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From civil disobedience to armed violence: political developments in Armenia

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Armine Ishkanian

On Sunday, an armed group seized a Yerevan police station. Their claims have chimed with recent civic initiatives, and reveal how the marginalisation of activism can help fuel the search for more extreme methods. [Español](#), [Português](#)



The siege begins: a BTR moves in to position outside the Erebuni police station, Yerevan. (c) Artur Esayants / RIA Novosti. All rights reserved. On Sunday 17 July, a group of armed men, calling themselves the Sasna Dzerer (Daredevils of Sassoon) seized the Erebuni police station in Yerevan and took several policemen hostage. As of today, 19 July, [the siege continues](#), but there has been little proper analysis of why this event occurred.

According to the statement released by Sasna Dzerer on Sunday, their “[primary demand](#)” is the resignation of Armenia’s president Serzh Sargsyan and the establishment of a new government. Additional demands include the release of their friend and comrade in arms Jirair Sefilyan, along with other political prisoners.

The current siege of Erebuni police station is connected to the [recent four day war in Karabakh](#) — the group accuses the current authorities of “endangering the security” of the country. They claim that peaceful means of protest and mobilisation have failed and for that reason, they have come to the conclusion that the “Only way to save the future of the [Armenian] nation and the homeland is through popular revolt and an armed rebellion”.

Unsurprisingly, the Armenian government, pro-government politicians and some political commentators have strongly condemned the actions, with some labelling it a terrorist plot and the organisers, terrorists.

To be very clear, I am in no way condoning the use of violence. However, as a scholar of civil society and social movements, who has studied civil society movements and organisations in Armenia for many years, my aim in this article is to provide a broader context and analysis of the unfolding events and causal factors.

In other words, I ask: why is this happening now and how is it related to past political developments and civil/political mobilisations in Armenia?

Who are the Sasna Dzerer?

Most of the men of Sasna Dzerer group involved in the siege are members, sympathizers or have ties to the [Founding Parliament group](#). [Founding Parliament](#), which was previously known as the Pre-Parliament movement, emerged from the Sardarapat movement in 2012. Since then, it has been calling for regime change and the resignation of Serzh Sargysan.

While the Founding Parliament includes people from different walks of life and diverse professional backgrounds, many of the Sasna Dzerer are former soldiers, or as they are locally known, “freedom fighters” (azadamardikner) who fought in the first Karabakh war in the 1990s. Jirair Sefilyan, who was one of the originators of the Founding Parliament, was imprisoned by the authorities on 23 June 2016, [on charges of illegal procurement, transportation and storing of weapons](#). Sefilyan is a Lebanese-born Armenian who moved to Armenia over 20 years ago and was a military commander in the Karabakh War. Whilst living in Armenia for over two decades, his application for Armenian citizenship has been consistently rejected.

Along with over 90 other civil society and political activists, my research team and I interviewed Jirair Sefilyan as part of the research on civil society and social movements in Armenia (2011 – 2015). I thus have first-hand knowledge of his views on the political situation in Armenia and the role of political and civic activism. However, since all our interviews were conducted in accordance with LSE’s ethical standards of ensuring anonymity of respondents, it is not possible for me to quote him here.

That said, I can identify some of those same ideas reflected in his public speeches. Sefilyan has always been upfront with his criticism of the authorities and has often called for regime change. Together with his team at the Founding Parliament he has organised rallies and protests to that effect. It was after one such a rally held on 4 May 2015 when Sefilyan, together with other Founding Parliament members, Garegin Chukaszyan, Varuzhan Avetisyan, Pavel Manukyan, and Gevorg Safaryan, were arrested.

In response to these arrests, on 6 May 2015, Human Rights Watch [issued a statement](#) in which it “expressed concern that the Founding Parliament members were being targeted for their peaceful political beliefs and affiliation and that the charges were intended to interfere with their right to freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, as protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, to which Armenia is a party.”

The statement goes on to say that the Founding Parliament’s booklet and advertisement for the rally called for “civil disobedience and peaceful political change”. Of the five, two of the men, Sefilyan and Safaryan, are currently incarcerated, Chukaszyan’s whereabouts are unknown, and Avetisyan and Manukyan are involved in the Sasna Dzerer’s siege at the Erebuni police station. It is worth noting that the most recent peaceful march organised for the release of Sefilyan and Safaryan [took place in Yerevan on 7 July 2016](#).

Symbolism and signifiers

The name Sasna Dzerer comes from the Armenian epic tale *The Daredevils of Sassoon*, whose origins date back to the 8th-10th centuries.

The epic tells the story of how four generations of men from a legendary family, which included the brothers Sanasar and Balthazar, Great Mher, David of Sassoon and Little Mher, rose against despotic rules to liberate the Armenians. The tale is very popular in Armenian culture and the heroes in the epic tale are fearless warriors, who are also slightly mad or crazy (*dzour*), hence the name *dzrer*. In invoking this moniker, the group has chosen a name that is full of symbolism and pregnant with meaning. Proclaiming themselves latter-day Sasna Dzerer, they intend to draw links to Armenia’s past heritage of liberation struggles and to perhaps also legitimate their use of arms.

While Armenians have taken to Facebook to debate whether the Sasna Dzerer are heroes or terrorists, if we take a step back, can we not say that these men appear to personify the stereotype of the ideal or real man in Armenian society ?

According to the stereotype, a *real* Armenian man is the (hyper)-masculinized, heterosexual, fearless protector and defender of the weak (read, women, children and the elderly). Having long promoted this stereotype, it

hasn't been as easy for the authorities to discredit this group of men as they did when criticising human rights defenders or the LGBT and feminist.

While the former use the language of nationalism and national pride, the latter, who speak of human rights and democracy are often presented by the authorities and in the Armenian media as grant-eaters who promote western/foreign values and norms.

Contextualising the siege

In the past six years, there have been [a number of civic initiatives in Armenia which have demanded greater democracy and justice](#), challenged what they see as the reigning oligarchic regime, and criticised human rights abuses and rule of law. These protests and civic mobilizations of recent years have been over [mining and environmental issues](#), the unlawful seizure of public spaces for private business, the hikes in electricity and transport fees, the privatisation of pensions, etc.

The civic initiatives have won symbolically significant but isolated victories. Moreover, [due to some activists' overtly anti-or apolitical stance](#), on the whole these movements have done little to alter the structural inequalities and patterns of governance in the country. Today 35% of Armenians live below the poverty line and there is wide income inequality, as the oligarchs continue to rule with impunity and violence.

Reading the group's statement and [watching the video interviews published by opposition MP Nikol Pashinyan](#), one hears some similar demands from the Sasna Dzerer as those previously raised by peaceful, democratic and rights activists.

For instance, the Sasna Dzerer statement ends with the following sentences: "The time has come for freedom, dignity, justice, and rights. We are the owners of our country". The last phrase ("We are the owners of our country") was [coined and popularised by young civic activists](#). The latter spoke of democracy and human rights, but these discourses have been notably absent (at least in the published) speeches and interviews of the Sasna Dzerer members.

While firmly rejecting the use of violence and arms, judging from the discussions on Facebook, it appears that some pro-democracy and human rights activists argue that they can understand the frustration and anger driving the men. This is in part because they themselves have come up against the unresponsive and coercive authorities and officials. On 19 July, a group of human rights NGOs from Human Rights House Armenia [published a statement](#) condemning the use of force, arrest and detention of "peaceful citizens" who had gathered in the streets and squares of Yerevan. The urge for a peaceful political situation stating that use of force by any side "is unacceptable".

When my research team and I analysed the protests that emerged in Armenia and globally since 2011, [we analysed the demands, motivations and slogans of different movements](#). We found that dignity, social justice, and democracy were broadly shared aims in movements around the globe from Tahrir Square to Syntagma Square.

But we also discovered that the protests had largely failed to achieve their aims and were often met with unresponsive governments which at times responded with violence, coercion, the penalisation and criminalisation of protest, and the marginalisation of opposition demands.

Social scientists have long analysed social movements and mobilisations, both peaceful and violent, to understand why such events occur and how they develop over time. They have found that in past decades, as today, movements choose different tactics and strategies. Violence is but one of those.

The question that remains is why this group of men chose to use violence at this particular time and more importantly, what will be the consequences of this violent action for those who are struggling to create a more democratic, peaceful and just Armenia.

Want to know more about activism in Armenia? Read Gohar Saroyan's [personal account of movement-building](#)

and politicisation.



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