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The archbishop's revolt: the culmination of anti-government protests in Armenia

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On 26 May, the anti-government protests in Armenia which have lasted for over two weeks, reached their peak. At the forefront of the protests is Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Tavush diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church. He is the leader of the Tavush for the Homeland movement, and had previously not been involved in politics. At a rally in Yerevan, he once again called for the government's resignation and expressed his readiness to lead a temporary cabinet composed of a broad spectrum of political forces, and to organise early elections. The immediate trigger for the movement was the transfer of four villages in Tavush to Azerbaijan; these villages legally belonged to Azerbaijan but had been controlled by Armenia for over 30 years. In more general terms, the protests have been caused by public frustration with the government's policies, which include accepting defeat in the conflict with Azerbaijan and its readiness to make major concessions so that a peace deal can be struck as soon as possible. Around 30,000 protesters attempted to blockade the capital and seize the prime minister's residence. These attempts were repelled by law enforcement forces, and nearly 300 people were detained. Smaller-scale demonstrations are continuing.

Commentary

- A section of the Armenian public, including the groups sidelined from power in 2018 due to public protests (the so-called Karabakh clan), accuses the government of betraying national interests, being overly submissive to Baku and 'suicidally' dismantling the alliance with Russia. A smaller group rejects any possibility of compromise with Azerbaijan, and is advocating for armed struggle. Over the past few years there have been several attempts to overthrow Prime Minister Pashinyan following a series of defeats in the conflict with Azerbaijan. However, since the attempts were not supported by a broader public and the old elites had been discredited, these threats could be neutralised straight away. What makes Archbishop Galstanyan strong is his positive image, the non-partisan nature of his movement, his initially relatively moderate rhetoric and the lack of any apparent ties between him and Russia. Galstanyan has 'suspended' his religious activities during the protests, but he is not eligible to hold a senior government position due to his dual citizenship (Armenian and Canadian).
- However, the 26 May protests have been an obvious failure for Archbishop Galstanyan, as public support and political backing have proved insufficient, and the unity of the government camp and law enforcement forces has remained intact. The greater part of

the Armenian public sees no alternative to the costly deal with Azerbaijan (despite the nation's post-war trauma) or to the incumbent national leader. There is also strong distrust of the old elites and of Russia as an ally. An additional factor that ultimately played into the government's hands was the disastrous flood in the northern part of the country, which has also affected the Tavush area. While Pashinyan was overseeing the relief efforts on-site, the protesters launched an 'assault' on his residence. This cast them in a negative light as they appeared to be focused on political games; their threats to block roads nationwide could also hinder the government's efforts to deal with the disaster's aftermath.

- The tensions inside Armenia are part of the ongoing crisis in its relations with Russia, which have been worsening for years. Armenia accuses Moscow of failing to fulfil both its formal (resulting from the two countries' alliance) and informal commitments to it at each successive stage of its conflicts with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan, who is pro-democratic, has openly criticised Russia and is seeking alternative strategic partners (examples of which include his readiness to cooperate with Turkey, military collaboration with India, and above all declarations that Armenia is reorienting its foreign policy towards the West). He has become the target of harsh political and media attacks by the Kremlin. Moscow supports and inspires the Armenian opposition (at least indirectly), plays on Baku's ambitions, and has signalled its readiness to use force against the government in Yerevan. Immediately before the recent protest, on 24 May, Moscow recalled its ambassador from Armenia. The pro-Russian infosphere suggested that Russian or CSTO forces could intervene and become involved in the crisis in Armenia.
- The protests of the Tavush for the Homeland movement appear to have lost their previous momentum, but this does not mean its complete defeat. Public frustration at the condition and the future of the country, especially as regards its security, is a constant element of Armenian reality, and it will not be possible to eliminate this in the near future. Russia's policy towards Armenia is also a growing problem. If the pressure it is currently bringing on Yerevan brings no effects, Moscow will look for new ways to destabilise the situation in the country. The regional context – the political crisis in Georgia, Azerbaijan's constant pressure on Armenia and the relative weakness of the West in the Caucasus – may make it easier for Russia to achieve this goal. It will remain crucial for Yerevan to maintain the current public trust in the government, to undertake successful peace negotiations with Baku, and to develop an effective alternative to cooperation with Moscow; concrete support from the EU and the US would be of strategic importance in this area.