

## ON THE ISSUES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ARMENIA: CIVIC INFLUENCE OR A STEP TOWARDS DEMOCRATIZATION?

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### Abstract

Social movements in Armenia are a topical subject of political science analysis by both world, regional and Armenian researchers. Scientific interest in Armenia in this topic of social movements and civic influence arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when democratization began in the political life of the Armenian society. In this article, social movements are analyzed as an organized structure of actions, which is endowed with certain democratic resources, presence in a public environment, special knowledge and skills that allow effective communication with public authorities in order to resolve this discontent. From this boiling point, social movements represent an integral element of the democratic regime of the political system of the Armenian transformational society. Public movements in Armenia are a mechanism for expressing the point of view of representatives of civil society, a way of highlighting in the public space those discontent that arise in society, a way of citizens' participation in politics, and not just in the period between elections. The article focuses on the fact that social movements in Armenia can also be viewed as a democratic resource that should be more effectively cooperated with the authorities, the ruling party and other parliamentary parties for a civilized solution of problems, in which the authorities and the civil environment are interested.

**Keywords:** human rights, citizenship, civic activism, social movements, democratization, post-communist countries, Armenia, accountability, transparency

### Introduction

The social problem of the article and its relevance are due to the presence of a contradiction that arises, on the one hand, from the need to participate in public and political life, and on the other hand, from the inability to really influence political life. Participation in the activities of parties on a regular basis is the field of activity of professionals who make up a small part of society. For ordinary citizens, movements are the most attractive form of social and political participation. The existence of a contradiction at the individual level implies a high degree of deprivation against the

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backdrop of a low standard of living of the population and distrust of formal institutions. At a structural level, this is due to the viability of informal rules, the transformation of old institutions and the creation of new structures in Armenian society. All this has a significant impact on the actual participation of citizens in public and political life.

Social movements in Armenia have undergone cardinal changes: the institutional environment has been transformed, new democratic institutions have appeared, such as elections, parliament, the institution of presidency, political parties and public organizations have been modified (della Porta 2017, 9-15). The most popular forms of civic participation are social movements, which, unlike political parties, are characterized by a dynamic structure and weakly expressed power relations within the organizational hierarchy, which corresponds to the current situation. Social movements adapt faster than others to new social conditions, accumulate new ideas, adapt to changed rules. They act as spokesmen for the interests of individuals, social strata and groups of society, draw attention to topical issues, provide support to leaders and political parties. The formation of movements and the political and social organizations they form is determined by the evolution of the social structure, the organization of actions into sustainable practices (Rhomberg and Lopez 2021, 37-43). This process allows for effective interaction between movements, government and society.

The limits of the effectiveness of social movements and NGOs in Armenia should become a social state, since the space of equality and the space of freedom do not correlate well with each other. Unfortunately, human security practically does not correlate with either tolerance or dialogue. Our time has posed such tragic questions and challenges to democracy as a way of organizing political power in Armenian society that the answers are not yet visible even in the distant future, and real political practice is, at best, an adequate momentary reaction of the government and parliament (Aleksanyan 2019).

The level of democracy in Armenia is mainly related to the activities of NGOs and civil initiatives, which ensure the relative stability of the political system. On the one hand, Armenian democracy is characterized as inferior, with partial violation of the principles of democracy. On the other hand, civic culture reaches a comparatively average degree of democratization. Thus, the analysis of the democratic movement in Armenia and the political conditions in the post-Soviet region in which civil movements operate is not only an interesting topic for political analysis, but also relevant at the transitional stage of the Armenian political system (Aleksanyan 2020). Thus, the research question sounds like this: what role does the social movement play in the democratization of the political process in Armenia?

The effectiveness of the activities of the public organizations under study implies the degree of their real participation in the political process: in this case, the democratic movement is viewed as a political actor, the bearer of democratic values, that is, the ability to act for the sake of achieving democratic goals, confirmed by resources, while correlating with the requirements and intentions of other participants in the interaction. Thus, the effectiveness of civic action is linked to the resources of democratic participation and dialogue.

## Democracy as an Armenian Idea

Democracy has become the ultimate goal for the majority of post-communist countries, including Armenia, though only several have succeeded in this pursuit. Some researchers claim that the ideological gap left after abandoning the communism was filled up with the notion of democracy. Significant changes were made and reforms implemented but part of the countries is still struggling (Smith 1997; Ekiert et al. 2007). Past and ongoing changes influenced a lot the society and its understanding of the state, independence, democracy etc. But the society is never only the receiver. The relationship between conscientiousness of the ordinary people and the state is reciprocal and political events are the results of these two coming together. Contentious politics is produced when threats are experienced and opportunities are perceived, when the existence of available allies is demonstrated and when the vulnerability of opponent is exposed (Tarrow 1998).

Starting from 2005 numerous grassroots movements started to emerge in post-soviet Armenia. Those movements have been addressing human rights, environmental problems, employment issues, public property vs private property, gender issues, etc. In spite of seemingly non-hostile conditions for grassroots initiatives in the country and even the non-existence prior experience of leaders in grassroots movements, social protests have been effectively progressing absorbing more and more layers of society. Since 2010, environmental civic initiatives have introduced new understandings and practices of citizenship and civic activism and opened up discussions, debates and public deliberations around specific issues (such as the use of public space for private gain and mining) as well as governance, corruption, the rule of law and accountability and transparency in policy processes more broadly (Ishkanian 2015).

Although environmental civic initiatives in Armenia address very specific and sometimes narrowly focused issues (such as saving a waterfall or a public park), their emergence is informed by and is an articulation of much broader concerns around corruption, the absence of the rule of law, the lack of democracy, the rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of formal political elites to address the concerns of ordinary Armenian citizens. The struggle for Mashtots Park, for example, (public free space) symbolises the development of the conscious pro-active citizenship within Armenian society and people which are gradually becoming the bearer of the concept of civic culture and constitutionalism and is trying to implement that by means of civic self-organisation, civic disobedience and creative civic activities.

The emerging of movements was due to both the coming of age of a new generation which had not directly experienced life under the Soviet regime as well as the availability of new information and communication technologies (Ishkhanian 2015). Perhaps Armenians have simply got tired, after decades of nationalist fervor, war, and blockade and economic ruin: they had made their sacrifices, and now just wanted a more normal (Andreasyan and Derlugyan 2015).

Throughout the history, movements have been successfully making impact on political processes and policy making processes and successfully set an agenda. William Gamson in defining movement success, considered two factors: “acceptance” - whether the challenging group was acknowledged by those in power - and “new advantages” -

whether the movement was able to attain its goals. Gamson's study showed that social movements caused at least some form of political change almost half of the time.

A social movement consists of a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population's numbers, commitment, unity, and worthiness (Tilly et al. 2020). Following social movement studies, we can assume that three sets of characteristics of these (activist) networks can affect their role in democratization processes: their frames on democratic issues, organizational structures, and action repertoires (della Porta and Diani 2006).

Alain Touraine discusses that social movements are not a marginal rejection of order; they are the central forces fighting one against the other to control the production of society by itself and the action of classes for the shaping of historicity (Touraine 1981). Another contribution to this stream came from Melucci who argues that new social movements try to oppose the intrusion of the state and the market into social life reclaiming individual's right to define their identities and to determine their private and affective lives against the omnipresent and comprehensive manipulation of the system (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

The article is discussing the social movements in Armenia in 4 main dimensions: organisations, mobilization, interests and political opportunities. Short Description of key civic initiatives in Armenia chronologically for the period of 2005-2016:

- 2005 - Started (SKSELA) - youth political movement was formed in Yerevan in 2005 and was active until 2008. The group raised the issue of various cases of human rights violations in Armenia by organizing a number of actions and campaigns in a number of communities in Armenia.
- 2007 - Teghut Defense Initiative was founded in 2007. The aim is to stop the implementation of the decision made by the Government of the Republic of Armenia on the exploitation of the Teghut mine in 2001; to protect the property rights of the residents of Teghut and Shnogh villages, and campaign to live in a healthy environment, to have a decent job. Until 2012, the initiative performed under the name Save Teghut.
- 2008 - Special Regiment Youth Initiative was active in 2008-2013. The core of the group was made up of young people from the Armenian National Congress. The focus was on the protection of human rights (especially of political prisoners) and justice.
- 2008 - NOW / HIMA youth initiative was founded in 2008. Operated in Yerevan until 2013. The initiative supported and cooperated with the Armenian National Congress. He waged a resistance struggle against the authoritarian actions of the authorities. In 2014, the core of HIMA was founded by the Civil Contract Party headed by Nikol Pashinyan. Since the April 2018 revolution, a number of NOW members have held senior political positions in Armenia.
- 2010 - Moscow Cinema Summer Hall Protection Initiative has been organized against the Armenian Government decision to allocate the land on which the summer hall of Moscow Theatre is built to Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. The group ceased operations in 2015 after its success. The summer hall of "Moscow"

cinema is considered one of the most famous monuments of Soviet-Armenian modernity.

- 2010 - Gyumri Taxi Drivers Initiative took action in 2010 against the government's mandatory requirement for cars to have a taximeter visible in the passenger compartment as it was not affordable for most of taxi drivers. The government had to meet the demand of taxi drivers, after which the initiative ceased.
- 2011 - Trchkan Civic Initiative Trchkan was created to cancel the Government Decision to build a hydro plant to Trchkan waterfall. After the success, the group's activities expanded, and later small new environmental initiatives emerged from the group, which acted as independent groups.
- 2011- The Dignified Transport Initiative, was established in 2011, required the Government of the Republic of Armenia to ensure decent transport in the capital and in the regions. The initiative was not and seized to exist in same year, but after a while it was expanded during the 2013 “100 AMD” civil movement.
- 2012- Mashtots Park Movement aimed to cancel the decision of the municipality to set up trade pavilions in Mashtots Park in the center of Yerevan. The struggle in Mashtots Park was used by the initiative as a struggle for public space against private interests. The initiative ceased to function after achieving its goal.
- 2013 - 100 Dram Movement was to fight against the decision to increase the transport fares of Yerevan Municipality from 100 drams to 150 drams. This initiative was decentralized and did not have a central coordinating body. After reaching the goal, it stopped.
- 2015 - Electric Yerevan Protests were against the increase of electricity tariffs in Yerevan from June 19 to 23, 2015. The demand was to annul the decision of the RA Public Services Regulatory Commission on June 17, 2015, related to the increase of electricity prices in the territory of the RA. It is considered one of the most political and large-scale movements since the 2000s.
- 2016 - The goal of the Pan-Armenian Environmental Front is to protect Armenia's nature, as well as to ensure social justice through harmonious development with nature. The group strives for the relevant state bodies to fully carry out their functions in the field of nature conservation and restoration. Coordinators and active participants of environmental civil movements of previous years are involved on the front. Currently they are coordinating the Amulsar case.

### **Organisation of the Movement**

Cultural and framing approaches highlight how internal processes such as the formation of collective identity and solidarity contribute to the emergence of social movements and how social movements shape the very understanding of social problems (Melucci 1995; Melucci 1989; Benford and Snow 2000).

Social movements which are called civic initiatives in Armenia are grassroots movements, who voluntarily join efforts to address certain issue. The initiatives have two main layers; core groups and supporters: core group is the key decision making and

responsible body. The average number of people per initiative in core groups are about 10-20 and with the average age of 20-40. The relationship between the founding members has been mainly horizontal and the decision-making process participatory and on consensus. The main principle of action has been the principle of non-violent resistance.

In the initial stage of the formation of the social movement, when several concerned citizens united, they discussed questions like: who I am, what I want to change, how I want to change, what we mean by politics, how the citizen participates in politics and how do we imagine cooperation with different groups. After synchronizing the values and visions of the members, the initiative has been formed, the decision-making mechanism, the order and frequency of meetings have been determined, and the roles in the group have been distributed. This was followed by the development of the strategy of the initiative, the formation of the struggle and the identity of the group, the formulation of the problems, goals and demands of the initiative, the public mobilization strategy - the forms of public accountability.

Various resources of the initiative and the different abilities of the members to find those resources were evaluated in detail. Particular emphasis was placed on discussing in detail the main message and tone of the initiative, defining the main audience of the initiative, allies and opponents, and building strategies accordingly. Mechanisms for exchanging information between group members have been established, as well as a horizontal platform for communication between different groups. Groups also created a new membership and enrollment procedure as new people have been constantly joining the initiative and it has not been always possible to join the team smoothly.

The team then has been divided into working groups, e.g research, economic, political analysis, financial department, media work, multimedia, etc. Continuous self-development and occasional self-reflections of what materials or literature was needed, discussions, debates, lectures, etc. were organized within the team. Public speaking, interview, article publication, letter of protest's support, announcements (also with the participation of celebrities), signature collection, demonstration, sit-down, distribution of leaflets, posting of posters were the main means of communication on problem/issue level.

The initiatives mostly promoted democratic values and methods (non-violent). Used legal structures for their campaigns and were against violence. There seems to be consent among activists and citizens that by protesting in the streets to express the demands the activists were able to demonstrate to people that protest is a legitimate way of making political claims and thus regularly encouraged others to follow their pattern. Tarrow argues that "Movement participation is politicising" something which seems to be accurate based on Mashtots Park Social Movement case.

The Mashtots Park Social Movement for the first time circulated the concept of "self-determined citizen", symbolizing the birth of the conscious citizen, who asserts their rights and demand changes to the status quo. The Movement promoted from membership to participation process which brought to the understanding of the status of a citizen. Since then, the term "Self-determined citizen" has been the central message to nearly all of the civic movements and the movement symbols have been developed around this concept during 100 Dram Social Movement Again transport price hike and Electric

Yerevan social movement against the increase of electricity price. The birth of a conscious citizen highlights and practices new form of communication between citizens with the government.

## **Mobilization**

In the mid-2000s when the social movements were emerging in Armenian Third Republic, the number of the participants at the civic movements was tiny. One could hardly observe more than 20 people in one event, the dissemination about the movement and movement objectives and events were being shared with population by door-to-door campaigns, by putting an add in a printed media, by hanging big posters in a street, etc. The civic movements thus were able to inform public about their initiatives, were able to mobilize people, set up local networks and local de-centralized working groups via *new media*. People also joined as there are no other platforms in the country that would allow them to express their genuine discontent from local politics, the platform was not also offering by numerous parties in the city.

The new media offered an excellent toolbox for the activists who very successfully used them. Around from the late 2000s the activist friendly media was doing LIVE from the activist scenes which served an excellent channel of communicating the message with wider public and calling them out to join the cause. With the increase of Facebook usage in the country, the speech of mobilization also increased and the activists were using facebook as the main tool of communication. If in the early stage of an initiative we would see just a few hundreds of supporters, a few weeks after a good Facebook campaign, the numbers were in thousands. Throughout the years, as the Facebook was becoming popular, the number of participants was also increasing in parallel. Thus one could observe the increase by comparing the number of online participants at Mashtots Park (2011), 100 dram (2013), Electric Yerevan (2014).

Many scholars agree that social movements can have a powerful influence on public opinion. The changes in political consciousness experienced by movement participants can spread beyond the movement itself and influence society. Thus Social Movements were able to mobilise people and exercise some elements of bottom to top democracy e.g participation, impact on policy change and political decisions, accountability and transparency etc. It has been also obvious that the success of one initiative encouraged people to come up with new civic initiatives.

## **Interest Groups**

The founders and key members of the social movements were mostly publicly distancing themselves from the representatives of the NGO community. The NGO community was offering assistance in covering the cost of e.g publication, expert analysis, transportation etc. Only those NGOs whose representatives were among the founders of the social movements they have had privileges in accessing and cooperating with those movements. The denial of cooperation with NGOs was being explained by the fact that

the latter are implementing foreign agendas in the country (as funded by foreign donors) and thus the cooperation with the activists would have a hidden goal to bring the foreign agenda to Armenian social movements as well. It is important to note that the initiatives in Armenia totally rejected the cooperation with international organisations.

There were very few media that have mostly supported the activists. Those media are *hetq.am*, *civilnet.am*, *medialab.am*, *aplus.am* etc. The political and other priorities of those media co-inside with the movement and they found common interest and space for cooperation. The activists, especially from the 2012 onwards until the revolution, have rejected and cooperation with state public TV and the satellite media around the head of the state Serj Sarkissian and Robert Kocharyan. Those media have numerous time been producing manipulative content showing activists as not so “dangerous” for the state.

Both the Protect Trchkan Waterfall and Save Mashtots Park civic initiatives had strong support from various diaspora Armenians living in Europe and North America who followed the protests on Facebook and YouTube. Diaspora Armenians signed petitions, wrote open letters to the Prime Minister and other government officials (including the Minister of Diaspora) and even collected funds to purchase tents and other camping equipment for the protestor (Ishkanian 2015).

In working with interested groups the founders of the movements and activists not always were able to cooperate with parties with who coincided their interests or who could provide resources to multiply the effects of the movement. They were unable to develop partnership for a bigger goal with other actors due to most probably lack of political maturity and personal characters. Instead a lot of unnecessary efforts have been spent into the opposition/competitors of the movements as a reactionary process.

### **Political Opportunity**

Political process approaches to social movements stress the importance of external factors in explaining the emergence, the strategies and the impact of social movements (Tilly et al. 2020; Tarrow 1998). Inspired by the rise of contentious politics the American scholars were first to develop a political approach to movements that eventually centered on “political opportunity structure” the founder of which is Tilly, who elaborated a set of conditions for mobilization, foremost among which were opportunity/threat to challenges and facilitation/repression by authorities (Tarrow 1998). Work on political processes has mainly focused on political opportunities understood as the political conditions external to the movement (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 1998).

Tarrow’s five elements of political opportunity a structure includes: 1) increasing access, 2) shifting alignments, 3) divided elites, 4) influential allies and 5) repression and facilitation. Tarrow writes that unlike political or economic social institutions, social movements’ power is less obvious, but just as real.

There has always been a debate internally in the movement whether the movement should cooperate with oppositional political parties active at that period. There was a shared feeling among activist against cooperating with parties “I don’t politicize my movement” (most probably they wanted to say “party-sized” as the social movement is a political process as such).



Here should be noted that the Armenian National Congress which was active in the country with the comeback of First President (of the Third Republic) Levon Ter-Petrosyan created a huge platform of interaction in the country. Majority of the activists who founded the above-mentioned social movements have started their path as active citizens by making part of the ANC movement being either member or follower. The operation of ANC created an enabling environment in the country for other political processes which indirectly supported the creation of many civic movements.

The civic initiatives in Armenia brought new discourses and successfully opened up series of important debates in the society which were previously non-existent. The key and popular discourses have so far been on feminism, anti-mining, environmental protection, public property, labor rights, LGBT, human rights in army, etc.

Several of the movements had certain impact on policy decisions. The civic movements Trchkan, Electric Yerevan, Mashtots Park, 100 dram successfully reached their goal by making the government to change the policy decision. The people initially being excluded from the decision making processes, found social movements as a channel to have an indirect influence on decisions. This was a good demonstration and exercise of a bottom to top democracy.

The Mashtots Park Social Movement excellently coincided with the election cycle in Armenia. In election cycle any minor issues gets highly political hence the Movement was able to use the chance its best and effectively opened its way to public agenda. It attracted the key political parties, became the key theme of media for three months, Ombudsman and representatives of Human Rights organizations regularly visited the park, and finally the President decided to intervene by visiting the park. The movement was able to attract the attention of the 7 out of 9 major political parties running for Parliamentary Elections in May 2012. Those political parties had their representatives regularly visiting the park, were doing weekly announcements, and were submitting open supporting letters.

In spite of the fact that the movements in Armenia created space and exercised their rights and freedoms and expressed their interests, they were mostly unable to have the political reading of the political situation and thus to be fully involved in local politics making processes. They also had a different language which would not allow them to be understandable by local immature political elite.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Institutional changes in the structure of Armenian society give rise to changes in organized practices, contribute to the emergence of new forms of citizen participation, which include social movements. Associations of individuals are transformed, changing content and form depending on the existing social order. They influence the models and channels of social interaction, influence the formation of new structures, participate in the dissemination of values, certain rules of behavior among the population. Initially, without having influential connections with officials, through their activities, movements based on the urgent problem identified by them can turn into a political party or pressure group, while expanding the scope of this problem or constructing a new one. They are

able to consider the mood of the population, actively influence the dynamic transformational processes taking place in the mass consciousness of modern society, and also give an idea of the direction and specificity of people's views and interests.

A social movement is a broad concept that includes both the mass actions of people and the activities of a small number of organized practices. In political science, there are many interpretations that explain this phenomenon. In the article, they are presented not as spontaneous activities, but as certain structures that set themselves the goal of protecting the interests of a social group, mobilizing society or part of it to solve a specific problem, or focusing attention on any problem. Movements are organized interactions between individuals and social groups. In modern society, they acquire special significance, as a rule, in the case of a stable structure, action for a considerable time. In connection with this social movement, one should consider such a form of collective activity, which is characterized by self-organization, orientation towards representing the interests of social groups, communities, society as a whole, organizational structure, and a certain stability. Thus, movements are organized practices that have a specific organizational structure. They are characterized by the presence of status-role positions of the participants, as well as the establishment of contacts between them on the basis of direct social ties, which become more indirect as the association develops. And although they have primarily informal connections, it is necessary to recognize the existence of structural roles and formal connections between activists and ordinary participants.

Social movements include aspects of such types of behavior as the crowd, the public, public opinion. For example, they may focus on public policy issues, and like other forms of collective behavior, movements cause social change. However, they exist for a longer period of time, strive for fundamental and lasting transformations, and their leadership is usually well organized. In addition, this structural organization leads to the inclusion of social machinery and institutionalizes them. At the individual level, a participant in the movement is an agent, an active figure who performs certain actions. Structurally, association is an institutionalized practice where actors interact with each other. They are united by a specific goal, common ideas, in many cases a single ideology. Using certain resources, participants strive to achieve the intended result.

Social movements have an important role in democratization processes by becoming an opposition to authoritarian regime and campaign for transition to democracy. The political impact of the movement has achieved have been very important in terms of setting up for a longer term the direction of political consciousness and changes in public opinion. The change of political consciousness is a very important form of political change because it sets a precedent for what citizens can demand from the state and can lay the foundations for future mobilization (McCann). While civic initiatives in Armenia remain limited in their space and resources, they offer a great potential in bringing changes in political consciousness. The experiences of the movements show that it is possible to go beyond the movement and effectively set up public agenda and bring up a broader political participatory culture.

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