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A Self-Repeating Crisis: the Systemic Dysfunctionality of Armenian Politics

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Abstract

As much as ‘crisis’, the notions of ‘standoff’, ‘civil resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ also characterize the summer events of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan. Furthermore, the idea of ‘dysfunctional politics’ can be used to describe these events as well. The “Electric Yerevan” movement and riots connected with the seizure of the police station in Yerevan by the armed group “The Daredevils of Sassoun” reflect some of the fundamental changes in society regarding attitudes and political behavior. They also reflect deep flaws within the political institutions and processes.

Input Problems

These events can be analyzed and understood with the articulation of one of the classic theories of political science: systemic theory, which was suggested by renowned American political scientist David Easton. In this context, the issues of the ‘input’ and ‘output’ of the political system reveal the fundamental problems of Armenian politics. First, the responsiveness of the political institutions towards the ‘input’ of demands and support of society should be analyzed. Second, this analysis should be coupled with an understanding of the appropriateness and timeliness of the ‘output’ of the political system (in form of decisions and actions) to those demands and grievances.

The basic suggestion is that the political system in Armenia has developed in a way that has eliminated a variety of channels for providing the ‘input’ of the political system. Very few ways for reflecting societal grievances have been left open, particularly cooptation into the ‘ruling elite’ or mass protests. Hence, analysis of the reasons that lead to the dysfunctionality of the ‘input’ of the political system in particular can help in understanding the events of the hectic Julys of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan.

David Easton suggests that political life is a “system of activity” and mainly what keeps the system going are the “inputs of various kinds” that are later transformed into policy results or outputs as a result of the political process. There are two types of inputs that need to be distinguished: support and demands. These two types of inputs should be analyzed separately.

In terms of support, various political institutions and the Armenian political system in general have long lacked public support. This lack can be traced by looking at the trust of the people towards various political institutions, as far as support is usually generated as a result of trust. The trends are not encouraging either; the polls show that public trust in the President decreased from 54% in 2008 to 19% in 2013, with some deviations along the way, and trust in the government during the same period decreased from 42% to 14%. Meanwhile, trust towards the political parties has never been particularly high but still shows decreasing tendencies, from 12% in 2012 to 10% in 2013 (Iskandaryan, CAD, 2015). It is difficult to predict this situation improving in the foreseeable future, particularly taking into account the economic hardship in the everyday life of citizens and general macroeconomic trends in the country.

While speaking of demands, it should be emphasized that the channels for transferring them into the political system do work. The political parties that are supposed to be the main structures that channel public demands into the political system are rather underdeveloped. The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which is heavily entrenched in the government system, is rather a conglomerate or mega-party. It includes different “parties” and factions, for instance the party of influential economic actors, or oligarchs, or the party of technocratic youth, etc. This situation creates self-enclosed circles of interests that exclude the demands of

those parts of society that are not affiliated with them. The other parties are not influential enough to make any significant changes in the way the political system operates. The opposition has regularly been shattered after almost all elections since the early 2000s.

Other structures that are supposed to reflect public demands, such as different state institutions, the media, certain CSOs, etc., have been overloaded with special interests and informal practices. The influence of special interests has been especially evident regarding the economy. According to different estimates, the size of the informal economy in Armenia lingers between 30% and 45%. Informal institutions (kinship, informal economy, etc.) are often used to avoid any interaction with state structures. In a properly functioning political system, a significant chunk of demands and grievances would come from the economic actors. As this is not the case in Armenia, the result is that direct input into the political system is avoided.

As a result of the described situation with the political institutions, the debates on certain social, economic and other policies that were supposed to take place in the parliament or in/among the political parties currently take place in the media (including social media platforms), civil society organizations and, of course, in the streets. In such a situation, where the main channels of transferring public demands into the political system are informal, the ruling party operates in a so-called “Thatcherite” “TINA—there is no alternative” policy environment.

Are There Alternatives?

Social protests have become one of the main channels to overcome dysfunction in the political system in terms of providing inputs to the system. In fact, in a way they tried *to use human agency to counter the system or to offer certain alternatives to different policies.*

A series of protests during almost a decade have included environmental movements. Since 2008 Armenia has seen a steady activation of those movements. An effort to preserve the “Trchkan” waterfall from having a hydro-power plant built on it was a success and provided an impetus for further movements. One of the most important movements was a rather long protest to preserve “Mash-tots” park in central Yerevan. Before the protests began, the plan was to build private boutiques in the park. Later, during 2013–2016, Armenia saw a series of protests every summer. In 2013, there were protests against the transportation price hike. 2014 saw protests against the new pension system, while in 2015 people took to the streets to protest electricity price hikes; this later event became famous with its Twitter hash tag of #ElectricYerevan. Finally, in 2016 a group of armed militants seized a police station in the Erebuni district of Yerevan and took hostages, yet

in a counterintuitive way were supported by large protests. One of the stable mantras of the movements until 2016 was that they operate at the civil dimension and do not want to be associated with politics or political structures. In fact, any association with politics was regarded as a “spoiling the purity of a civil cause”.

These movements have generated in essence somewhat leftist discourses in Armenian political and public debates, inferring the importance of the common interest over private gains, public spaces over private business interests, etc. *The protests, however, civic or social as they may be, are political at their core, and not simply political, but to a certain extent leftist.* Meanwhile, regardless of the fact that these movements, at least at the level of discursive practices, offer certain alternatives to the ruling policies, *they are still incapable “of fixing the input problem”* discussed above. Why is that so? Why did these movements fail to transform into larger forms of alternatives to the ruling party elite and its policies? First, they never transformed into institutional structures that could yield real political results and participate in the institutional political life of the country. Second, they lacked the human and financial resources to achieve the first goal. Therefore, these movements remained in limbo—there were not enough energy and resources to tackle every issue in the country via civil resistance, nor were there enough resources and will to transform those movements into political structures. Hence, it turned out that these movements were, in fact, *trying to fix the systemic dysfunctional problems of Armenian politics via non-systemic means.* This approach yielded some results in certain cases and none in others, but it certainly cannot be underestimated or downplayed in the sense of creating the basis for new forms of political discourses, notably leftist.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the situation in July 2016 with the group of armed men (“The daredevils of Sassoun”) seizing a police station in Yerevan was somewhat different and complex. It goes without saying that the group presented its actions as an ultimate form of countering the corrupt regime and demanded the resignation of the incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan. The most obvious political demand, and the fact that the armed group was connected with the political structure called “Founding Parliament” led by Nagorno-Karabakh war veteran Jirayr Sefilyan, left no chances for depoliticizing a political movement. In comparison with previously mentioned social movements, this time the situation was rather different, though the idea that social movements had political connotations and were largely generated by the notion that the people are politically disenfranchised and disenfranchised showed up more clearly than in previous occasions.

Still, it goes back to the idea that ‘input’ of the political system is not working properly and the grievances that are brought about by every movement are not being addressed.

The Larger Context

Recent developments in the Western political systems, i.e., the upsurge of far right political forces in many countries from Europe to the United States and of some far left movements in some parts of Europe, a general frustration with political elites, etc., can also be attributed to the idea that political systems are having problems securing stable, consistent and institutional ‘inputs’. Of course, this process has been growing in the West for at least a few decades and notably has very different reasons and applications in practical politics than in the post-Soviet area. Nevertheless, there is one similarity that is vocal and outspoken: *the growing gap between what is called “the ordinary” people and the “elites”*. Many social and political movements have adopted this line of thought across the world. Armenia is no exception; it was one of the most important mantras of opposition forces ever since the inception of the republic. So what is the difference now? Why did this idea recently find new life? It would be tempting to say that because Armenia also adopted this line of political thought, the country entered into the general maze of Western political discourses, which is definitely right to some extent, but there are other reasons as well. Armenia was one of the most industrial republics of the Soviet Union, with almost total literacy and a well-educated population that could be generally described as a “Soviet middle class”. After the collapse of the Union, war and almost total breakdown of the Armenian economy, a huge gap appeared between the educational capabilities and over-

all awareness of the population and real life economy. As in all post-Soviet countries, newly formed political and economic elites emerged and became intertwined, controlling a large segment of the economy that still survived the changes, creating a real gap and depriving many from getting their share of the economic pie. Another specific reason has shown up recently. April 2016 saw the most severe clashes between Armenian forces and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1994 cease-fire, to the extent that it was characterized as a “4-day war” or the “April war”. Some misgivings by and shortcomings in the army were largely discussed in the context of “Why have taxes not been spent properly?” and the like.

Thus, there are specific, locally generated reasons for the idea of the divide between the public and the elites but that also fits into the overall trends of the post-Soviet transition and of international political trends and discourses as well.

Conclusion

The input channels of the Armenian political system have been predominantly dysfunctional for almost two decades. This dysfunction does not provide possibilities for securing the necessary inputs in the form of demands and support in order to later produce relevant outputs in the form of actions and decisions, which has a great deal to do with the underdeveloped political party system and with the parties themselves as structures, as well as with the fact that the other structures (state institutions, etc.) that are supposed to provide inputs are overloaded with special interests and informal practices. Recent social movements, which are essentially political, are a means of trying to use human agency to overcome the dysfunction of the system.

About the Author

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