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The Space for Civil Society and Civic Activism in Armenia

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1. A short review of Armenian Civil Society

In Armenia, as in many Soviet states, social life as well as often private life was controlled by authorities during Soviet rule. All organisations and associations were formed and controlled by the state. People were encouraged, at times even forced, to join these organisations. The legacy of forced membership of Soviet times had important implications later on. During late 1980s, the gradual lifting of the iron curtain and the disintegration of the communist bloc created new opportunities for organisational activities. In Armenia, the first civil society organisations (CSOs) were established during late 1980s and early 1990s. They were mostly driven by local needs, and in some cases initiated as well as financially supported by foreign organisations[1]. The devastating earthquake that hit Armenia in 1988 further opened doors for humanitarian missions and international organisations. Alongside humanitarian aid, they contributed to the development of the local non-governmental sector. This period can be considered the first stage in the formation of local CSOs. Most of the organisations were focusing on humanitarian aid and emergency response. This was due to the consequences of the earthquake, the ongoing armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh Republic)[2], as well as the instability of the country in transition from Soviet Union to an independent state.

The increasing number of organisations and the need to regulate the activities of CSOs led to the adoption of the first Law on Civil Society Organisations in 1996[3]. The international organisations were encouraged to change the scope of their activities from emergency response to development, protection of human rights, and capacity building.

New organisations began to appear in this field in the early 2000s. The number and geography of the CSOs consistently increased due to the needs and available support from the international organisations. Most of the organisations were donor-driven and had no capacity to operate without financial support. Consequently, most of the registered organisations stopped operating when the international organisations cut off financial support, ended their mission and/or changed the direction and scope of their activities.

Along with the development of the civil society sector, the rise of a new type of activities called "civic initiatives" or civic movements was an important advance in Armenia. These were various issue-oriented, horizontally-structured

groups of individual activists united around common, very specific causes. These new forms of civic participation emerged with the protests after the elections in 2008. Though there had been civic initiatives back in 2003-2004, these did not have a political orientation. The possibility of rebellion was discussed only in the context of the protests after the elections (e.g. post-electoral protests in 2003[4]). In recent years, however, there were more protests, initiated by informal civic movements.

2. Political Space of Civil Society: Shrinking

In the last decade, the government's perception of civil society has changed dramatically alongside the development of civic movements and initiatives in Armenia. Instead of creating a dialogue with civil society, the government perceived them as a threat to the sovereignty. In order to stay in power, the government began to utilize repression strategies by shrinking the space of civil society using administrative and non-administrative resources. The repression amplified during street protests, which became increasingly popular in Armenia in recent years. For instance, the government tried to use its power to stop protests against public transport fare increase, cumulative pension systems, changes in the working conditions for taxi drivers, increases in the price of electricity, construction in a public park, demolition of an architecturally valuable buildings, building new mines, etc.

The core activists are usually young, educated people who use social media extensively to organize and spread information regarding their activities. The civic initiatives have become an important part of Armenian civil society and have registered some victories., However the government has always viewed the activists as a threat rather than as potential partners in policy dialogue and has used a variety of strategies and measures to continue to shrink the political space, violating the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of

expression. On the other hand, the activists have not initiated a dialogue with the government either, since there has always been a culture of mistrust and frustration.

Disproportionate use of force

Violations of the right to freedom of assembly have long been a core problem of human rights in Armenia, relating to the excessive use of force by law enforcement authorities. In the last decade, the Armenian authorities have tended to react to civic initiatives and social protests with a mixture of suppression, repression, and concession. State authorities often justify their policing of protests as a means to guarantee law and order in the country, while activists consider it a form of repression. State agents, in particular police forces, tend to outnumber the protesters when they see that the movements are growing and becoming a true threat to their authority. The most common tactics have included the use of water cannons with capsaicin (pepper spray), tear gas and baton charges, and in some cases live ammunition on unarmed protesters. Such attacks took place during most of the protests in the last decade, where people were seriously injured or killed.

On March 1, 2008, after ten days of protest against the results of the recent presidential elections, there was a brutal police embargo on the protesters in Yerevan's Freedom Square. That same day, the authorities declared a state of emergency, and army units were deployed in the streets of Yerevan. Ten people (seven protesters and three policemen) were killed in the overnight clashes between police and opposition protesters[5].

In June 2015, during the Electric Yerevan[6] social movement when protesters blockaded the streets with sit-ins, the riot police sprayed protesters with water cannons, and then marched forward to force them out. Plain clothes police officers violently grabbed the protesters from the streets and dragged them behind the police line in order to prevent them to get to the streets again[7]. In order to

manipulate people, the authorities and pro-Russian media labelled the protest as being political and anti-Russia, the utility company being fully owned by a Russian company, despite the fact that it was a social movement.

Detention, ill-treatment and arrest

Along with the violence towards peaceful protesters, another tactic that the police applies during the protests is arrest and detention of activists who are in charge of leading the movements. They try to detain the leaders in order to spread fear among the protesters, hoping they will be afraid to demand what they want. Detention of the activists usually lasted in Armenia from a few hours to three days, after which the activists were released according to the national law. However, there have been cases where activists were arrested and charged with violation of public order and the use of force against the police. Administrative penalties came to replace the detention, and thereby became a mechanism of financial repression of the activists.

In December 2013, the day of Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to Armenia, a large number of citizens held protests in the capital against Armenia joining the Eurasian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. The police dispersed the protests using violence and apprehended 110 peaceful protesters, who were kept in police stations for eight hours without access to legal assistance[8].

In July 2016, in support of the armed veterans ''Sasna Tsrer[9]'' who had seized the police station to demand the release of their jailed leader and the resignation of the president Serzh Sargsyan, dozens of civil activists marched in the streets of the Erebuni district of Yerevan. Despite the Police warning that this was a special crime site and protesters should not pass behind the special unit operation area, protesters did march in that direction. This led to a brutal police crackdown happened, leaving many protesters and policemen injured. Over 200 activists, including the opposition leaders, were detained at various police stations[10]. Most

of them were later released, but social and political activist Andreas Ghukasyan was arrested and faced criminal charges of "organizing mass disorder"[11].

Attacks on political activists

Another existing trend of repression utilized on civil society activists in Armenia is individual attacks on activists by unknown groups of people who are usually bodyguards and/or supports of politicians, in particularly the oligarchs. After these incidents, the police usually announce an investigation, but in most cases does not reveal the perpetrators.

In 2013, activists were staging protests in Yerevan against corruption, inflation, controversial construction plans, and President Serzh Sargsyan's decision to join the Russian-led Customs Union. They were met with violence, both by police officers and organized gangs in the streets. Numerous life-threatening attacks occurred against the activists, including members of such organisations as Transparency International and the Anti-Corruption Centre[12] The police were accused for ignoring the reports filed by the victims and not carrying out proper investigations.

In 2015, thousands of people protested against the referendum for constitutional changes that would turn Armenia into a parliamentary democracy where the prime minister, not the president, would hold power[13]. These changes were to ensure that the present regime would retain its power, and in particular that the President would become Prime Minister, since the constitution did not allow him to be elected as President for three consecutive terms.

The rallies were followed by a number of attacks on individual activists who had reported brutal violence by unknown groups. A female activist participating in the protests against the referendum was threatened several times over the phone, and eventually beaten up by unknown people for participating in the protests[14].

Media restrictions and attacks on journalists

The media coverage of protests in the country has increased in recent years, along with the journalistic criticism of the government. This has led to violent actions against opposition journalists. In November 2008, the head of the Armenian Association of Investigative Journalists, known for his stories exposing government corruption, became the target of a violent attack connected to his reporting[15].

The use of live streaming of protests by local media has also increased over the past few years. This often causes problems for protest policing, especially when force is used against peaceful protesters.

Journalists have experienced harassment and violence during protests. Attacks on journalists usually happen alongside the arbitrary destruction of equipment. The number of attacks on journalists reporting on protests has decreased in the last five years, but they still sometimes suffer from the use of special forces against the protesters.

In July 2015, at least ten journalists suffered burns, bruises, and other injuries after being hit by police stun grenades or beaten in Yerevan while covering a demonstration. They were attacked and beaten up by a large group of men armed with sticks and metal bars. The men, who appeared to be police officers, were clearly aware that they were assaulting reporters[16].

Beside the violence, harassment, and destruction of equipment during protests, attacks on investigative journalists has also been quite common. The most critical journalists who reported on corruption and illegal actions of the government or particular politicians have been harassed and beaten. Again, this usually accompanies damaging equipment, including cars, and seizing materials containing data (phones, computers, flash drives etc.) by groups of unknown people.

In one case, in 2016, the Umbrella Journalists' International Network NGO (MediaLab)

which is popular for producing cartoons that address pressing political, economic and social issues in Armenia, had difficulties organizing an exhibition. The reason behind the difficulties was that the exhibit halls were afraid of the repercussions for hosting this event, and thus refused to rent out their space for this purpose. After holding the exhibition in an open area, the car of the editor-in-chief of the Medialab Newspaper was damaged, and the cartoons were stolen[17].

Social media restrictions were not often utilized by the government during most of the recent protests. Thus social media could serve as a tool for mobilizing protesters. However, there was a case of Facebook being blocked when the police station in Yerevan was seized by the armed opposition activists.

Counter protests

In recent years, a new trend has been developed by the authorities. This involves fake protests against protesters in support of the authorities in general and/or specific politicians that the public is protesting against. This trend has been used mostly by oligarchs who were members of parliament, high level government officials, and mayors. These "fake" protests mostly involve the representatives of government-organized non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) and the employees of oligarchs accused of using their position to make more profit in their businesses. In this way, the politicians want to deceptively demonstrate to society that the decisions the government or local authorities make for themselves also enjoy the support of the people.

3. Reclaiming the Political Space: Resiliency of the Civil Society

Despite the fact that civil society in Armenia has been repressed by the authorities in the last ten years and that there has not been a constructive dialogue between the two sides, it is worth mentioning that there are numerous success stories. Civil society has constructively responded to the repression, built up

resilience, and reclaimed the space which had been narrowed down by the authorities.

Civil society organisations have responded to the repression and the shrinking of the political space by applying a number of long-term and short-term strategies and mechanisms, summarized below:

- Protest as a response to repression: Most civil society organisations and civic activists continue in their work according to their goals to show the authorities that they are not suppressed, and that violence, harassment, and other tactics cannot keep them from fulfilling their mission.
- Networking, Capacity-Building and Advocacy: As a mechanism of response to the narrowing political space, most critical civil society organisations and international donor organisations have created a safe network of CSOs where they can discuss issues, come up with strategies, and work as an alliance. Additionally, the donor organisations involved in the networks have strengthened the capacities of the organisations, and their beneficiaries and have supported more projects on advocacy.
- Mobilization and restraint through online media: The use of social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram etc,) has increased in Armenia over the past 10 years. Civil society organisations thus make use of online space to reach a wider audience and mobilize more people for protests. Facebook groups, pages, and events became quite popular and served as a good tool for communication as well as timely responses in critical situations and in informing the general public.
- Additionally, increasing media coverage of events, especially live streaming and international media coverage, has restrained the radicalization of government action against the public.
- Decentralization and diversification of the civil disobedience: The decentralization and application of different types of public

disobedience has also been utilized recently. This involves occupation of public spaces (squares, parks, pedestrian passages, streets) and widening the geography of protests by organizing parallel protests at the regional and local level (cities, villages). This can obstruct policing and force the authorities to refrain from radical action so as not to disrupt the whole country.

These mechanisms and strategies were applied in Armenia during the recent protests in April 2018 (the 'Velvet Revolution'[18]) when mobilization and dialogue between the political opposition (in this case the 'Civic Contract' party) with its 'My step'-movement[19] and civil society at the end of March 2018 started a parallel movement (Reject Serzh[20]). This led to a peaceful revolution and brought civil society representatives into the government. Despite the use of the whole ''artillery'' of repression by authorities against the hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets, the activists resisted and achieved their goals. This served as proof that an intelligent mix of civil society resistance, dialogue, institutional development, capacity building, and proper use of media resources can lead to reclaiming of the shrunk political space. Despite the pressure from the government in the last decade civil society and civic movements were overall able to develop their resilience, resist, and come up with effective response strategies to reclaim their operational space.

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[19] **"My step"** movement was the initiative of Civic Contract political opposition party which started a march and walked from the Northern Armenia to the capital city of Yerevan to mobilize people for massive protests against the corrupt government and its reproduction.

[20] **"Reject Serzh"** movement was initiated by young civil society representatives for the resignation of the President Serzh Sargsyan who initiated constitutional changes in order to become a Prime Ministry after the two terms of his presidency.