

## **A Disaster For Democracy Just Waiting To Happen**

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By Mikael Danialian in Yerevan (Published on October 29, 1999)

And many then add "...in a country that welcomes democratic changes?" But Armenia is the country where the then defence minister Vazgen Sarkisian met charges of vote rigging in the September 1996 presidential elections with the announcement that even "if the opposition received 100 percent of the vote we wouldn't hand over power."

Armenia is the country where soldiers fired on protestors who objected to this outcome. Where a Prosecutor General can be shot in his own office. Where the deputy ministers of defence and internal affairs have been murdered. For the violence of October 27, when five gunmen stormed the Armenian National Assembly and killed Sarkisian, by then the prime minister, was only the end of a long chain of such terrorism.

How could the gunmen get into the parliament building, then into the chamber itself, while carrying automatic weapons? Of the gunmen only the leader Nairi Unanian, as a former journalist with the State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company had an accreditation card, the others did not and could not have got one from the Assembly press office. One of the deputies or staff members at the Assembly would have had to sign their passes.

The hall is guarded by security guards that will not allow anyone in except deputies, staff members and accredited journalists. As I know, a press pass to the building is not enough - a separate pass is needed to get into the chamber.

The Assembly officials know me as a journalist but still would not have let me in with my building pass. Why did the gunmen have no trouble getting in? Either they had passes or the security was removed from the chamber - or they were simply let in.

Then you have to ask - was it a coup attempt, or as some say, simply the work of a gang of mentally unbalanced lone warriors. And last, you must ask whether the Armenian government is truly the tightly knit team it says it is - and that there really are no points of difference on all issues, including the vexed matter of Nagorno-Karabakh.

I've known Nairi Unanian since 1988 and last crossed his path, unintentionally, this summer in Yerevan. He hasn't changed much as a person over those ten years; he was then and is now a supporter of radical action. Listening to him talk over a mobile phone during the standoff I thought he sounded calm and completely in control. He wanted to talk to president Robert Kocharian.

It was Sarkisian's pressure that forced then president Levon Ter-Petrosian to step down and make way for Kocharian, who was no more legitimate a president in 1998 than Ter-Petrosian was in 1996. Kocharian, who as a Karabakh man, was not technically even a Armenian citizen, brought a 'Karabakh Clan' to power in the country.

However the widespread view among this clan of Karabakhers - which included National Security Minister Serj Sarkisian (no relation to the dead premier) and other members of the nationalist Dashnaktsutyun party, of which Unanian was once a member - that it was Sarkisian who wielded the power in Armenia.

After Kocharian's extraordinary rise to the presidency and especially after the May presidential elections only the deaf and blind would fail to see the disagreements between the different players.

It had been Sarkisian who played the knight in the run up to the parliamentary polls and created the Miasnutun (Unity) bloc. It united the diametrically opposite political forces of his own militaristic Republican party and the former communists of the Popular Party led by Karen

Demirchian - former first secretary of Armenia's Communist party in Soviet days and another victim of Wednesday's bloodbath. Sarkisian had unsuccessfully backed Demirchian against Kocharian in 1998, so both had to wait until the parliamentary elections for their moment.

Almost their first act was to split the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of National Security into two separate entities, thereby undermining the Karabakh Clan's influence in the department.

Key Karabakhers such as the disputed occupied province's defence minister were unseated, with the words "I gave you life and I can take it away". Sarkisian was a hero to many people in Nagorno-Karabakh and built much political capital on his hard line on the territory and his tough record as defence minister.

But as prime minister he began to overshadow Kocharian. He would hold meetings with IMF delegations and US vice-president Albert Gore, who promised him vast amounts of "money" and "help" (as requested) if the Karabakh problem is settled.

The man once seen as a pro-Russian defence minister, who sent tanks against street protests in 1996 was transforming before the very eyes of Karabakh Clan and the Dashnaksutyun into a pro-western leader, distanced from Kocharian's generally pro-Russian stance.

They didn't like it. The word was that the prime minister was about to force the resignation of Karabakher state security minister Serj Sarkisian. Something was bound to break.

Young radicals are easily found in Armenia, and Unanian was just one of many combat veterans from the bloody Azeri-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh - where he fought in a Dashnaksutyun armed brigade. When he and his fellow gunmen finally surrendered at the parliament on Thursday they went to the ministry of internal security, reportedly they did not even hand over their pistols until they reached the investigation centre.

How did the international community react? Some read the incident as a coup attempts and threw their support behind Kocharian as the only "legitimate" authority while praising Sarkisian's efforts "in the name of democracy". US president Bill Clinton, taking a lead, condemned brutality directed against personalities who fight for democracy in their countries.

Yet both US governmental and non-governmental organisations have many times since 1995 pointed out violations of democratic principles in Armenia, many times attributing them to the late prime minister.

The last question - What awaits Armenia? With the demise of Sarkisian and Demirchian, Kocharian and the

Karabakhers are no longer under the same threat they were before. It can be expected that the official quarters will investigate thoroughly and deliver a report ruling out the possibility of a plot, and that Unanian's men were mavericks beholden only to themselves.

In that case we turn to Sarkisian's long term allies among the military, the defence ministry and former members of his old and influential civic-political organisation Yerkrapa, now merged with the Republican Party, and speculate as to their likely actions if Kocharian takes advantage of the situation to put the Karabakhers back in the ascendant.

Kocharian does not yet have his hands on all the levers of power, thus the very worst scenario - civil war - cannot be ruled out. Whatever the outcome, democrats will not be the winners, for there are no democrats around.

By Mikael Danialian, Chairman of the Helsinki Association of Armenia.

**Location:** Karabakh  
Armenia

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