

# The Politics of Independence and Transition

INTERVIEW WITH ARA SAHAKYAN

**F**ormer deputy speaker of the Armenian Parliament answers questions on political developments in Soviet Armenia that led to independence, a legislative process, economic transformation problems, and democratization in a time of war. Sahakyan assesses the role of the Armenian National Movement in these changes and the future.

*Demokratizatsiya:* You have played a major role in the Karabakh movement, the establishment of the new Republic of Armenia, and the establishment of its institutions and new political culture. What led you to be involved in the movement? What changed the Karabakh movement from a request for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to Armenia to a national revival movement that aspired for democracy and independence?

**Sahakyan:** The moving force of the Karabakh movement that emerged in February 1988 came from among the middle-level intellectuals within the literary, scientific, and teaching professions, and to a lesser extent also from the industrial or engineering fields. The political credo of this generation born after World War II was stamped by the duality of the times. On the one hand, this generation was raised under the influence of the Khrushchevian critique of Stalinist despotism, the hopes raised by the “thawing” of the cold war, and the antigovernment actions and ideals proclaimed by the dissident movement; on the other hand, their attitudes were warped under the pressure of the conformist dispositions of Brezhnev’s years of “stagnation.”

The political line being pursued beginning in 1985 under perestroika definitely moved the pendulum of the intellectual and spiritual duality of our generation in the direction of law and justice. We endlessly devoured the life-giving air of freedom. In the workplace and in cafes, at intimate gatherings and at home we discussed Gorbachev’s bold political actions. We discussed movies, theatrical productions, literary works, speeches, political works, and articles of new faces, the news on tele-

---

This interview was conducted by Gerard Libaridian through a series of e-mails from November 2005 to January 2006. Copyright © 2006 Heldref Publications

vision and radio, free from censorship. Those were the days of permanent discovery. With youthful enthusiasm we rediscovered the world around us, our past, and ourselves—our human dignity and national identity.

This period of passive self-awareness and reflection did not last long. The gradual and careful reforms being implemented by the upper echelons of the Communist Party were invaded by the rank-and-file members, followed by the people. It became clear that events were moving in a direction that deviated from the scenario devised by the Kremlin. The peoples of the Soviet Union, not satisfied with the diet of reforms presented in small portions by the Center, refused to remain in the spectators' seats and assumed a direct role in the process of democratization. However imperfect, the elections of the USSR peoples' deputies, the direct airing on television of the proceedings of the new Congress of the Peoples' Deputies and of the Supreme Soviet that ensued from that Congress played the role of catalysts; everyone, without exaggeration, followed these events. The goals of the authorities and the people were, however, divergent from the start. The authorities were seeking by all means to maintain the Soviet Union, believing that by offering socialism with a human face and granting the regions economic autonomy, it would be possible to arrive at the consolidation of a new quality in nation-statehood, a federative state or, in the worst possible case, to a type of confederation. Peoples of the nominally Union republics as well as those with lower autonomies (Tatars, Chechens, Bashkirs, Abkhaz, Ossetians, and so forth) and even those without any territorial designation (Crimean Tatars, Metskhetian Turks, Germans, Kurds, Greeks, and so forth), had the opposite position. It is true that national movements based their claims on different political, legal, historical, religious, ethical, or other bases, but by their nature these were all centrifugal and separatist. The most radical in terms of goals, the least vulnerable from the point of view of international law, the earliest, and the strongest from the point of view of popular support were the movements in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

The Karabakh movement was a people's movement. It began as a demand for the transfer of Karabakh from Azerbaijan to Armenia, but evolved into a mass movement for independence and democracy, and eventually led to the creation of the Republic of Armenia. The movement had a tremendous influence on both the domestic and foreign policies of the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1991. To avoid the real danger of provoking the other national movements, the Kremlin sharply opposed the peaceful Armenian political demands from the first days, even though changing internal Soviet borders was permitted constitutionally and had been a normative practice in the past in a number of cases. A few factors contributed to the radicalization of the views of its participants: the distortion of the character of the movement and the attempts by the Soviet propaganda machine to discredit it, the escalation of hatred toward Armenians in Azerbaijan, the bestial murder of about thirty Armenians in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait, the criminal attacks on Armenian villages in Karabakh, and the practical acts undertaken to change the demographic situation in that territory. The rekindled historical memory reminded Armenians that they would be incapable of defending their

national interests by remaining within the USSR without state sovereignty, that it would be impossible to secure the lives and properties of Armenians, and that they are threatened by the real danger of deportation and ethnic cleansing. That is, they may suffer the same fate as their western Armenian brothers who were subjected to genocide in the Ottoman Empire at the start of the century.

The independence-democratic movement's political program was presented during a mass rally in Yerevan's Freedom Square in August 1988. The program won the support of the hundreds of thousands of participants.

***Demokratizatsiya:*** The Karabakh Committee remained in solidarity for a long time under adverse conditions. How do you explain the differences and antagonisms that arose in 1991? How do you assess the role of the Karabakh Committee?

**Sahakyan:** It was the good fortune of the Armenian people that the right group of leaders emerged spontaneously at the start of the movement. Known as the Karabakh Committee, this group led the movement and eventually took over the reins of government. Babken Ararktsian, Hambartzum Galstyan, Samvel Gevorgian, Rafayel Ghazarian, Samson Ghazarian, Aleksan Hakobyan, Vazgen Manukyan, Ashot Manucharian, Vano Siradeghian, David Vardanyan, and Levon Ter-Petrossian were noted non-nomenklatura personalities in the world of science, education, and art. They determined the ideological and political direction of the movement, the methods and implementation of mass action to apply pressure on the authorities to secure the safety and constitutional rights of Karabakh Armenians. The movement and Karabakh Committee members in particular were persecuted by the Communist authorities; the leaders were thrown in prison under false accusations of inciting interracial hostilities and mass disorder. However, under pressure from rejuvenated internal democratic forces, especially Andrei Sakharov and his circle, as well from the United States, European Union (EU), international human rights groups and international public opinion, Gorbachev was compelled to release them.

The Karabakh Committee very quickly became a second center of power. And in Armenia's 1990 Supreme Soviet (legislative) elections, the committee members and other activists of the movement won a relative majority of the seats. Forming an alliance with some progressive elements that had distanced themselves from the Communist Party, the Karabakh Committee assumed the leadership of that representative body and formed a noncommunist government. The Karabakh Committee ceased functioning as such once the new authorities of the state were established. Karabakh Committee Member is now an honorific.

The fast pace of political processes and the crystallization of programs and principles led to differences in a movement that had been coherent until then. These differences produced new political parties and groups, often opposing each other, and sometimes even behaving like enemies. An essential segment of the committee and movement determined the fate of Armenia until the coup of 1998. This segment was centered around two figures: Levon Ter-Petrossian (Armenian National Movement, or *Hayots Hamaygay in Sharzhum*—HHS) as chairman of the Supreme Soviet (1990–1991) and president of the Republic (1991–1998); and

Vazgen Manukyan (National Democratic Union, or *Azgayin Zhoghovrdavarakan Miutyun*—AZhM) as Ter-Petrossian's prime minister (1990–1991) and defense minister (1992–1993).

**Demokratizatsiya:** What were the main steps taken for the transformation of the political landscape? To what extent did you consider democracy without independence? Similarly, did you see the adoption of a market economy as an integral process of democratization?

**Sahakyan:** The first and fundamental document that elucidated the goal of independence was the “Declaration on Independence” adopted by the Supreme Soviet by a near unanimous vote on August 23, 1990. With that historic act, Armenia's land, underground, air space, water, and other natural as well as economic, intellectual, and cultural resources, the state-owned enterprises within its territory became the property of the people of Armenia. The goals were establishing a national currency, a central bank, and tax, customs and financial or credit systems. The Declaration established a citizenship of Armenia, a multiparty system, the supremacy of the laws of Armenia over Soviet Union legislation, the establishment and organization of state authorities independently from Moscow, the exclusive service of military draftees from Armenia on Armenian territory, and the creation of autonomous armed forces, internal law enforcement departments, and agencies of state and public security.

Similarly, the Declaration asserted that Armenia would henceforth conduct its own foreign policy and that it would establish relations with other countries, including national-state units of the USSR and that it would participate in the work of the United Nations and other international and regional organizations. This was an appeal to be recognized as a fully empowered subject of international law.

Furthermore, this historic act proclaimed a system of government based on the principles of the separation of powers, the supremacy of law, political pluralism, and the depoliticization of the armed forces. Armenia assumed the responsibility to respect and guarantee human rights and freedoms, including the right to life and to freedoms of speech, press, and conscience. Together, these principles were to constitute the foundation of a new, democratic constitution. A commission that included representatives from a wide spectrum of political forces as well as professionals was formed to draft such a constitution.

The Declaration on Independence of 1990—not yet a declaration of independence—was simply a road map to secede from the USSR. Its authors were quite aware of how hard it would be for the small country deprived of its own state and government organs and traditions to overcome the resistance of a seventy-year-old totalitarian regime.

The Armenian people (and, on a different basis, the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) did not obtain independence simply because the Soviet Union collapsed. Rather, independence was achieved through a difficult struggle, having ensured that it complied fully with domestic and international law. Armenia was one of the rare Soviet republics that did not participate in Gorbachev's referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union, held on March 17, 1990.

Instead, Armenia organized its own referendum on secession from the USSR. To keep the disobedient republic within the USSR at any price, the central authorities resorted to conspiracies, blackmail, and the use of force in Armenia as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Center's violent repression reached its height in August 1991, during the days of anti-Gorbachevian troubles.

During those dramatic days, the new government of Armenia was not concerned solely with securing the safety of the Armenian population. The HHSh and its allies undertook the radical overhaul of the body of laws and system of government in the republic. In a systematic way, new laws were enacted on freedom to own property, privatization of state-owned agrarian land and homes, elections, mass media, and political parties. Citizens were given the freedom to engage in entrepreneurship, politics, and public life. Their lost personal and national dignities were restored and hope for improvement in their lives awakened.

The linkages between independence, democracy, and a market economy took root in the people's minds. Increasingly, they adopted paradigms that did not rely on the "the Turk as an eternal enemy" and "the Russian as an eternal friend" premises. The traditional approaches lost their dynamic input. These were replaced by a political realism that called for reliance on one's own capabilities, on acting according to international realities and laws, and establishing normal relations with all neighbors on an equal basis.

Indeed, the absolute majority of voters said yes to the referendum on independence on September 21, 1991, in an atmosphere of revolutionary fervor and inspiring reforms.

**Demokratizatsiya:** To what extent, in your opinion, have people's beliefs in independence and democracy eroded due to economic hardships? Has the drive for independence and democracy changed the political culture of Armenians? To what extent was that drive based on history and Soviet structures?

**Sahakyan:** When addressing the issue of Armenian identity and political culture, we should remember the five centuries Armenia spent under Oriental despotic states such as the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires, full of tragedies, economic regression, and political repression, where the most basic human, national, and religious rights were trampled on and the slightest aspiration for independence was punished severely. Some national aspirations survived only in a poorly imitative fashion in major capitals or among some communities of merchants, workers, and intellectuals abroad.

The most recent and destructive rule for a national agenda was the Soviet regime, where even the thought of democracy and independence was punished as

---

***"The Armenian people (and, on a different basis, the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) did not obtain independence simply because the Soviet Union collapsed."***

a major crime and ascribed to “Western decadent influence” or “treasonous” dissident movements.

The USSR would inadvertently provoke the independentist feeling of Armenians, when, in its battle against the United States, Soviet authorities would on occasion bring up the issue of the recognition of the Armenian genocide, a painful problem for Turkey, an American ally. Taboos placed on certain themes in Armenian history would be lifted in such campaigns managed by Moscow. Scientific, documentary, and works of fiction would be published for that purpose, but such moves would inevitably raise hopes among Armenians of bringing justice by one’s own resources and of restoring lost statehood. Those who trespassed the boundaries set by the authorities were, of course, punished severely.

The situation changed drastically during the years of perestroika. And people understand quite well that economic difficulties are not caused by independence and democracy, but rather the disdainful attitude of authorities toward such values.

*Demokratizatsiya*: Armenia adopted its constitution in 1995. One attempt to change it failed in 2003, but another succeeded in 2005. What were the sources of comparison or the models you took into consideration when drafting the constitution? Do you think there was room for improvement?

**Sahakyan**: Just as elsewhere, Armenia’s constitution is simultaneously a legal and political document, in which the two layers are intimately intertwined. The constitution’s legal content is dependent on the political goals being pursued by the people and authorities adopting that constitution in a historical time frame. The purpose of the 1995 constitution was the rejection of Soviet totalitarianism and the establishment of an independent and democratic state based on the rule of law. That constitution, amended in essential ways in 2005, was drafted over a period of four and one half years.

With the 1995 constitution, Armenia adopted a semipresidential system of government. Except for the Baltic states and Moldova, the other republics of the former Soviet Union established presidential systems. Armenia could not have been unaffected by these examples. On this question, there were two different approaches that dominated the processes at the time in our republic: the approach of the HSh and its allies, on the one side and that of the AZhM and *Dashnaktutium*, or HHD, on the other. Since these two approaches also represented the ruling coalition and the opposition respectively, the debate around the constitution acquired the brutality and intolerance of a struggle for power. The differences in the perspectives touched on essential items. The opposition, which came to the arena with a common alternative draft, insisted that the constitution should highlight the genocide of 1915 and the goal of demanding reparations. It insisted on the adoption of dual citizenship, and it wanted a parliamentary system of government. The HSh based its preference for a system of government on what already had been established and was taking root, a system that had justified itself. A clear separation of powers between the legislative and executive had already been established by law as early as in 1991, including mechanisms for checks and balances. During the whole period of state formation, as well as the war with

Karabakh, these two branches of government worked effectively within the limits of their powers as designed by law and avoided any dangerous confrontation. On the question of dual citizenship, the HHS adopted a very tough line and rejected it outright. The HHS argued that dual citizenship might allow citizens of Armenia to avoid the draft and the payment of taxes and that it might permit a situation where the political future of Armenia is determined by those holding dual citizenship but living in other countries and, possibly falling under the influence of other countries. We should note that those of us opposing dual citizenship had in mind such threats exclusively from countries like Russia and Iran, countries that within the international arena were in conflict with Armenia's partners, the United States and the EU, and that have serious problems in the area of guaranteeing human rights. With the constitutional amendments of 2005, dual citizenship became the norm. The next step is the signing of treaties that regulate its implementation. It is possible to predict that the first in line will be exactly these countries, whose large Armenian communities may play the role of transmitters of the interests of these countries.

*Demokratizatsiya:* Do you think that the 1995 constitution gave too much power to the president?

**Sahakyan:** During the initial period of building statehood in the first half of the 1990s, the leaders of that time sought to strengthen presidential authority constitutionally in order to secure the manageability of the situation. The idea was that the person who has been elected directly by the people should have effective influence over the formation of the rest of the executive. According to the 1995 constitution, it is the president who appoints and relieves the prime minister of his duties, he can dismiss Parliament, and he is the guarantor of the independence of the judicial branch. It is true that Parliament can oppose the president's designated prime minister with a vote of no confidence, override a presidential veto over legislation by a simple majority vote, and impeach a president for treason or other serious offenses. But these are powers that would be used in exceptional circumstances and would be seen as signs of a confrontation between the president and Parliament. Logic suggests, however, that in a mature political system and with strong political parties, conflict would be hard to imagine if a parliamentary majority is supportive of the president. In this case, we would be dealing with a strong president. But if the president does not enjoy a majority support, then he is compelled to submit to the will of Parliament.

*Demokratizatsiya:* Did you think there was room for improvement?

**Sahakyan:** The constitution is not the Holy Book; it is possible and necessary to amend it. But the problem in Armenia is the respect for the constitution, not its text. Governing bodies today are elected and function in a non-legitimate manner. Elections are not free and do not correspond to the norms of democracy, and results are often distorted significantly. Such assessments can be found in every one of the reports on recent elections by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and European Parliamentary

Assembly; the U.S. State Department, too, has expressed dissatisfaction. The problem for the population in general—and not just for the political elite—is the restoration of the constitutional order and the institution of authorities that enjoy the confidence of the people, authorities whose actions can be checked and that are changeable. What is the use of increased powers of members of the Parliament when these are recruited from a close-knit political and economic elite and when elections have become a farce played with open bribery, blackmail and fraud? Citizens of Armenia, half of them in poverty, unable to overcome the difficulties engendered by the transition process, have essentially lost the sense of “taste” for freedom. I hope temporarily.

*Demokratizatsiya:* How do you assess the role of Parliament during your time and now? Do you think you were able to establish Parliament as an independent institution when you were otherwise a close collaborator and from the same party as President Levon Ter-Petrossian?

**Sahakyan:** When assessing the current state of affairs in post-Soviet states, one should not forget that there never existed democratic institutions there for seventy years. Even theoretical or historical references were discredited. Therefore, it was in “our days” (I will accept your terminology) that the incubation of the political system, including parliamentarianism, took place. As elsewhere, this incubation period coincided with the transition to a market economy and the collapse of the security system, economic relations (actually constraints), and financial institutions.

When our HSH team came to power in 1990, we and the Communists had an equal number of seats, about 30 percent each. The rest were made up of a variety of groups, including a significant one labeled the “swamp.” While the questions of the elections of the chairman of the Supreme Soviet and the prime minister were resolved in an atmosphere of romantic fervor and under pressure from the “street,” during the prosaic period that followed, the initial phase had to resort to undesirable compromises, often delaying reforms at the request of neocommunists and populists.

In addition to the same objective factors common to all post-Soviet states, Armenia’s transformation suffered also from the consequences of the 1988 Spitak earthquake, the Karabakh war, the presence of three hundred thousand refugees, and the blockades by Azerbaijan and Turkey. The country had practically collapsed. Instead of following systemic changes, the authorities were solving operative problems, such as those related to the war and energy and food supplies to the population. Deprived of a steady parliamentary majority, the Supreme Soviet sometimes sounded like a noisy political club. On the other side, the role of the presidency, of the executive, the police and the army increased significantly. Nonetheless, the Supreme Soviet performed its function of a platform for the debate and formulation of political programs and ideological debate and, at the end, gathering its strength, completed the task of drafting a constitution in 1995. The HSH bloc within the Supreme Soviet (the National Assembly since the adoption of the constitution in 1995) was cognizant of the misbalance between

the two branches of power. But it rejected consciously the dangerous path of conflict and opted for solidarity with the president and the executive. This choice was suggested not only by the care with which the HSh approached the newly born state and its preference for realistic policies, but also the tragic fates of the political teams of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia and Ebulfez Elçibey in Azerbaijan, the civil wars in their countries, and the territorial losses suffered by them.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Some critics trace the erosion of fair and free elections to the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1995 and 1996 when the HSh was in power. That is also when some associates of the president and known members of the HSh distanced themselves from the administration and even went into opposition. What were those differences? Is there anything you would have changed in the scenario?

**Sahakyan:** Life has shown that such accusations became necessary to discredit the HSh and push it out of the political arena. When the HHD and segments of the AZhM—that constituted the nexus of the opposition at the time and had hurled such baseless accusations—came to power in February 1998, they demolished the weak saplings of free speech and elections and of other democratic freedoms. The HSh could not have destroyed the election system for the simple reason that such a system did not exist in Soviet Armenia, a country on whose ruins we started to build a new Armenia. Such accusations leave the impression that before 1990 we were living in a unique type of a democratic and legal paradise. Legend-based thought has always required a guilty party. Some in Armenia have assigned the HSh that special role. Life is made easier when the question “What is to be done?” is replaced by another, “Who is to blame?”

With regard to those who left the HSh—the groups led by Vazgen Manukyan, Ashot Bleyan, Albert Baghtasaryan, David Shahnazarian, Edward Yegoryan (since deceased)—that was part of a normal process of political differentiation. It is interesting to note that these figures are today part of the opposition to the current government or have returned to the fold of the HSh. That indicates that from the point of view of political orientation, the distancing you refer to did not have serious bases and that the debates often exaggerated the real significance of the problems or that simply there were some personal ambitions that remained unfulfilled.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Laws passed by the national assembly as well as the constitution had much to do with the system of political parties that evolved in Armenia. What is your assessment of that system as it was conceived then and now?

**Sahakyan:** Laws are obviously extremely important in state building. But they are not sufficient. You also need the political will to achieve noble purposes. There has always been in Armenia a gap between declared values and principles, on the one hand, and political reality, on the other. What is impermissible is that instead of narrowing, that gap is widening. The dominant mentality in the circle of the leaders now is to either conform the law to ugly realities or to bypass them completely. It is that philosophy that has justified the defrauding of the recent elections and constitutional referendum, the violation of constitutional requirements

regarding presidential qualification in 1998 and 2003, the increasing intertwining of political and economic elites, the creation of a favorable environment for washing dirty money, the rejection of civilian control over the armed forces, the impunity enjoyed by officials who oversee and implement election fraud, and the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators.

At times one is left with the impression that the development of contemporary civilization has bypassed our country, that this “difficult-to-educate” country has been pushed down on the list and our turn has not yet come. But I am confident that under present conditions characterized by independence, open borders, the Internet, globalization, and integration of peoples, the new generation of Armenians will not

---

***“The dominant mentality in the circle of the leaders now is to either conform the law to ugly realities or to bypass them completely.”***

tolerate limitations on its freedoms and rights, that when its time comes, this new generation will throw out this autocratic regime left over from the past. Just as it was done in Ukraine and Georgia.

***Demokratizatsiya:*** Do you still consider the Karabakh conflict the most critical question facing Armenia?

**Sahakyan:** The problem is that in countries such as ours, growing pains end up being treated as forgotten diseases and, under some external circumstances, become threats to regional and international security. The nondemocratic regimes in Armenia and Azerbaijan are incapable of bringing a just peace to their peoples by making the difficult compromises. They lack legitimacy to take such that step. Robert Kocharian and İlham Aliyev are preparing to rule indefinitely, carrying on their back the Karabakh problem while sitting on the backs of their peoples. Impoverished for the most part, our citizens do not have the moral argument to participate in a government steeped in corruption. That means preserving the status quo in the resolved conflict and to deny the peoples affected by the opportunities of development. All more-or-less significant events in Azerbaijan and Armenia are stamped with the heavy seal of the unresolved conflict. That seal is obstructing economic development, investments, and communications; polluting the entrepreneurial world; strengthening militarism and revanchism; deforming the development of democratic institutions; encouraging the worship of repression and force, extreme nationalism, and xenophobia; and providing opportunities for the hawking of foreign interests. In some sectors in both countries and for short times, one can note a certain reinvigoration. But these should not be confused with stability and security or overall development, which must benefit all of society and not just the authorities or the minority that has accumulated wealth.

***Demokratizatsiya:*** The new administration came to power after the resignation of President Ter-Petrossian and his close allies arguing against the president’s

position that considered the Karabakh conflict the main obstacle to further economic progress. Did you agree with the president fully? Was that the reason for your resignation as deputy speaker of the National Assembly as well? Do you still think the president was right in pursuing a solution based on compromises, given the statistics on economic improvements released by the Kocharian administration and often supported by international institutions? Do you still think you were right in resigning your position as well?

**Sahakyan:** The reason for the intragovernmental crisis of 1998 that ended in the coup d'état of February 1998 was the differences in the approaches to the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. When the first president was compelled to resign, so did his political allies: the president of the National Assembly and his two deputies, including myself, three of the six chairmen of the Parliament's standing committees, the minister of foreign affairs, the mayor of Yerevan, the president of the Central Bank, and the president of the All-Armenia Fund. Our resignation constituted a moral action, not just a political one.

Although it was clear that the program and approach of the authors of the coup were unrealistic and dangerous, we were unable to prevent the flow of events. First of all, with the militaristic and nationalist propaganda, they had been able to set a segment of the population against us by convincing it that our readiness to accept mutual compromises for the resolution of the conflict was tantamount to treason. We also did not wish to remain in power at the cost of a conflict; that could have led to a deep fissure in society and brought about internal instability.

Subsequent events have proven that the position of the first president and his team on the resolution of the conflict was the correct one. Nine years ago there were hopes that with a supreme effort to make maximum use of internal strengths, an increase in organizational efficiency, and the support of the Armenian diaspora, it would be possible to compel the international community to recognize Karabakh's independence; currently a majority of the public recognizes that the plan offered by the OSCE Minsk Group in 1997 September and accepted by President Ter-Petrossian was the best possible result the Armenian side could achieve. The public has understood that the slogan "independence or union," as the solution to the Karabakh problem, offered by the Karabakh clan that organized the coup and the military that supported it, represented an adventure that had no future, and that freezing the situation has weakened our position both in the international community and in our competition with Azerbaijan in the economic and military fields. The weakened and discredited authorities are now promoting the Ter-Petrossian approach they had labeled as defeatist and treasonous, although the situation has now changed drastically in the region and the world, to the detriment of Armenia. Our country has been left out of the oil and gas pipeline projects that will cover Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey; we are being sidelined by new railroad projects; and we are not part of other regional economic or political processes. Armenia has opted for an isolationist policy and become an adjunct of Russia, while turning into a serious threat to regional security.

*Demokratizatsiya:* Having played the major role in the founding of the new republic, the HHSb today is relegated to the position of an insignificant opposition. Do you agree with this assessment? Does the HHSb have a following? A future?

**Sahakyan:** Armenia does have internal resources to correct the situation, I believe. These are forces that profess the true values of liberalism and democracy. But the sad reality is that these forces have not been able to come together, although on occasion attempts have been made. The HHSb could have played a pivotal role in such a regrouping. But the current leadership of the HHSb has adopted a passive position; on occasion it has altogether remained aloof from issues that are important to the people. The generation that led Armenia to independence and opposes collaboration with the authorities in any form has been by and large removed from its leadership. Given the present leadership, the HHSb cannot assume a major role in the democratization of the country. At best it could play a supporting role.

*Demokratizatsiya:* What is the role of Armat in Armenia's politics?

**Sahakyan:** The former leaders who left the HHSb have regrouped in Armat, an NGO. These leaders were present at the genesis of the movement and governed the country until the coup of 1998. Despite the propagandistic terror of the authorities and their relative isolation, Armat intellectuals enjoy high moral authority among movement activists and the middle tier of the public. Political persecution and restrictions of democratic rights, especially of speech, have pushed them to the margins. They look on Armat strictly as a political club and their political ambitions are diminishing year after year. One also cannot underestimate the constraining influence on the HHSb on Armat, and on the whole of the right-liberal wing, of the mysterious silence that the former president has kept on political matters for nine years now. Even so, Levon Ter-Petrosian is recognized as an established leader and, for a segment of the public, a democratic alternative to the current regime. That is the reason why those in power never miss an opportunity to debase his accomplishments, spread false rumors about him, and discredit him personally.

*Demokratizatsiya:* Do you have any predictions on the direction in which Armenian politics may be headed?

**Sahakyan:** One of the challenges that Armenian statehood is facing is the absence of original political thought. Maybe this is understandable for a young and small state. What is not permissible is the absence of rational political debate. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the first years of independence, there were heated debates on remaining parts of a reformed USSR or seeking independence, on presidential versus parliamentary systems, on normalization of relations with Turkey without preconditions versus making the recognition of the 1915 genocide by Turkey and its attendant issues preconditions, on the choice between traditional pro-Russian foreign policy and political pragmatism. There were also efforts, during those years, to analyze and understand Armenian identity, the resources of the diaspora and its possible impact on Arme-

nia's policies. Debate was not just part of the life of Parliament and the pages of party organs, but also of academia and the universities. More-or-less recognized figures published articles on all subjects important to the public and the country.

All of that seems to be forgotten now. The connection between political theory and practice is broken. The nondemocratic policies of the authorities have had their impact on the political mind, rather than on its absence. The fact is that the forces dominating the political arena do not feel the need for political science, legal studies, or the findings of contemporary studies on international relations; they function along the path of long discarded autocratic concepts.

Nonetheless, from an ideological point of view, there are two main approaches in Armenian political life, each projecting its own foreign policy. The liberal-democratic approach, based on a genuine belief in Western values, will aim at European integration; the nationalist-socialistic, nurturing skepticism and showing selectivity toward Western values, will try to balance inevitable integration processes through nationalist discourse and by preserving Russian influence. Institutionally, the HSH and its offspring represent the first; the second approach is represented by the three parties within the current coalition in the government (*Hanrapetakan* or Republican, *Orinats Yerkir* or Land of Laws, and the HHD) as well as, strange as it may sound, the rest, including the full range of groups in opposition nowadays within or outside Parliament. And if we are convinced that the natural drive to live under democracy and freedom will triumph in the near future, that is, in the next ten to fifteen years, it will still take quite a bit of digesting to see the establishment of normal relations between Armenia and Turkey.

***Demokratizatsiya:*** Do you envision a scenario when you may return to politics?

**Sahakyan:** As a first and necessary step, the HSH must undertake a genuine and active effort to return to Parliament. Despite the propagandistic terror applied with our regard, the HSH can overcome the 5 percent threshold in free and fair elections. In Parliament, it can present and discuss its policies and programs. The HSH must achieve this goal in the next parliamentary elections to stop the attempts of the regime to reproduce itself. Who should be included in the HSH electoral list is not the most important issue. The important thing is to end the deepening antidemocratic tendency, in order to bring Armenia out of its poverty and indignity, to make it a factor of peace and development in the Caucasus, and to have an Armenia that contributes to freedom in the world.