
Armenia : Getting Serious About Corruption

By Marianna Grigoryan
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Armenian leaders have pledged that they will wage an all-out fight against corruption, but some observers doubt how far that fight can actually go, and to what extent politics drives the campaign.

With the zeal of a revivalist preacher, Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian has declared that corruption is Armenia's "number one problem that obstructs all our reforms." Meanwhile, President Serzh Sargysan has assured the public that his administration will wage a "transparent" and continuous fight against graft.

To lend force to those pledges, in recent months a string of firings has targeted the tax department, customs service and police.

On July 7, the head of Armenia's police department for passports and visas, Alvina Zakarian, was the latest official to be sacked. While no explanations were given for the dismissal, analysts point to a June 26 statement by Prime Minister Sarkisian that targeted a "serious problem" of bribery in the department. Bribe-takers in the country, he added, number in "the thousands."

The official crackdown has been accompanied by changes in customs regulations, as well as reported tax police inspections of companies owned by pro-government businesspeople.

However, Armenia's war on corruption has so far met with mixed reactions.

The opposition, for one, argues that the measures to date are more show than substance. "Personnel changes are not of a systemic nature," charged Suren Sureniants, a senior supporter of ex-President Levon Ter-Petrosian. "The authorities are simply trying to show to the public and the international community that they are doing something. However, it is only formulaic."

Pollster Aharon Adibekian, head of the Sociometer Center, counters that the government's crackdown cannot be considered artificial.

"Pensioners, the unemployed, those with low-paid jobs are discontented and most of them gave their votes to the opposition during the election," Adibekian said. "But it is incorrect to say that the authorities have started to create a show [to respond to those concerns]. The anti-corruption program in Armenia in recent years failed, and that is admitted also by the government ... they are trying to take real steps, which is a positive thing."

The government's strategy for its 2008-2012 anti-corruption program is still under development.

The late Prime Minister Andranik Margarian launched Armenia's first post-Soviet campaign against corruption in 2003. The initiative, however, has been widely disparaged for being short on results.

Between 2003 and 2007, the annual corruption perception index registered by anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International showed no changes in

Armenian perceptions of the presence of corruption. The country's 2007 rating (3.0 on a ten-point scale) placed it in the neighborhood of Moldova, Algeria, Belize and the Dominican Republic.

Amalia Kostanian, head of Transparency International's Armenian branch, believes that the government's ongoing political standoff with the opposition has prompted officials to try to convince skeptics that it means to stamp out corruption once and for all this time. "Today, we are not in quite a usual situation. It is a political crisis and the issues raised by the opposition have created such a situation," said Kostanian.

Unlike in the past, she continued, the government now must really show whether they have the will to fight corruption or not. "Mid-level officials are arrested on graft charges. If there is bribery at the mid-level, it proves that those above are also aware of that," Kostanian argued. "If only a few people are arrested and the struggle is not ongoing, of course, it won't lead to any good thing."

Going all the way, however, raises the question of whether the government has the will to "sacrifice" to the campaign "ministers, regional governors and higher level officials," she added.

Pollster Adibekian contends that the fact that the 2003 campaign led to few results puts extra pressure on the government to get it right this time.

"If the whole system is corrupt, which is the case, then orders and decisions will not reach their targets and, in that case, there can be no discussion about reforms," Adibekian said. "Therefore, the authorities will do everything for the second stage of the anti-corruption campaign to prove really effective."

But opposition leader Ter-Petrosian charges that the results to date are less than impressive. "The government has indulged in empty phraseology and the formation of Soviet-type commissions," he told a July 4 Yerevan rally. "No large businessman," he declared, has yet been charged with tax violations.

Meanwhile, pro-government political analyst Eduard Mamikonian cautions that the spread of corruption under Ter-Petrosian's own 1991-1998 presidency raises doubts about the opposition's ability to tackle the problem any better than the government. Armenia's latest anti-corruption crusade has just begun, he said.

"It is still early to give an evaluation [of the campaign]," Mamikonian commented.

Editor's Note: Marianna Grigoryan is a writer for the online ArmeniaNow.com weekly in Yerevan.
