

Gorbachov's dilemma in Armenia violence

by Muriel Mirak

A good deal of mystery still surrounds the origins of the demonstrations which have rocked Soviet Armenia and the region of Karabakh in Azerbaijan; no one knows, or wishes to reveal publicly, who organized the protest actions. Furthermore, regardless of who instigated the demonstrations, multiple political factions have jumped on the bandwagon, fueling the revolt for very different political reasons. But, the Armenian population of both the "republic" and Karabakh, which has been mobilized on an unprecedented scale, could very well break out of the various scenarios being spun by behind-the-scenes manipulators, creating a new dilemma for the Muscovite leadership.

Clearly, the demonstrations which broke out sporadically in October and began in earnest in Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia, in mid-February, were not spontaneous. If the October ferment came in response to reports of KGB-instigated harassment of Armenians in Karabakh, the Yerevan demonstrations carried fully articulated political demands. Foremost among these, was the claim that the Karabakh region should be annexed to Soviet Armenia: "One People, One Republic," read the banners carried by marching crowds.

This was not the first time that such a demand had been voiced. According to Armenian sources in the West with good connections to Yerevan, the demand emerged in response to the outrages perpetrated by the KGB against the Armenian population in Azerbaijan since the 1960s. Economic aid for Karabakh has dwindled, which has contributed to the steady flow of Armenian emigration out of the region. Thus, the Armenians, who made up 96% of the Karabakh population 20 years ago, now represent 80%, a fact they interpret as part of a deliberate Soviet depopulation policy. Armenians in the Soviet Republic reckoned that it would be better to annex the region than to let it be depopulated.

The proposal to annex Karabakh was floated outside of the Soviet Union, by persons close to the Moscow leadership. Not only did Gorbachov's economic adviser, Abel Aganbeyan, express his "hope and belief" that it would be annexed in public addresses in London and Paris, but Sergei Mikoyan, while in the United States in February, publicly suggested

that the Armenians draft a petition to this effect and send it to the Presidium. On Feb. 20, the people's parliament of Karabakh called on the "Presidiums of the Azerbaijan and Armenian republics to cede Nagorno-Karabakh in the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Armenian Republic," as reported by Radio Yerevan.

How these developments fed into the political struggle in Moscow could be read by certain unusual features of the leadership's response. After hundreds of thousands had taken to the streets daily in Armenia, General Secretary Gorbachov issued a call for order to both the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, a call he made in his own name, not that of the Central Committee or the Politburo, which was in session. Furthermore, Politburo members Georgi Razumovsky and Pyotr Demichev were dispatched to the region, and the ethnic Russian Boris Kevorkov, first secretary of the Nagorno-Karabakh party, was swiftly replaced by an Armenian, Genrikh Pogosyan, former mayor of Stepanakert.

In Moscow itself, many are supporting the unrest, for factional reasons. Some close to Gorbachov are said to be promoting the ferment, to push through reforms which Gorbachov has verbally endorsed, but never implemented. Others, in the "conservative" camp opposed to Gorbachov's reformist rhetoric, are reportedly stoking the coals both among the Armenians and the Shi'ite extremist Azeris, hoping to ignite an explosion which will blow Gorbachov out of his current position.

In Armenia, the political infighting is as complex as in Moscow. According to Western sources, the organization which is actually coordinating events is a "committee," whose members have remained anonymous. Made up of representatives of different regions of Soviet Armenia and enterprises (businessmen), this committee issued the call for demonstrations, specifying that no violence should occur, and that provocations should be prevented. It was this committee which designated the poetess Silva Kaputikyan and writer Zori Balayan, the Yerevan correspondent for *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, as interlocutors with the Moscow leadership. Following their talks, which ended in a one-month "cease-fire," the demonstrations in Yerevan stopped, as abruptly and as orderly as they had begun.

Where the Armenian Party leadership stands, indeed, how long it will stay on its feet, is not clear. Although the "intellectuals" in Armenia, with whom the committee is associated, have voiced their opposition to party leader Karen Demirchyan, on grounds of corruption, mediocrity, and the economic crisis, and have predicted that he will "be out by April," he has thus far survived the storm. Demirchyan, who was singled out for criticism by Gorbachov last summer, has powerful allies in the anti-Gorbachov faction in Moscow. Brought into power in 1974, Demirchyan has consolidated a political machine which he does not want to relinquish control over. During the demonstrations, he managed to project

the image of law and order, calling for calm.

The Armenian Church, both in the person of its highest representative, the Primate Vazgen I, and churchmen in the West like Archbishop Manoukian of New York, have publicly played down the disturbances, as if echoing Demirchyan's call for calm. Regarding the Karabakh issue, the Church has taken no official position to date.

A new dynamic

Parallel to the factional contest being waged in Yerevan and Moscow, the masses of Armenians, both in the Soviet Republic and in Azerbaijan, have entered a process which is taking on a dynamic of its own. Recent visitors to Yerevan report that the popular mood is one of open criticism of the Soviets, combined with misplaced hopes in the "new" leadership of Gorbachov. In a nutshell, the prevalent opinion voiced to Westerners is: "If Gorbachov claims he wants reform, let him prove it by doing something for us." The public perception of events over the past few weeks is that if a million people take to the streets, then they get results. When that perception becomes a conviction, all hell could break loose.

Further fueling the process of mass action are reports of assaults, arson attacks, and riots in Azerbaijan. During the period of demonstrations in the last 10 days of February, up to 60 persons are said to have been killed in Karabakh. In the first days of March, after the demonstrators returned to their homes in Yerevan, violence escalated between Azeris and Armenians in Baku and Sumgait. According to informed sources, Soviet troops are patrolling the streets of Sumgait with armored personnel carriers and tanks, enforcing a curfew from dusk to dawn. Sumgait is a major industrial city on the Caspian Sea, with 30,000 Armenians of a total 215,000 population. TASS characterized the situation with reports of "rampage and violence," provoked by "hooligans." TASS announced that "measures have been taken to normalize the situation in the city and safeguard discipline," an evident reference to the military-enforced curfew.

On March 2, Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Genadi Gerasimov admitted in a briefing to foreign correspondents that "several" lives had been lost, without further specification. Days earlier the Soviet media had carried the statement of Soviet Deputy Chief State Prosecutor Alexander Katusev, confirming that two Azeris had died in the Nagorny-Karabakh district. No Soviet reports have detailed Armenian casualties, although sources in the West estimate that between 100 and 200 have died since the disturbances began.

Coverage of events in the Caucasus has been sparse; obviously, inside the Soviet Union, the Moscow leadership is determined to keep news from Armenia and Azerbaijan to a minimum. Gorbachov has until March 26 to come up with a solution, as agreed upon in talks with the committee's representatives. He has promised that the Armenian question



The Supreme Patriarch of All the Armenians, Vazgen I. The Armenian Church in the Soviet Union has downplayed the recent disturbances.

will be dealt with in one of the upcoming Central Committee plenary sessions, which will devote its attention to the "nationalities issue" as a whole. Regardless of what scenarios Gorbachov has been toying with, the objective situation he now faces represents a tough knot to untie. If he bends to pressures from Armenia, loosening up restrictions on contact between Armenians in Azerbaijan and those in Soviet Armenia, for example, by allowing access to Radio Yerevan in the Karabakh district, this will be read as a concession, and pressure will mount for annexation. Were Gorbachov to agree to annex the region—a highly unlikely occurrence—it would antagonize the Azeris, placing Moscow's Islamic card in jeopardy. It would also be correctly interpreted by other oppressed minorities throughout the Soviet Union as a green light to force through their own demands by mass action.

If Gorbachov, on the other hand, rejects any and all demands, the only means available to quell predictable further uprisings would be brute military force; this would destroy the fragile image of "reformer" that Gorbachov has been groomed to project to the gullible in the West. Sacrificing glasnost would essentially mean tearing off the mask, and if Gorbachov's mask goes, he, as a public relations ploy, will also go.