

Armenia: Mother Greta Stirs Opposition

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Lone protest by country's most famous mother bolsters opposition in run up to elections.

A grey-haired elderly woman has begun a solitary picket outside Robert Kocharian's presidential office in Yerevan, giving Armenia's angry opposition a new figurehead.

Sixty-five-year old Greta Sarkisian, who is perhaps the country's most famous mother, has been protesting since March 17, following the arrest of her son Armen. A stout woman with kind but sombre eyes, she is an upright, calm and confident, surrounded by a more emotional crowd of supporters, who bristle with suspicion at visiting reporters.

Mother Greta, as Armenians know her, had three sons. The eldest, Vazgen, was defence minister and prime minister, a towering figure in the Nagorny Karabakh war effort and arguably the most powerful man in the country when he was assassinated in parliament in October 1999.

Her second son Aram Sarkisian, who was director of the Ararat cement factory, served for six months as prime minister in succession to his brother, following the emotional upheaval caused by Vazgen's death. He was sacked by Kocharian in May 2000 and went into opposition. He ran for president last month but stood down in favour of fellow opposition candidate Stepan Demirchian.

But it is Greta's youngest son, Armen, a businessman, who is now the focus of attention. On March 15, he was arrested on suspicion of involvement in the murder of Armenian state television boss Tigran Nagdalian last December.

Nagdalian was a close associate of President Kocharian, and the government all but openly accused the opposition of complicity in his murder. The very next day, Gagik Mkrtchian, editor of pro-government newspaper Hayots Ashkhar, said, "The radicals have no choice but to commit such a crime."

Relatives and friends of Armen Sarkisian strongly deny the charges against him and allege that his arrest is an act of intimidation. "This is obviously a political order - to link Nagdalian's murder with my sons," said Greta Sarkisian.

The timing of the announcement that arrests had been made for Nagdalian's murder - on the evening of March 5, just as votes were being counted in the second round of the presidential election - has certainly raised some eyebrows. "It was a clear message to the opposition, telling them 'give up, don't protest the official results of the elections'," said political commentator Alexander Iskandarian.

However, the opposition did protest the official results, declaring Kocharian the victor. Tens of thousands of people attended rallies in Yerevan, denouncing the verdict, and dozens of them were arrested.

On March 15, well-known human rights activist Artur Sakunts of the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, who had been monitoring the elections, was detained for ten days in the town of Vanadzor. Sakunts' office had been set on fire the night before and he held a small protest demonstration in front of it.

The opposition is now gearing up to fight parliamentary elections due to be held on May 25, with many

rallying behind, and drawing strength from Mother Greta and her grievances.

She says she is convinced that the arrest of her youngest son is directly linked to the opposition's continued defiance of Kocharian.

"The usurpers could not halt a mass public movement holding up banners of justice and dignity, even after mass falsification of the results of the elections and after the illegal arrest of dozens of people," she said in an appeal to "all mothers and wives in Armenia, Artsakh (Nagorny Karabakh) and the Diaspora" on March 17.

Two days later, President Kocharian, visiting the Yerevan jewellery factory, dismissed the charges against him. "I think the accusations the opposition making, that the authorities are using the results of the Nagdalian investigation for political ends and the neutralization of political opponents, are absurd," he told journalists.

Kocharian said that there were "more than enough very convincing facts which justified the arrest".

Greta Sarkisian, however, is also linking the arrest to another long-running row, the quarrel over the investigation into the October 1999 assassinations in parliament, which killed her eldest son, Vazgen.

The late Tigran Nagdalian was regarded as an important witness in the trial of Nairi Hunanian, the leader of the assassins. Oleg Yunoshev, the Sarkisian family's lawyer in the trial, has repeatedly claimed that Nagdalian edited a video cassette, recorded by state television's cameras in parliament, showing in full all the events of the night when Hunanian and his accomplices carried out the killings and held 40 deputies hostage. The lead gunman gave himself up only after talking personally to the president.

Yunoshev says that Nagdalian removed 11 minutes from the cassette and that "he didn't do that on his own behalf, but on someone else's orders". In January, the middle Sarkisian brother Aram, suggested that Nagdalian had been murdered because of the edited cassette and before he was given the opportunity to give testimony in the Hunanian trial.

As a result, argues opposition deputy Shavarsh Kocharian (not a relative of the president), the Sarkisian family "had a vested interest in Nagdalian being alive and being a witness in court" and no interest at all in seeing him dead.

"It is important to remember that the opposition holds Robert Kocharian responsible for (the killings of) October 27," said human rights activist Mikael Danielian. "So the political confrontation is taking place in the legal sphere as well."

Danielian said the arrest of the youngest Sarkisian brother had taken the heat off the main accused, Nairi Hunanian, whom most Armenians believe was acting under orders. Haikakan Zhamanak newspaper claimed that Armen Sarkisian is being kept in the next cell to Hunanian, the murderer of his brother.

"Armen Sarkisian is a hostage," said Danielian. "While he is in prison, it will be very hard for Sarkisian and his comrades-in-arms to fight the political fight."

His mother Greta, meanwhile, continues her protest, despite cold rainy weather. Around a hundred people, mostly middle-aged women, stand by in support. They, in turn, are surrounded by a vast chain of

policemen, covering all the surrounding streets. Nearby, there are buses with soldiers and two armoured water cannon, only adding to the tension in an already edgy country.

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