocracy the current protest movement is the most aggressive he has seen in the country – but is also identified with the country’s “old guard” and their cronies, leading some to dub it ‘the revolution of millionaires’.

“People surely have concerns about the fate of Karabakh, but the fear of ‘return of the old’ is bigger,” Tadevosyan said.

Elites vs the people

In their attempt to force him out of power, protesters have used the civil disobedience tactics of Pashinyan himself, who came to power in the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

Four years ago, opposition MP Pashinyan [organised](#) a city-wide campaign of blocking transport and roads in Yerevan, which eventually helped him dislodge Sargsyan from power. But since Armenia's defeat in the 2020 Karabakh War, Pashinyan's government has [come under fire for its weakness in handling the conflict](#). In response to the defeat by Azerbaijan, hundreds of people demonstrated in central Yerevan over the government's failures, even breaking into parliament buildings.

This time, protesters' efforts at blocking traffic are sporadic and have not paralysed the city like in 2018. Rather, the protesters have created traffic problems in the gentrified city centre with few alternative roads to the suburbs.

But after a month of protests, why has it proved unsuccessful? According to independent observers, the daily average number of participants is around 3,000-5,000, while protesters claim the rally gets about 50,000 attendees daily and is growing.

On the street, several protesters explained the protests' lack of popularity by virtue of the Armenian people not being "awake", and therefore unaware of the danger that Pashinyan poses to the country.

"The uneducated part of society, unfortunately, is very large and they get cheated by [Pashinyan's] propaganda machine," said lawyer Taguhi Hovhannisyan, who I spoke to near a rally outside the president's residence, in Yerevan on 25 May.

When I asked Hovhannisyan about the role of former presidents Sargsyan and Kocharyan – leading representatives of the country's old system of power, the Republican Party – in the protest campaign, she said she was not against them.

"This is not about individuals," said Hovhannisyan, as protesters stop to perform a national dance – and a man hangs a flag of Nagorno-Karabakh to the front gate of the presidential residence. "The return of the old regime is not as bad as losing our republic to Turkey's expansion."

On some days, the city police have detained between 200 and 400 protesters on charges of disobeying a lawful order from an officer, public swearing or hooliganism. Most detainees have been released within hours.

"This is the first ever protest where differing opinions are not only not welcome, but might encounter verbal or even physical violence. People are genuinely afraid"

"Nikol doesn't think about the nation, only about human rights," Artashes Hakobyan complained, suggesting 'human rights' are a foreign concept to Armenia. Hakobyan is a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, one of the country's oldest political parties, which has previously cooperated with the Republican Party.

"If the border with Turkey opens, it will kill the Armenian economy," said Artashes, arguing against Pashinyan's negotiations with Turkey to open the border. "Turkish employers will surely offer a higher salary, and Armenian labourers will prefer to work for them. It's the law of the market."

The protesters have also focused on surrounding the buildings of state institutions, including the country's [Foreign Ministry](#) on 24 May – as announced by Ishkhan Saghatelyan, an MP from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. As Saghatelyan put it, this location was chosen in order "to prevent [the Foreign Ministry] from working against Armenia's national interests".

Two days later, protesters gathered outside a central government building where Pashinyan was hosting the president of Montenegro. The protesters were making loud noises with plastic whistles. A woman in her 60s complained about the noise, after which she claims she was verbally abused by young male protesters. She refused to be named for the article, calling the protesters “dangerous people”. Instead, she shouted back that “Nikol did not concede any land in Karabakh.”

“That contract was signed years ago by Serzh [Sargsyan]. Serzh is a Turk himself, and Kocharyan is an Azeri. This is a fight for power, not for Karabakh,” she cried.

Revolution of millionaires

Anthropologist Aghasi Tadevosyan, who has studied civil movements and their folklore in Armenia since 1988, says this level of hostility and violence is new to the country’s protest culture.

“This is the first ever protest where differing opinions are not only not welcome, but might encounter verbal or even physical violence. People are genuinely afraid,” Tadevosyan said, saying that the current protest movement had “elements of terror”.

As an example, Tadevosyan pointed to an incident on 8 May in the northern city of Gyumri, where a [video](#) shows a group of protesters assaulting and beating several elderly men at a bus stop who refused to join them. Seven people were [indicted](#) on charges of hooliganism.

Tadevosyan notes he also received threats of “revenge” on a Facebook post, after posting that he disliked the 19th century military music anthem that has been adopted by the protesters.

“People perceive this crowd as a bunch of gangsters and looters of public wealth. They don’t believe that their patriotic narrative is sincere”

On Monday, protesters declared their intention to approach every government minister to get their commitment in rejecting [Nagorno-Karabakh](#) becoming part of Azerbaijan. To reach ministers, protesters gathered outside a central government building in Yerevan – with the police responding by [detaining dozens of people inside and outside the office](#). This was the most violent clash so far, in which four people including two police officers were hospitalised. Law enforcement has started an [investigation](#) into the “mass riots” with eight people having been arrested so far.

Beyond the level of aggression, Tadevosyan also points out a potential class element to the protest movement – which is led by former leading members Armenia’s Republican Party, which was removed from power in the 2018 revolution. He says he’s seen people with “expensive clothes and expensive cars” in the protest leadership, a hark back to “old regime” rule when a “privileged social class” had “sanction to subordinate others through violence”.

“People perceive this crowd as a bunch of gangsters and looters of public wealth,” Tadevosyan said. “They don’t believe that their patriotic narrative is sincere, and so don’t think it’s worth their time engaging with them. People have started calling this ‘a revolution of millionaires’, a phrase which sums up their attitude.”

On the other side, loyal supporters of Pashinyan are also prone to labelling their political opponents “looters”, “drug addicts” and “Turks” (the latter a slur synonymous to ‘enemy’ in light of the Armenian Genocide).

Yet in contrast to both sides’ tendency to insults, Tadevosyan says that “the majority of the population is left out of this tension.”

“People just want to live their life. People’s appreciation of every second of life has increased after the [2020] war,” he said.

Julia Grigoryan, a teacher I meet in central Yerevan as it hosts evening protests, points out that despite the fact she has worked for 30 years, she “still lives in a rented house” while people like “[former president Robert] Kocharyan” are extraordinarily wealthy.

“We tried to open our own company in the 2000s, and faced racketeering. We didn’t forget that,” Julia recalls.

Despite the fact the route of her evening stroll has been disrupted by the protests, Julia is not too bothered. She believes the protests will die out soon.

“You don’t save Karabakh in Yerevan,” Julia said. “They just want to provoke a clash. But this won’t happen. We won’t be provoked.”

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