Länderbericht

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Fanning the Flames of Domestic Political Crises:
Corona in Armenia

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The Pandemic Is Both Fact and Political Issue Alike

Was the timing merely coincidence or orchestrated political manoeuvring? On 1 June, the Armenian Prime Minister, *Nikol Paschinyan,* announced to the public that he himself and the closest members of his family, his wife and three daughters, had become infected with the corona virus. Anti-government members of Armenian society found it difficult to view this communication in isolation of the current domestic political situation. The announcement, only one week later, that the Prime Minister's family and *Paschinyan* himself had now recovered, reinforced speculations that officially announcing the infection was nothing more than a diversionary tactic. Government measures officially adopted to contain the pandemic, such as the state of emergency extended for the third time last weekend, are predominantly interpreted in light of the prevailing political climate. The number of those in Armenian society who are critical of government seems to be increasing every day.

Regularly published figures on new cases of corona virus in Armenia are disenchanting, perhaps even shocking. For weeks now this figure has been increasing each day by 500 to more than 700 new cases: this corresponds to up to 4500 per week! A country like Armenia with its fragile healthcare infrastructure needs to take these figures seriously. There are, of course, various reasons for this tragic trajectory. What is striking, however, is that compared to neighbouring Georgia for example, the government's handling of the pandemic has long become a political issue for the opposition.

"Hour of the Executive" Has Become an Admission of Failure

On the one hand, we can level criticism against the government for having failed to fight the pandemic. At this point, it is critically noted that too many politically inexperienced people were involved in *Paschinyan's* government, who were unable to appropriately deal with the crisis. Indeed, it would seem that, for instance, having allowed the Irish "Ryanair" to continue flights from Yerevan to Milan or even to Tehran well into the second half of March, was a flagrant mistake. As we know, Northern Italy and Iran were already two of the most dangerous "corona hotspots" at that time.

As late as March, unprotected mass events were also held in some provinces of Armenia, at which the government called for a referendum to dismiss members of the Constitutional Court. It was then, at the latest, that public perception of the pandemic became one and indivisible with other domestic political issues. The longstanding dispute fought out between the government and Constitutional Court will be examined below.

Raising doubts about official figures has now become commonplace among some government critics, on the other hand. They believe the figures to be too high because international aid is specifically "calculated" on the basis of these statistics, and hence the government avails itself of more aid than originally intended. A second reason for a supposed artificial inflation of figures is because it enables the government to efficiently exploit drastic measures, such as curfews, for stymieing political opposition under the smokescreen of fighting the pandemic.

Even though verifying these accusations is likely to prove very difficult in the current situation, such discussions, which are being widely debated in social and traditional media, illustrate how deep the discrepancy between official policy and its perception among large swathes of the population has become. The former national hero, *Paschinyan*, now appears in public "only" as a Prime Minister who has to confront criticism from both within and outside government on a daily basis. Some discussions portend that faith in his government seems to be dwindling at breathtaking speed. Not only is the Prime Minister accused of completely failing in the fight against corona, there are also growing suspicions that extraordinary measures are actually intended to counter the opposition. Problems with containing the pandemic are clear for all to see, however. We merely have to consider this fact alone: anyone with some knowledge of the cultural and historic conflict situation reigning in the South Caucus, will, at the very least, find it rather remarkable that Armenia has now officially asked Georgia for help in fighting the pandemic. This is generally deemed to be a clear admission of failure.

Is the "Velvet Revolution" Devouring its own Children?

The once broad alliance of *Paschinyan* supporters seems to be falling apart at the seams. In 2018, these supporters included large sections of civil society from outside the parliament, without which the "Velvet Revolution" would not have

been possible. The resulting government now has to deal with opposition from both within and outside parliament. This confronts the Prime Minister and once charismatic hero of the "Velvet Revolution" with a new situation; and namely, influential factions in civil society are increasingly turning their backs on the government. For instance, the co-founder of the NGO "Legal Way", *Ruben Melikyan*, protested against further extending the state of emergency – he was condemned to prison as a result. Only after protests, for example those held by the Chairman of the Armenian Helsinki Committee, was he released.

If statements only came from the deputy leader of the former "Republican" government party, *Armen Ashotyan*, then political observers would most likely ignore it. After all, the parliamentary clout of the "Republicans" was virtually swept away by the "Velvet Revolution" two years ago. For *Ashotyan* it is clear that the Prime Minister would no longer wage war against corona, but simply fight to hold onto power.

Whereas now even prominent supporters of *Paschinyan's* "Velvet Revolution" in 2018 are increasingly distancing themselves from the Prime Minister's government. Based on the motto underpinning the then widespread protest movement when calls of "Sersch go away!" urged the longstanding President Sersch Sargsyan to step down, calls of "Nikol go away" now ring out towards the once charismatic leader of the "Velvet Revolution": *Nikol Paschinyan.* Although it started as demands from individuals, ever larger sections of Armenian society are now heeding this call.

It is not unusual for measures taken against "corona" to meet with criticism of politics, as we also witness when looking at stable democracies. But the debate raging in Armenia seems to be particularly widespread. With those criticising the *Paschinyan* government having no longer been confined to social media activists for some time; renowned politicians and civil society

representatives express doubt in official policy, too.

Pressure on the erstwhile hero of the "Velvet Revolution" seems to grow every day. And in light of the criticism voiced among large sections of civil society, *Paschinyan* is experiencing a kind of dejá-vu only two years after the revolution. Or is this just a kind of normality syndrome in the wake of revolution?

Ruling Party Continues to Enjoy a Stable Balance of Power in Parliament

Yet for all these observations, there is one thing we shouldn't forget: *Paschinyan's* alliance of parties "My Step" continues to enjoy an absolute majority in parliament with 88 of a total 132 seats. In addition to two independent mandates, 42 seats are allocated to the parties "Prosperous Armenia" and "Bright Armenia". Both parties supported the "Velvet Revolution" two years ago.

What benchmarks should be applied when assessing the current situation in Armenia? Just over two years ago *Paschinyan* gained international acclaim as a highly esteemed revolutionary hero. Enthusiasm for him seemed to know no limits – he earned enormous levels of trust both in Armenia and around the globe. It goes without saying that everything was to be done differently, and the majority in parliament was in fact turned on its head. Many protesters and members of civil society organisations became politicians. Though for a long time now, they too are facing the realities of everyday politics.

The recently announced third extension of the state of emergency, which is now to last until 13 July, provided an opportunity for a number of opposition politicians to not only position themselves against the corona measures, but to fundamentally attack the politics of *Paschinyan* as well. Ever greater resistance is forming within parliament, too. The third largest fraction in the Armenian National Assembly constitutes "Bright

Armenia" party with 17 seats. Representatives of this party are taking a clear stance against government measures. This is all the more striking because "Bright Armenia" belonged to the former alliance of parties, "My Step", under the leadership of *Paschinyan*, and in December 2018 essentially entered parliament by riding on the wave of euphoria created by the "Velvet Revolution". That means the Prime Minister is now opposed by once important allies.

Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the party "Prosperous Armenia" and also an active supporter of *Paschinyan* in 2018, was last Sunday summoned and interrogated by the National Security Service. With 25 seats, his party now represents the largest opposition faction. He accuses the Prime Minister of politically persecuting him with the help of the Security Service. This case also highlights how it is becoming increasingly difficult for political observers to distinguish between actual criticism to anti-corona measures and fundamental political opposition. *Tsarukyan* at first called for the resignation of government because it had failed in the fight against the pandemic.

One week later, the colourful oligarch was questioned by the Security Service, and at the same time members of his party were arrested in Armenian provinces. It is the temporal coincidence of events that raises suspicion. On 16 June, the *Paschinyan* party finally voted in favour of lifting the immunity of*Tsanukyan.* Representatives from both opposition parties "Prosperous Armenia" and "Bright Armenia" abstained from the vote.

On 15 June, the Security Service initiated criminal proceedings against another prominent member of the "Prosperous Armenia" party, the parliamentarian, *Naira Zohrabyan*. Ms *Zohrabyan* is Chairperson of the Committee for "Human Rights and Public Affairs". A number of arrests took place in Yerevan and other parts of Armenia on Sunday in connection with protests against government measures.

On 17 June, the "Bright Armenia" fraction introduced two initiatives to parliament. Firstly, an investigation committee is called upon to address the failure of government with regard to the fight against corona. Secondly, the opposition wants the Constitutional Court to verify the legality of the state of emergency imposed by government.

At the same time, nobody can claim that both of the only opposition parties in parliament have acted destructively so far. On the contrary, in several legislative initiatives during the "corona era" alone since mid-March, representatives from both opposition parties voted in favour of government bills or even introduced some themselves, which were then adopted by a majority of representatives in the "My Step" government coalition. In general we can say that the parliament in Armenia works regularly, and is still accepted by the important opposition parties as a place for political debate.

The External Parliamentary Landscape Is Regrouping

Artur Ghazinyan, founder and leader of the party "One Armenia", is convinced that the government's corona measures are above all directed against the political opposition. The party "One Armenia", one of the many new formations, was only established in 2019 and therefore has not yet emerged as an independent political force. It is made up of influential lawyers and scientists, however.

In the meantime, the parties "Prosperous Armenia" and "Hayrenik" and the so-called "Armenian Revolutionary Federation" (ARF) have formed an alliance. The main demand is: the resignation of *Paschinyan* and his entire government. "Hayrenik" and "ARF" are parties in which the Armenian diaspora have a strong influence. The leader of the "Hayrenik" party is *Artur Vanetsyan.* He was installed by *Paschinyan* immediately after the "Velvet Revolution" as head of the National Security Service – one of the most powerful authorities in the country. We can

assume that such posts are only occupied by people in whom the respective head of government has absolute trust. *Vanetsyan* is now also one of the Prime Minister's political opponents.

The "Adekvad" party constitutes one of the most notable actors outside parliament that very openly opposes government policy and especially the Prime Minister himself. Initiated in 2018 as an emphatically "conservative movement", "Adekvad" has been officially registered as a party since 2019. Its explosive nature is connected to one person: the towering figure of this party is *Mikayel Minasyan*, who was recently officially presented as the party's PM candidate. He is the son-in-law of the former President *Sersch Sargsyan* who was ousted by *Paschinyan.*

What's more, another self-proclaimed "conservative movement" is increasingly making headlines: "VETO". In the past, its leader *Narek Malian* entered the political stage as an excessive opponent of the "Open Society Foundation", which he accused of having financed *Paschiniyan*'s "Velvet Revolution". Prior to the "revolution", *Malian* was a close companion to the former police commissioner *Vladimir Gasparyan.*

The causes of the critical domestic political situation are manifold, and date back well beyond the outbreak of the corona crisis. The pandemic is not the cause of the tense domestic political situation, but a veritable catalyst for it.

Conflict between Government and Constitutional Court

For months a conflict has been smouldering between the government and Constitutional Court. *Paschinyan's* very personal commitment here is more than striking, and his goal is clearly to reshuffle members of the Constitutional Court. Of the nine constitutional judges in total, six as well as the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court, *Hrayr Tovmasyan*, are to step down. Since early 2019, in other words shortly after the parliamentary election, judges at the

Constitutional Court have unashamedly been called upon to resign on many occasions. Since they did not officially react, and criticism levelled against this government action grew ever stronger, *Paschinyan* used another dubious "offer" in an attempt to remove constitutional judges, which he clearly disliked, from their posts. If the judges were to "voluntarily" step down, they would be paid their entire salary until reaching retirement age. In December 2019, a law was adopted in parliament to this end, stipulating that affected parties ought to declare their resignation under these conditions by the end of February 2020. None of the members of the Constitutional Court accepted this "offer".

Seeing as the constitutional judges are not likely to back down, on *Paschinyan*'s instructions, parliament made another attempt to "legally" remove them from their posts in early February 2020. A referendum is to provide an opportunity for amending the constitution such that the constitutional judges can be prematurely removed from their posts. The *Paschinyan* party advocated for this referendum in March during public events (see above). The referendum itself was to be held on 5 April, which was prevented as a result of corona measures.

Regardless of the relatively robust and ultimately dubious actions of one constitutional body against another, international observers asked themselves why *Paschinyan* is so fiercely opposed to the Constitutional Court. Why does he recklessly disregard the fact that this matter could undermine his international reputation? As it was of course inevitable that these actions would attract criticism. A key figure is the second President of the Republic of Armenia, *Robert Kotcharyan.* Quite specifically, we are referring to events that took place at the very end of his tenure in March 2008.

The first of March 2008 witnessed violent clashes between protesters and security forces in Yerevan. Protests were held against an alleged electoral fraud, which enabled *Sersch Sargsyan* to become elected in the first round of voting

against the first Armenian President *Levon Ter-Petrosyan*.

Kotcharyan was still in office until the end of April 2008, and thus responsible for the massive deployment of police and security forces that left more than ten people dead. Events of that time are building a politically and personally explosive bridge to the present. That's because one of the most active protesters against the alleged electoral fraud in 2008, was the then 32-year old *Nikol Paschinyan*, who had supported *Ter-Petrosyan* in the election campaign. After protests were violently repressed, *Paschinyan* managed to keep a low profile at first. He was eventually arrested and spent one and a half years behind bars. He holds *Kotcharyan*, in particular, responsible for his incarceration and the entire deployment of security forces back then. Directly after *Paschinyan*'s accession to power in 2018, an investigation was sought against him due to the events of that time. However, the local court responsible for the hearing turned to the Constitutional Court in order to examine whether the charge was even legal. Specifically, the question of the applicability of a criminal law article was at issue in this case.

Yet, the Constitutional Court did not make a decision itself, and addressed this question to the European Court of Human Rights. This meant the process gained its own momentum, such that was probably not intended by government; after all, it is hard to imagine that *Paschinyan* sought so much international attention with this. History was to be reappraised with the help of justice. We cannot completely rule out the fact that personal satisfaction also has a role to play here. However, this has led to a veritable constitutional crisis that continues to loom large to this day, and is taking its toll on domestic politics in Armenia.

Outlook: "Shut down" with a Strong Political Dynamic

It is not yet possible to say how Armenia as a whole will survive the corona crisis. Domestic political disputes exacerbate or even prevent a

sober analysis of the actual dimension underpinning the pandemic.

Having said that, the Armenian government continues to benefit from a real vote of confidence since the so-called "Velvet Revolution" precisely two years ago. The last representative survey (International Republican Institute) determined that 76 per cent of Armenians were generally satisfied with the Prime Minister's work. That is a very promising figure. But that was in October 2019 – so long before corona! More recent surveys do not exist.

We can also continue to assume that the majority of the Armenian population generally supports the government's politics, despite conflicts as highlighted above. The issue that dominated the "Velvet Revolution" on all sides, the fight against corruption, is still firmly on the agenda. Even though the country is far from turning its back on corruption as an obstacle to economic growth, there has been some success. According to Transparency International (December 2019), it has been possible to reduce systemic corruption.

Armenian's expectations on the government remain high and time is running out, however. The shut down as a result of the pandemic has not resulted in political standstill. Quite the contrary: old conflicts have been and will be intensified during the state of emergency and

new ones are arising. It will be interesting to observe how civil society, the new parties and political alliances will develop outside the political apparatus. It was precisely two years ago that a strong civil society shook the political foundations of the country, giving rise to completely new constellations.

There is also a discrepancy in how Armenian domestic policy is perceived. The lines of conflict described in this report dominate public discourse to the extent that we can infer from social and traditional media. Yet, Armenians operate in a political culture that is perceived as highly personalised. That's why it is of course interesting, for example, to scrutinise the current Prime Minister's role in demonstrations that took pace twelve years ago. But ultimately, this Armenian government, too, will be measured by whether it is able to solve urgent economic problems. In all corresponding surveys since *Paschinyan* took office, Armenians cite unemployment and thus future prospects as the most pressing problem – constitutional crisis or not.

The path already pursued by the predecessor government to develop Armenia into a high-tech hotspot, is being systematically continued under the new government. What's more, it would be one of the few economic sectors that – due to "corona" – has not yet been hit by such heavy financial losses compared to traditional ones. From a strategic perspective, the IT sector is also all the more important for Armenia because it could greatly compensate for major disadvantages owing to the country's relative isolation with having closed two of the four borders. Having said that, an unemployment rate of approx. 20 per cent begs the question as to how many Armenians can participate in this economic sector. The phenomenon of young Armenians migrating overseas has not been significantly curbed as yet.

In light of the significant impact that measures in the context of corona are having on current political developments, the dynamic trajectory of domestic policy conflicts in Armenia is likely to continue over the next few months.