

Karabakh Regime Resorts to Totalitarian Rule

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Comment. The Nagorny Karabakh regime is eradicating any vestige of political opposition in the run-up to the parliamentary elections

Dreams of building a democratic utopia in Nagorny Karabakh are fading fast.

The conflict in the Armenian enclave signalled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Never before had one ethnic group been so united in attempting to create an oasis of freedom and prosperity in the Communist empire.

Back in 1988, there was real hope of creating an economically stable, independent state that would favour an open and democratic society where human rights were respected.

Now it is clear that this bubble has burst. The events of the last few months point towards a grimmer future - to the emergence of a tough, totalitarian regime which refuses to countenance any murmurs of dissent. In the run-up to the June 18 parliamentary elections, any serious opposition has effectively been crushed.

So where did we go wrong? The seeds of discontent were sown back in 1996, when Armenia's president, Levon Ter-Petrosian, invited Karabakh president Robert Kocharian to be his prime-minister.

The move triggered a new mood of uncertainty in Nagorny Karabakh. Kocharian named the prime-minister, Leonard Petrosian, as his successor. The choice was unpopular: not only was Petrosian notoriously corrupt but he did not enjoy the patronage of the republic's real king-maker, Samvel Babayan.

Then the defence minister, Babayan was the hero of the war against Azerbaijan when he led the Karabakh armed forces to their de facto victory. At the time, he was the effective ruler of the mutinous statelet, building a small commercial empire at the same time.

Babayan quickly removed Petrosian from office and replaced him with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arkady Ghukasian, who, at the very least, boasted a certain degree of personal charisma and presidential bearing.

And Ghukasian may well have ended his term in Babayan's shadow were it not for the scandal surrounding the listening devices found in President Ghukasian's offices by the Armenian security services. It was claimed that the bugs had been planted by the prime-minister, Zhirair Pogosian, on the orders of Babayan.

The discovery gave Ghukasian the perfect opportunity to turn on his patron - at a time when the general's political forces had won a substantial number of seats in the Stepanakert parliament. He was summoned to Yerevan for secret talks with President Kocharian and security minister Serge Sarkisian, also a Karabakhi.

On his return, Ghukasian promptly dismissed Pogosian on charges of treason. It soon became clear that the president was preparing to stand on his own two feet.

His next move was even more unexpected: the president replaced Pogosian with Anushavan Danielian, who had recently fled the Crimea where he was suspected of links with criminal groupings and Russian security services.

It was the first time that an outsider had been appointed to a senior government position since Mikhail Gorbachev named Arkady Volsky as his special representative in the region.

Paradoxically, the population at large began to warm to Ghukasian - whose reputation had previously been tarnished by his affair with a young girl, who later became his second wife. His popularity even began to equal that of Babayan - and many Babayan supporters hastily deserted to Ghukasian's camp, sensing that the president enjoyed the good will of Yerevan.

But the political schisms went hand in hand with a growing economic crisis. The new government promised swift reforms but high taxes effectively paralysed the entire economy.

Babayan was swift to marshal his forces as the chinks appeared in Ghukasian's armour. He threw his weight behind Yerkrpah, the union of war veterans, strengthening their ranks. Ghukasian retaliated by forming an alternative veterans' association and men who had fought side by side during the conflict suddenly found themselves on opposite sides of the fence.

This split in the military opened up a yawning gulf in Karabakh society as a whole.

The attempted assassination of President Ghukasian on March 22 was the final nail in Babayan's coffin. Two masked gunmen riddled the presidential Mercedes with machine-gun bullets, wounding Ghukasian, his driver and his bodyguard. The shooting cast a shadow of fear and suspicion across the republic.

However, amid the cyclone of rumours surrounding the event, the Nagorny Karabakh authorities considered that only one hypothesis was worthy of further investigation - that the attack had been organised by Samvel Babayan and carried out by his accomplices.

Retribution was swift. In just a few hours, over 200 people were arrested, including the commander-in-chief, all his male relatives and anyone who had a chance of being voted on to the National Assembly in the June 18 elections. Two independent journalists were detained, a third was threatened with a warrant. Vagram Aghajanian, of the Tasnerord Nahang ("Tenth Province") newspaper, was sentenced to 12 months in jail for libelling Prime-Minister Danielian. The sentence was later suspended for two years.

The repression continues, targeting any public figure who expresses any sympathy for Babayan or any doubt in his guilt. The prisons are crowded with suspects who are subjected to interrogation techniques reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition. Prisoners are denied legal counsel and lawyers are themselves subjected to physical violence and blackmail threats.

The Nagorny Karabakh authorities have used the terrorist attack to banish the concept of independent thought from the mountain republic. But, behind closed doors and across the border in Armenia, conspiracy theories abound.

Armenian newspapers have been pulling no punches. Some claim that the shooting was masterminded by the Kremlin in a bid to destabilise the region and bring the South Caucasus back under its wing. Moscow is also keen to limit Western influence in these former Soviet republics.

Perhaps the most popular theory is that Western special forces were involved in the terrorist attack. Observers are even making a connection between the Stepanakert shooting and the political assassination in Yerevan's parliament last October when eight leading politicians were gunned down. Supporters of this theory say the West was attempting to remove pro-Russian figures from the local political scene.

Whatever the truth, the existing regime now makes no secret of its totalitarian leanings. Recently, Vardkes Bagirian, the president's right-hand man and a former Babayan ally, said there could be no talk of democracy in Nagorny Karabakh because the republic was still at a state of war.

The only person who still appears to believe in the free utopia is Naira Melkumian, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who airs her views on the official Nagorny Karabakh Internet site. And the People's Union of Artsakh, a socio-political group formed to represent the regime in the forthcoming elections, is promising to build a civil society. One day.

But the new atmosphere of repression and fear will have far-reaching consequences. Recent events have dealt a severe blow to the credibility of both Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia on the international stage. This could adversely affect Armenia's bid for membership of the Council of Europe and Karabakh's eligibility for humanitarian aid programmes.

The arrest and alleged torture of former war heroes have badly damaged morale in the Karabakh armed forces. Professional soldiers are beginning to mutter that they can expect little recognition for their services if decorated veterans are being thrown into jail. Discipline is crumbling, the officer class is emigrating abroad and the defence budget is at an all-time low. The Karabakh army is more vulnerable today than at any time since the 1994 ceasefire.

The pogrom launched against Samvel Babayan and his immediate entourage has removed any element of competition from the forthcoming elections. Only those whose candidature has been personally approved by Arkady Ghukasian will be permitted to stand.

It is unlikely that the elections will be recognised by the international community: Azerbaijani refugees, who made up 25 per cent of the population before the war, will be unable to take part while rumours abound that the authorities have deliberately doctored the electoral roll.

The course of ongoing peace talks depends heavily on the results of the parliamentary elections. But Samvel Babayan was perhaps the main opponent of any resolution that did not have the interests of Nagorny Karabakh at heart. His removal seriously weakens the cause of Karabakh independence.

Reports of repression and human rights infringements in Nagorny Karabakh will do much to damage Stepanakert's international reputation. Representatives of the Armenian community in the enclave rejected calls for autonomous status within the Azerbaijani state on the grounds that Azerbaijan had a poor human rights record and was unable to guarantee the freedom of its own citizens, let alone the Karabakhis.

The ongoing pogroms in Stepanakert make Azerbaijan seem like an oasis of civil liberty by comparison. And, at a time when many leading figures in Azerbaijan see military intervention as the only real solution, the battle readiness of Karabakhi forces has never been poorer.

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