

Is the Party Over?

*Limits and Opportunities of Civil Society in Armenia and Georgia**

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Abstract

The concept of civil society has been a key topic in the ongoing attempt to explain the socio-political changes in the former Soviet Union and especially in countries that experienced peaceful revolutions (the so called color revolutions). This piece attempts to offer some explanations on recent trends of civil society (in)activism in Armenia and Georgia by focusing on the correlations between increasingly responsive (aka democratic) governments and the intensity of activism that civil society groups have generated. The research argues that in the past decade or so, as Georgia became more democratic, civil society activism has declined sharply, whereas in Armenia the trend has gone in the opposite direction, with an increase in civil society activism as successive governments have become less responsive and accountable.

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The definition of civil society used in this research is taken from the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics. According to this definition, civil society

...refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, **its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market...**

... Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.¹ *Emphasis mine*

This being said, it is important to make it clear that the operation of civil society is not contingent on the

existence of democratic structures, as it is quite possible to have elements of civil society operating in non-democratic countries. At the same time, not all democracies are conducive to civil society movements.²

While it is possible for civil society and democracy to be mutually exclusive, civil society and commitment to civil action go hand in hand. Commitment to civil action is characterized as individuals acting in unison to advocate "collective action within an array of interests, institutions and networks, developing civic identity, and involving people in governance processes."³ Furthermore, commitment to civil action occurs through participation in civil society where individual citizens are provided with opportunities to interact with politicians in order to influence policy or politics.⁴ The development of civil society and civil action are possible either through government encouragement and development of such institutions—in the case of more open and democratic societies—or through bottom-up processes whereby grass-root organizations coalesce to form civil society groups and encourage citizen participation in political processes.

¹ "Definition of Civil Society" Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction.htm#generated-subheading2> retrieved on 03/31/2008.

² Brian O'Connell, "Civil Society: Definitions and Descriptions," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (September 2000): 477.

³ Terry L. Cooper, Thomas A. Bryer, and Jack W. Meek, "Citizen-Centered Collaborative Public Management," *Public Administration Review* 66, Supp. 1 (December 2006): 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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Finally in a democratic setting, civil society acts as a mediator between individuals and the state apparatus, thereby acting as a conduit for personal views and values to state institutions.⁵

The other concept that is important for the current discussion is the phenomenon of the “color revolution”. This refers to the relatively bloodless and popular movements to change governments that occurred first in Serbia (2000) and soon afterwards in the former Soviet Union, in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). The term “color revolution” is used to describe as a single phenomenon a number of non-violent protests that succeed in overthrowing authoritarian regimes. This has involved thousands of people with colored symbols taking to the streets to show their discontent with the current regime, while the opposition leadership, legitimated by such crowds, has been able to negotiate political change with the authorities. Geographically, the term

has tended to encompass only post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, though there is evidence that similar movements for change have been initiated in the Middle East (Lebanon, 2005), North Africa (Tunisia (2010), Egypt (2011), and Asia (Myanmar, 2007).⁶

In all of these revolutions, distinct and multi-stage patterns emerged. The desire to oust corrupt leaders was not in itself sufficient to achieve that goal. Rather, politically active youth tried to raise money and devised marketing campaigns, adopting short, catchy names and logos for their movements. They also successfully used mass media to transmit their message with the hope of getting people to vote and take to the streets.⁷ This has led some scholars to argue about the role of civil society in establishing the foundations of democracy.⁸ However, the main question that needs to be asked is, “what next?” The civil society groups that managed to bring opposition forces together and spearhead the color revolutions seem to have been tossed aside by the former opposition, now the ruling elite, which has resulted in a major decrease in their funding and activities.

⁶ Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese eds., *The Colour Revolutions in the former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

⁷ A detailed aspect of this issue is explored in a documentary by Tania Rakhmanova, *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*, DVD (Brooklyn, New York: Icarus Films, 2006).

⁸ Alan Whaites, “Let’s Get Civil Society Straight: NGOs and Political Theory,” *Development in Practice* 6, no. 3 (August 1996): 240.

⁵ Patrick M. Jenlink, “Creating Public Spaces and Practiced Places for Democracy, Discourse, and the Emergence of Civil Society,” *Systematic Practice and Action Research* 20, no. 5 (October 2007): 432.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the case of Georgia, where civil society and opposition groups managed to topple the undemocratic regime of Eduard Shevardnadze and to establish the foundations of a democratic state. What ensued, however, was the rapid decline of the role and level of activism of civil society groups and the redirection of international donor funding away from civil society and toward the newly established democratic government of Mikheil Saakashvili.

Based on preliminary research, the following observations can be made. While revolutions are commonly viewed as spontaneous phenomena, the color revolutions were not. They were long, arduous, and meticulously prepared. The successful deployment of modern marketing techniques, coupled with a strong civil society, has been a trademark of these revolutions. It was because of this strategy that the population rallied behind the political opposition and successfully challenged the hotly contested and disputed presidential elections in each respective country where the incumbent had been declared victorious.

That said, the phenomenon of the color revolution seems to have run its course, yet not much attention has been given to this notion. The continued euphoria and optimism about positive change prevails in the mindset of most scholars, as does

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the belief that the revolutions have changed the course of history in the countries where they occurred. Furthermore, civil society groups, which were the driving force behind these revolutions and which continue to operate as advocates for various social issues, remain mostly neglected by analysts, and their role as societal forces is insufficiently explored by scholars.⁹ Politicians and academics alike have been fascinated and compelled by the peaceful overthrow of leaders who seemed irreplaceable and deeply entrenched across the former Soviet space. In 2003, the internal security forces in Tbilisi were confused when faced with crowds carrying roses. The confusion was based on the fact that they were trained to disperse angry and violent mobs, and were empowered to shoot; they were thrown off guard when teenage girls and boys with smiling faces placed roses in the barrels of their guns.

⁹ For a basic definition on the concept of civil society and its domains of activity see Patrick M. Jenlink, "Creating Public Spaces and Practiced Places for Democracy, Discourse, and the Emergence of Civil Society," *Systematic Practice and Action Research* 20, no. 5 (October 2007) and Brian O'Connell, "Civil Society: Definitions and Descriptions," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (September 2000).

Civil Society Trends in Armenia and Georgia

Unlike Georgia, Armenia did not witness any color revolutions for various reasons that will not be

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discussed within this piece. However, this analysis will look at another interesting trend that emerged in Armenia. After the disputed presidential election of February 2008, the Armenian opposition—which was supported by the fledgling civil society community—took to the streets. However, within two weeks, it had been violently suppressed and dispersed. The authorities cracked down on any form of political rallying and gathering in major cities. However, the heavy hand of government did not disrupt the activities of civil society, which over the past four years has witnessed increased levels of activism and has expanded its scope beyond traditionally political issues, including environmental protection and police corruption, among others.

One of the more recent events that highlights the level of civil society activism in Armenia includes a lawsuit brought by an activist with the youth movement “SOS Teghut”, Ms. Mariam Sukhudyan, against the

country’s chief of police for violating her rights, under an article which states that a suspect is presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Several months earlier, Ms. Sukhudyan publicized a case of child abuse by a teacher which had been covered up by the police. Eventually, Ms. Sukhudyan was charged with intentionally slandering the teacher for her own personal benefit.¹⁰ This event is just one example of activism by Armenian civil society groups, which in recent years have given particular focus to social justice, women’s rights and environmental issues. This activism has occurred in spite – or indeed perhaps because of – the fact that Armenia never saw its own color revolution.

In Georgia after the Rose Revolution of 2003, a government of “idealists” came to power. With a younger generation in government and with the support from western institutions (including but not limited to USAID and the Millennium Challenge Program) it seemed that the playing field for civil society groups was transferred from the public domain into the government circles. According to one observer, after the Rose Revolution, a new tendency developed, which became a trend and then a norm. Before 2003, young university graduates ventured into the

¹⁰ For details see Nanore Barsoumian, “Activist Takes Cops to Court in Armenia,” *The Armenian Weekly*, October 29, 2010. <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/10/29/activist-takes-cops-to-court-in-armenia>. Last accessed January 20, 2011.

This narrative was echoed by another Georgian civil society activist, who when asked, “is civil society in Georgia dying?”, responded, “no, it is not dying, it is already dead!”

NGO sector for various reasons, not least because of the disillusionment with the Shevardnadze regime as well as the relatively higher salaries.¹¹ However, since 2005, the Saakashvili government managed to attract the new generation of university graduates to employment for two main reasons. First, government employees were offered higher paid and better working conditions than their counterparts in the NGO sector (the reverse of the situation eight years ago). Secondly, most of the social and political reform programs formerly run by NGOs were eventually adopted by the new government, hence depriving NGOs of their *raison d'être*, as well as their human and financial resources.¹² This narrative was echoed by another

¹¹ The choice of terms “Shevardnadze regime” and “Saakashvili government” is intended to highlight the difference of political system under the two leaders. Thus “regime” signifies a set of rules and governing mechanisms (which are not necessarily democratic and could entail elements of nepotism) whereas “government” suggests a group of people who have constitutional authority to govern. The next presidential elections in Georgia, scheduled for October 2013, and the subsequent potential role of Saakashvili as a powerful prime minister (akin to what Vladimir Putin did in Russia), might re-categorize his political activism from “Saakashvili government” to “Saakashvili regime” with possible negative consequences on the development of state institutions and also the democratization process of the country.

¹² Personal interview with Otar Kantaria, Senior Officer for Programs and Development at the United Nations Association of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia. 31 May, 2011.

Georgian civil society activist, who when asked, “is civil society in Georgia dying?”, responded, “no, it is not dying, it is already dead!”¹³

That said, after the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, there were significant changes in international funding for civil society groups in Georgia. Immediately after the war, the U.S. announced a \$1 billion aid package to help rebuild Georgian infrastructure.¹⁴ According to some sources, of that \$1 billion, almost \$200 million targeted the rejuvenation of Georgia's civil society, focusing on watchdog groups such as Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) to help encourage government accountability led by civil society groups.¹⁵

In Armenia the situation was a bit different. While there was small civil society community active even before the Rose Revolution in Georgia, there was no unifying force bringing all the various elements together, at least until the 2008 disputed presidential elections, when the opposition under the leadership of former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan managed to mobilize not only the opposition political forces in the country but also various civil society groups ranging from social to environmental rights

¹³ Personal interview with anonymous civil society activist, Tbilisi, Georgia. 9 June, 2011.

¹⁴ Rice: U.S. to Give \$1 Billion to ‘Help Georgia Sustain Itself’, The Washington Post, 4 September 2008.

¹⁵ Personal interview with anonymous civil society activist, Tbilisi, Georgia. 8 June, 2011.

groups. What was different about the post-2008 activism was that the political polarization and mass rallies helped mobilize a younger generation of civil society activists. Later, after the political climate settled down and the possibility of regime change receded, civil society groups faced yet another challenge - the level of mistrust from the public. Many people view civil society groups as "spies", a fifth column controlled by "foreign entities."¹⁶ Furthermore, Armenia's civil society groups, as is the case for many post-Soviet countries including Azerbaijan, face serious funding deficits from national sources. For the most part, funds come from international donor agencies and embassies - further propagating the misconception that civil society groups are "foreign agents." It should be mentioned that issues such as women's rights, police corruption and environmental degradation have been at the forefront of public discussion among citizens' initiative groups. Moreover, it seems that even with this limited funding and increased government restrictions, civil society in Armenia seems to be attracting younger activists and is able to put pressure on government decision makers, with varying degrees of success.

Future Outlook

On 7 July 2009, when President

Obama visited Russia, he attended a meeting organized by U.S. and Russian civil society groups where he argued that strengthening civil society and community activism in Russia would eventually result in a stronger, more stable and more democratic Russia.¹⁷ This sentiment was echoed almost exactly a year later on 3 July 2010 by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Krakow. She made similar observations, arguing that civil society advocacy is the foundation of democracies in Eastern Europe and lies at the heart of U.S.-Polish cooperation.¹⁸ Considering the central role that civil society is poised to play in U.S. foreign policy, understanding the limits and opportunities of civil society movements in Armenia and Georgia could help U.S. policy makers better understand and subsequently support the consolidation of democracy in those countries.

To that end, it is extremely important for U.S. policy makers to directly or indirectly nurture and support civil society movements in Armenia as Georgia as mechanisms to develop a checks and balance system against the governments. The fact remains that internal checks and balances within the government are absent in both Armenia and Georgia.

¹⁶ For the full transcript of President Obama's remarks see http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-by-the-president-at-parallel-civil-society-summit/. Last accessed on 30 June, 2012.

¹⁷ For full transcript of the speech see <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/143952.htm>. Last accessed on 30 June 2012.

¹⁶ Personal interview with anonymous civil society activist, Yerevan, Armenia. 26 July, 2011.

Strengthening civil society remains the best alternative for continued state building in the South Caucasus and for helping the long-term development of democracy and accountability in both countries.

