



## **The winning recipe of Revolution 'Love and Solidarity': Armenian style**

Prepared by Anna Arutshyan, Society Without Violence, Armenia



A small landlocked post-soviet country was on international news headlines<sup>i</sup> recently and the reason, luckily, was not a natural disaster, mass killings or a terrorist attack that usually attracts global media attention in less developed world but the phenomenon of exceptional character of civil disobedience acts bringing to the unprecedented non-violent bottom-up revolution in the post-Soviet territory.

## **What in fact happened and why:**

Since 2008 Serj Sargsyan was in power for 10 years as the president of Armenia. As his two-term presidency was coming to end, he was seeking legal paths to keep his political and economic monopoly in the country and under a 2015 Constitutional referendum Armenia shifted powers from the presidency to parliament. Under the new Constitution, in April 2018 Parliament elected Serj Sargsyan as the new prime minister potentially paving for his indefinite rule in power.

This 'smooth' transition from president to prime minister was happening in the light of the formed corruption and oligarchic regime with close ties to Serj Sargsyan, his family members and the ruling party. Serj Sargsyan and his government left almost 30% of the country to live below poverty line and the economic growth has benefitted only the top 5% of the 2.9 million population of Armenia.

In late March 2018 parliamentarian Nikol Pashinyan began a protest march from the second large city of Gyumri to Yerevan (capital city of Armenia) ahead of the president's switch to prime minister. The movement quickly galvanized and under the pressure of people who took to the streets on 22nd April Serj Sargsyan and Nikol Pashinyan had a brief meeting in the presence of media. The talks collapsed very quickly as Serj Sargsyan left the room reminding about 2008 tragic events of March 1 when 10 demonstrators were killed by police during the peaceful protests against Serj Sargsyan presidency.

In hours after Nikol Pashinyan left the negotiation room he was kidnapped and taken into the unknown direction and the situation got even more escalated and urged more people to take to the streets. On the next day 23<sup>rd</sup> April (Armenian Genocide Commemoration Eve) Serj Sargsyan resigned with a remarkable speech. He said: 'The movement on the streets is against my rule, I will comply.' "Pashinyan was right, I was wrong'.

23<sup>rd</sup> April was a day of national celebration in Armenia when people were dancing on the streets in euphoric state of mind and firm conviction of the better future for Armenia. On 8th May under people's pressure and physical presence on the square Parliament of Armenia (where Serj Sargsyan's Republican Party has majority) elected people's candidate Nikol Pashinyan as an interim prime minister of Armenia before snap elections.

The Armenian revolution was declared to be a Revolution of Love and Solidarity and it took 40 days from the first day of protest march to the day when Parliament elected people's candidate as prime minister of the country.

It would be naïve to think that such an uprising would have been possible overnight and I wish to share my own bespoke recipe of Armenian revolution of Love and Solidarity. The ingredients are:

### **1. Decentralised acts of civil disobedience**

Since 1996 post-election (both presidential and parliamentary) atmosphere in the country was tense and it was always accompanied with demonstrations. The same scenario was applied every time, when demonstrators were circled by police, brutally beaten, dispersed or detained illegally. Protest marches and demonstrations were centralised around the opposition leader who lost the elections and they were mostly built on hatred, condemnation against the ruling power under quite negative slogans or no slogans at all. It was a struggle AGAINST.

2018 protests was built on the whole different concept. It was a struggle FOR. It was a flight for inclusiveness, love, non-violence. It was a revolution of open hands, liberation of police from doing unlawful orders. It was a struggle of unity but not separation and destruction. It became unbeatable as it was decentralised, people were self-organising themselves, when they understood their power of disobedience, when they understood that each of them was capable of an action without any instructions from the high platforms. Streets, roads were paralysed with the most creative solutions: mums with strollers walking on the main roads, children with toy cars across the streets, people took their business to the street (barbers were doing haircut on the main streets), people took out their grills out to the street for BBQ party, orchestras were playing concerts on the streets, etc. etc.

Everybody was out on the streets- feminists, misogynists, bigots, liberals, conservatives, gays, transgender people, heterosexuals, homophobes, transphobes, nationalists, anarchists, literally everybody was united for love and solidarity to win over tyranny, corruption and single-party rule. But it was not a cacophony, it was very organic accompanied with smart political technologies (songs, hashtags, digital technologies, social media, etc.).



### **2. History of civil initiatives in the past**

On the day of the election of prime minister by Parliament, parliamentarian Lena Nazaryan in her speech said: 'It is a historic day and the revolution is a culmination of two decades of despair and struggle'. Indeed through the years various civil initiatives were organised and in each of them feminists were playing the pivotal role. Feminists, women's rights advocates were

out on the streets on all occasions of civil initiatives regarding ecological, economic, social, educational, military issues. Most of the time they were intimidated, mocked, ignored, beaten, harassed, threatened but never defeated. The euphoric victory was double, triple overwhelming for feminists, human rights activists as for years they were told that their struggle was in vain and doomed to failure. It was not just a celebration of overthrowing the tyranny but the celebration of the righteousness that peaceful protests, civil disobedience methods do succeed.

### **3. Civil society sector's work of years**

On the day when Serj Sargsyan resigned, I was thinking that perhaps he was heavily regretting that he did not follow his tyrant colleagues from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, Turkey and closed down all civil society organisations or jail dissidents. Eventually the awakening of the people, acknowledging their own power and demanding truly democratic processes in the country was partially happened thanks to the tireless, low-paid/unpaid, ungrateful work of civil society actors. Civil society actors, human rights activists, feminist activists and scholars were constantly working under the backlash, mainstream propaganda that they were imported by immoral West to destroy Armenian culture and families. Most of the threats were directed against feminists of course, as they were labelled as "grant eaters", 'traitors', 'disseminators of homosexuality, paedophilia, and indecency'. Personally I consider this revolution as an impact of the work



that civil society was doing from the remote parts of the rural areas having talks, discussions and trainings with people. Apparently a drop to the sea throughout long years accumulated into a big, thrashing wave of tsunami.

### **4. Women's power**

In the patriarchal society with androcentric and sexist norms on the day of the election in the Parliament, Nikol Pashinyan said: 'This revolution would have never happened without women. They were the generators of our movement and I hope they will remain the main actors in the process of

state building.' That day was like a dream to me, as I cannot recall any recollection of women's recognition in any public processes in the country. Yes, soon after Government formation, 80% of it is represented by men and the whole post-revolution is absorbed with testosterone but it was the first time in the history of Armenia when the role of women was acknowledged publicly by the prime-minister. Usually women are remembered and 'respected' on the day of March 8th as symbols of tenderness, sweetness and



obedience. This revolution was breaking stereotypes, gender rigid roles in the society, women, especially young women were making bold statements and self-organising pickets and marches with slogans 'Serj Sargsyan is not our father, we don't need a father!', 'Women's place is not in the kitchen, but in the revolution'. LGBT

groups were hand to hand fighting on the political front line and there was no atmosphere of fear and disconnect.

Of course, it would be delusional to think that homophobia, sexism and bigotry were radically eliminated from the mindset of people these days. Feminists, women, LGBT activists and advocates of inclusiveness and equal representation have a long path to go. Not to be a killjoy but the society cannot change overnight, more years of painful struggle is ahead of us. And most importantly, we should remember that every moment, every single gained accomplishment can be taken from us, it can regress back with gain of the power by conservative, nationalist right wing forces.

### **5. Young generation free from Soviet syndrome**

About 250,000 protesters poured into Republic Square, the largest demonstration in Armenia's 27 years of post-Soviet independence. Once started as a youth disobedience act, it escalated into a tangible mass demonstration with determined people to make a real change in the country. On the early days of the revolution we read many papers on the role of the youth in the movement. Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 but it did not kill soviet totalitarian mentality in people. People cannot easily reform their political construct and it may happen only through natural change of generations when with free flow of information, worldwide education is accessible, free mind set from enslavement is released, dependence on super powers, in confidence in their own strength and capabilities is a history. Young women were exceptional in their vision of struggle, bold and vocal. Many of them were shamed by police to go back home where they belong, young women were fearless and courageous on closing roads and urging their classmates to join them in the strike.

### **6. Awakening of citizen consciousness**

Another surprising phenomenon observed was that people were not indifferent towards each other, there was no sense of apathy and despair prevailing in the country for decades. It was an awakening call where everybody does have a communal commitment (early in the morning after mass demonstrators, people were self-organising and cleaning the squares, streets from litter). Citizen consciousness was raising: they understood their power as a constituency and started to write letters to their MPs, they started to feel



their power as consumers and boycotted shops, supermarkets for oligarchs. They out loud or secretly started to curse themselves for trading their votes, acknowledged their rights as tax payers, the dreadfulness of election bribes and the harm of political and economic monopoly to the country. But most importantly they understood the power of uprising.

## 7. Vote of confidence in people's power

Many academic researches, political analysis will be written on the phenomenon of the Armenian revolution, but there is one undeniable victory for me - whatever government will come to power in Armenia now, it has to acknowledge the power of people, it has to acknowledge its accountability and service to the people, otherwise we are ready to rebel and reject the tyranny again and again.

We learned a new culture of peaceful demand for rights and dignity, a new form of civil disobedience which proved to be successful and won over brutal force, hatred and intimidation. I am a proud Armenian now who is known to the world not as a mourning nation and victimized ethnos of Armenian genocide, but as an offspring of the people demonstrating to the world how bottom-up, no external geopolitical stakeholders involved, driven by the love and desire to build a strong and egalitarian state can transpire.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-armenia-election-20180507-story.html>  
<http://www.international-alert.org/blog/who-are-armenias-protesters-and-what-can-we-learn-them>  
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