

Murder In The Parliament - The Consequences

Armenia's stand off at its parliament may be at an end but the political fallout from Wednesday's televised carnage will linger for months yet.

The five gunmen who stormed the Armenian parliament Wednesday, killing prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian and several top officials are now being questioned in secret by police at the country's Security Ministry.

The rest of the public must make do with the clues passed down by the leader of the gunmen, Nairi Unanian, an extreme nationalist and former journalist, who told a local television station before surrendering: "This is a patriotic action. This shake-up is needed for the nation to regain its senses."

"The country is in a catastrophic situation. People are hungry and the government doesn't offer any way out," he told Armenian TV channel A1 Plus, claiming that the eight deaths and dozens of injuries in the attack were all "innocent victims" except for the case of Sarkisian, who he said had "failed the nation".

Aside from Sarkisian, several top members of his ruling Miasnutun (Unity) party bloc were killed. The dead included parliamentary speaker Karen Demirchyan, former premier in Soviet days, deputy Ruben Miroyan, policy spokesman Yuri Barkhsyan, energy minister Leonard Petrosian, senior economic official Mikhail Kotanian and four other deputies.

"We've run out of all the civilised methods of political struggle," Unanian said. "All our efforts to implement changes into the society were roughly dismissed by top officials. All elections were falsified and Vazgen Sarkisian is the person who's responsible for that.

"Today's murder is going to be a shock for people," he said. It was intended as a warning to the rest of the government. "It doesn't matter who's going to replace those who died in the shootout today. From now on they will serve the people, because they see what can happen if they don't."

But later, in a declaration issued half an hour before their surrender the gunmen changed their story, claiming that they had only fired into the air to scare the deputies, only then to come under fire from guards who shot wildly through the building, they claimed.

Unanian had become known as an organiser of the students' movement in the late eighties and until 1994 had been a member of the extreme nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutyun group until he was reportedly excluded for "undignified behaviour".

Dashnaktsutyun leader Vahan Hovanisian went on record saying that Unanian had been a member for less than two years in 1991-92, before being expelled, without elaborating on the reasons why. He did describe the gunmen as "sick people".

Unanian reportedly moved to Evpatoria in the Crimea between 1994 and 1997 before returning to take up a job in Armenian State TV. Unofficial sources claim that two of the other attackers were relatives of his.

According to witnesses interviewed later Unanian cornered the prime minister and told him: "Enough of drinking our blood." Sarkisian reportedly replied: "Everything is being done for you and the future of your children." Unanian then opened fire with an automatic weapon.

Yet witnesses noted that Unanian seemed sane and well composed. He allowed reporters to be freed first, then allowed the minister of health Gayk Nikogosian to evacuate the wounded. Miasnutun deputy Genrik Abramian died later in hospital, with deputy Mikhael Katanian, who suffered a heart attack.

The question raised by almost all is whether Unanian had outside help particularly on how he got their weapons into the building, presumably hidden under the long trenchcoats worn by the gunmen - dress that would have normally drawn immediate suspicion from the parliamentary guards.

The strongest criticism came from the Armenian military, who were close supporters of Sarkisian, a onetime popular defence minister and champion of the rights of veterans of the bitter 91-94 war with Azerbaijan. A statement from the defence ministry was repeatedly broadcast on national TV calling for the minister of the interior, the minister of national security, and the prosecutor general to quit.

"The internal and external security of the state is in danger. Under these conditions, the army cannot remain indifferent and demands the resignations," the statement said. "Those who allowed this crime to be perpetrated are guilty before the Armenian people. This was possible because of a total absence of security."

Two hours after the attack Robert Kocharian met with the leaders of all the party groups in the house, including Sarkisian's Miasnutun, Dashnaksutyun, and groups right and left including the former Communist Party. They issued a joint declaration "that they consider the question of paramount importance the preservation of stability in the country".

Onetime communist youth leader, sportsman, teacher and journalist, Sarkisian, 40, was appointed premier by Kocharian on June 11 after Sarkisian and Demirchian's Miasnutun topped parliamentary elections running on a platform easing the pressures of post-Soviet reforms in the landlocked Caucasus country of 3.8 million people.

Sarkisian, a senior member of a nationalist Karabakh movement in 1988, agitating for the Azeri region's unification with Armenia, became defence minister in 1991, the year Armenia became independent after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In 1996 he drew much condemnation after ordering the army to break up demonstrators protesting against the conduct of a disputed election.

Though Unanian himself told reporters that the action was nothing to do with the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the killings cast a pall over hopes that recent closed talks between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan would lead to a deal to be signed at the next OSCE summit in Istanbul on November 18. US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott had finished talks with Kocharian on the dispute and left the country just hours before the violence broke out.

The Armenian rulers of the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh issued a statement calling on the Armenians to support Kocharian and help the authorities reestablishing order and legality. "Those who carried out that appalling act," they said, "should realise that today the future of the Armenian statehood and the whole Armenian nation is put under question."

Over in Azerbaijan, the deputy chairman of the Azeri Popular Front party, Ali Kerimov told the Caspian news agency that the violence indicated the depth of internal instability within Armenia, and that Yerevan could not be relied upon to fulfil any conditions that might be made in a settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The head of the Azeri parliament committee of foreign affairs, Rza Ibadov, described the killings "as not only a powerful blow to the image of Armenia, but also an obvious demonstration of the inter-party political crisis in Armenia. It seems that concrete political powers stand behind the acts of the terrorists." Ibadov thought that hopes of signing a deal in Istanbul were now slight, though much still depended on the developments in Armenia.

Ironically the proposed deal, worked out in a series of secret meetings between Kocharian and Azeri president Heydar Aliev over the last few months, is generally seen inside Armenia as the most convenient resolution of a problem that has dominated the country's international situation to its detriment.

Armenians interpreted the political upheaval in Azerbaijan over Aliev's negotiation and the slew of high-profile resignations and public protests that followed there, as proof that that Armenia was coming away from the talks with a better deal.

Gagik Aivakian is an independent journalist in Yerevan and Ara Tatevosian is director of Mediamax, an independent Armenian news agency.

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