

Armenian prime minister resigns after mass protests

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25 April 2018

After almost two weeks of mass protests, Armenia's prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan, announced on Monday, April 23, that he would step down. Commentators in Russia and internationally expressed fears that the political crisis could lead to a renewed escalation of the frozen military conflict over Nagorno-Karabkh with neighboring Azerbaijan with potentially far-reaching consequences for the entire region.

The protests started 11 days earlier, after Sargsyan announced he would be the country's prime minister after serving 10 years as president. In 2015, Sargsyan had pushed for changes to the constitution that would give him the same powers as prime minister that he had wielded as president.

Initially limited to a few hundred people, drawn largely from supporters of the liberal, pro-EU opposition, the protests rapidly embraced broader sections of the population and spread to cities other than the capital, Yerevan. By April 21, about 100,000 people had joined the protests across the country. Thousands of students at the country's most important universities went on strike. There were also reports of strikes by workers at a number of factories. In a country of just under 3 million people, the protests involved a significant portion of the population and are among the largest in Armenian history.

Nikol Pashinian, who has been celebrated in the Western media as the opposition leader, announced on April 17 that the protest movement constituted a "non-violet velvet revolution."

The scope of the protests, which took virtually everyone by surprise, and the involvement of sections of the working class indicate that more was involved than just the machinations of the pro-EU opposition, which has received barely 8 percent of the votes in the country's last parliamentary elections.

After over a decade in power, Sargsyan was widely associated with a state of corruption and ill-begotten wealth at the top side-by-side with desperate poverty for the majority of the population.

The official unemployment rate stands at almost 18 percent, and almost every third Armenian lives beneath the

very low poverty line. The average salary in the capital Yerevan was just \$390 a month in 2016.

Unlike Russia, Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, Armenia does not have any significant raw material resources, making it one of the poorest and economically most underdeveloped states that emerged out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, about a third of the population has left the country because of the lack of jobs in Armenia.

Hundreds of protesters were arrested by the government, including several opposition leaders.

The situation tipped after the release of the opposition leader Nikol Pashinian on Sunday, April 22, failed to quell the protests. In a televised debate between Sargsyan and Pashinian on April 22, the opposition leader said, "You do not understand the situation in Armenia, the power is now in the hands of the people," to which Sargsyan replied: "a party that has registered only 8 percent at the [legislative] elections cannot speak in the name of the people."

On Monday, up to 200,000 people—almost a tenth of the country's population—again took to the streets calling for Sargsyan to step down. Hundreds of members of the armed forces as well as clergy joined the protests, indicating that important sections of the state apparatus had by then also turned against Sargsyan.

However, the biggest fear of the Armenian bourgeoisie as a whole was that the protests would turn into a full-blown movement by the working class. In a desperate attempt to regain control over the situation, Sargsyan announced his resignation, describing the demonstration as a "turning point for the country." Tens of thousands of people celebrated his resignation.

Pashinian immediately stepped forward, demanding snap elections and for allies of Sargsyan in the government to step down. Protests in support of Pashinian and the opposition on Tuesday drew significantly fewer people than those of the previous days, with about 10,000 supporters marching in Yerevan.

The Russian government has issued statements, insisting that the demonstrations were a matter of Armenia's internal

affairs, and indicating Moscow's hope for a "smooth and peaceful political transition." There is little question that the Kremlin, like the Armenian political establishment, fears a movement of the working class in the Caucasus that could quickly spread beyond the borders of the small country.

The US government and the European Union (EU) are closely following the situation, hoping that a change in government will further their own interests in the region by bringing the liberal opposition into power. US media like the *Atlantic* have celebrated the demonstrations as "Armenia's Democratic Triumph."

While broader sections of the working class and youth were involved in the protests, under conditions of the absence of any political organization that expresses their interests, the liberal opposition has been able to step forward in an attempt to reassert control over the situation in the interests of the bourgeoisie and to advance its own foreign policy agenda.

The political crisis in Armenia has implications far beyond the borders of the country. Due to its geographic location in the Caucasus, which functions as a bridgehead between eastern Europe and the Middle East and possesses some of the world's largest oil reserves, developments in the region have far-reaching implications for the geopolitical situation internationally.

Ever since 1991, the Armenian government has maintained very close ties to Russia, by far its most important economic and military partner. Russia also has an important military base in southern Armenia. In recent years, however, the Armenian government has undertaken tentative steps toward a rapprochement with the EU. Yet in 2013, the government backed away from signing an Association Agreement with the EU, and instead joined the Russia-led Eurasian Union. The liberal opposition has sharply criticized this move and has continued to advocate for an Association Agreement with the EU.

In February 2017, the Armenian government announced that it wanted to work within both the EU and the Eurasian Union, and signed an agreement for closer economic and political ties with the EU. The liberal opposition advocates a pro-market platform and deeper cooperation with the EU, including EU membership. Several members and trustees of the opposition party Civil Contract, which Nikol Pashinian represents, are entrepreneurs, current or former members of the Armenian political establishment, or are working in the US.

The tactical differences over foreign policy within the Armenian bourgeoisie have been significantly exacerbated by the escalating war drive of US imperialism against Russia in both eastern Europe and the Middle East, while the development of growing working class struggles in both

Europe and the Middle East has sent shock waves through the ruling class in the region.

Armenia is surrounded by Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran. Turkey is a NATO member and has historically had hostile relations with Armenia, while Georgia and Azerbaijan are closely aligned with US imperialism.

Iran, Armenia's only foreign policy ally among its neighbors, was shaken by mass working class protests last winter. At the same time, the increasingly aggressive posture of US imperialism, which threatens all-out war with Iran, has exacerbated nervousness and tensions in the entire Caucasus. Russian media have been running reports that US-backed Israel and Iran are standing on the brink of war.

Armenia itself has been in a state of war with its neighbor, Azerbaijan, over Nagorno-Karabakh, a small mountain enclave in southern Azerbaijan, since the late 1980s. The war over the territory from 1988 to 1994 took the lives of 20,000 to 30,000, wounded 50,000 and permanently displaced hundreds of thousands of people. The conflict was never resolved, and border clashes have occurred repeatedly in recent years.

Both in the Russian media and in Armenia there were warnings that the current political crisis might fuel a renewed outbreak of the conflict. Thus, the Russian online newspaper *Gazeta.Ru* warned that the South Caucasus could become "something like a Middle East in miniature, the hearth for a new war," if Azerbaijan were to exploit the current political crisis in Armenia and intervene militarily to reestablish control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan, one of the most important oil-producing countries in the world, has maintained close ties to both the EU and especially US imperialism, which has built up extensive ties with Azeri oil and gas companies since 1991. Azerbaijan has also been an important ally in the US war preparations against Iran and would likely receive US backing in any open military clash with Armenia.



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