

Armenia's Opposition Espouses Grassroots Issues

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Campaign groups now find that politicians are interested in their causes.

Popular protests about grassroots issues seem to capture the political elite's attention more than formal opposition does, even if the latest one – a campaign to save a historic building in the capital Yerevan – has ended in failure. Opposition parties have recognised this and are making various campaign issues their own.

After weeks of protests, efforts to save the 130-year-old Afrikyan House came to an end on July 8 when demolition workers moved in. The government sold the centrally-located plot to a company called Millennium Construction despite having designated the building – the home of 19th century merchant Armen Afrikyan – a “site of public interest” in 2008. The company plans to build a hotel on the land and recreate the exterior of the Afrikyan House elsewhere in the city.

Photographer Hayk Bianjyan has been capturing images of Yerevan's old buildings since 2003, and joined the campaign to save the Afrikyan House.

“Thirty-two buildings like this have been removed in Yerevan in the last 20 years,” he told IWPR. “The old town no longer exists.”

The preservationist movement formed an alliance with another campaign group fighting a ten per cent rise in electricity prices, although that too failed in its objectives, as the higher prices will come into effect in August. (See [Armenians Shocked at Electricity Price Rise](#) on that issue.)

Despite these setbacks, issue-based rather than overtly political campaign movements are gaining traction in Armenia.

Some issues raised in this way are making it onto the mainstream political agenda in a way that has not been seen before.

“The political parties are taking these ideas from civil society and putting them on the agenda,” Yerevan Bozoyan, a political analyst and head of the Mitk research centre, told IWPR. “As a result, it's becoming a real headache for the government, and we're seeing the results in parliament. People have managed to find effective ways to get their voices heard, thanks to civic groups and political forces.”

On June 10, the four opposition parties with seats in parliament – Prosperous Armenia, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), Heritage and Dashnaksutyun – presented the government with a list of demands, most of which were originally issues raised by campaigning groups.

The disparate demands include a review of fines for parking and driving offences, a freeze on public transport fares, and a commitment to get the [Nairit chemicals factory](#) back on its feet by paying off corporate debts and back wages.

Manvel Sargsyan, director of the Armenian Centre for National and International Studies, said the opposition appeared indifferent to grassroots movements until recently, but this had changed.

“Even the ANC leadership has said that political parties are unable to solve the problems facing Armenia without help from civic movements,” he said. “We also saw how they worked with the Dem.am movement.”

Dem.am has spent the last eight months or so fighting against a proposed pension reform introducing mandatory staff contributions. After initially refusing to budge, the government has cracked and sent new amendments to parliament that postpone the reforms' start date until 2017.

Bozoyan said public activism was still in its infancy in Armenia, but was moving in the right direction.

“I think time is working against the government and in the public's favour. People see they can have an impact,” he said. “The prime minister was replaced by someone else who has proposed various new versions of the [pensions] law, which is a positive thing in itself. Think about how it used to be, when dialogue of this kind was inconceivable.”

Artur Avtandilyan, a spokesman for Transparency International, said he doubted that Dem.am could take the credit for Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan being removed and replaced with Hovik Abrahamyan. (See [Did Economic Woes or Moscow's Hand Force Out Armenian Premier?](#) on some of the other

possible causes.)

Avtandilyan also cast doubt on the ability of civil society groups to force change.

“Their activists have become too predictable for the government, which knows how to use psychology and technology to unsettle its opponents, whereas civil society [group] just uses street clashes with the police and a few statements,” he told IWPR. “It’s time to move from quantity to quality.”

And despite opposition parties taking up popular causes, Artur Sakunts, head of the Vanadzor office of the Helsinki Civic Assembly, said there was still no organised political force capable of forcing parliament to look into the issues that concerned Armenian citizens.

“If the country had such an opposition group, then our country would be completely different. Of course that would take a lot of work,” he said. “I wouldn’t say the government is not concerned, but it does not believe there’s a group that’s able to harness public dissatisfaction.”

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