

Sargsyan Stole the Presidential Election From Me

By [Raffi Hovannisian](#)

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Exactly 25 years ago, from this little square called Liberty, a movement began that would topple the greatest empire of modern history. Of course, nobody knew that at the time. Few people believed in this ancient people — subjugated, massacred and finally landlocked into the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

But I believed. On the other side of the globe, in a Los Angeles skyscraper, I packed my briefcase for the last time. That night, I kissed my wife and son goodbye. Then I boarded a plane. I was going to the other side of the globe, to the land my grandfathers had once told me about. I was going to Liberty Square.

It was an extraordinary time. A video camera on my shoulder, I pressed through the vast chanting crowds on Liberty Square, watching the eyes of my people inflamed with the rage and the hope of a coming independence. I knew then that my life, and the life of my people, was about to change. The following year, together with my family, I moved to Armenia for good.

In 1991, Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union, and I had the honor of serving as the country's first foreign minister. I raised Armenia's flag at the United Nations headquarters in New York. I raised it in memory of my grandfathers who survived the Armenian genocide of 1915 and lived in exile in California. He dreamed of returning to an independent homeland.

I had realized their dream.

But not everything was as it seemed. Very soon the dream began to disintegrate because of the war with Azerbaijan and a closed border with Turkey. The lights went out. The water was turned off. The government was filled with corruption, and the oligarchs came to rule over an impoverished nation. Opposition political leaders were imprisoned and assassinated. Elections were rigged.

And the exodus began. Millions of Armenians fled the very homeland they had spent generations praying for.

Within a year of my appointment as foreign minister, I had already submitted my resignation. But I knew I could never leave Armenia. In fact, I gave up my U.S. citizenship once and for all. And once again, I went to Liberty Square where I joined a new generation of protesters, no longer against foreign enemies but against the tyrannies of our own government.

It was in Liberty Square in January that I started my campaign for the presidency of Armenia. The election was held Feb. 18.

People said it was a mistake that I ran against the incumbent, President Serzh Sargsyan. The most I would get was 5 percent, they said, or 10 percent if I was lucky. The incumbent's expected rivals, one a former president and the other a billionaire businessman, refused even to compete. There was no chance to challenge an incumbent who would run these elections as all previous elections had been run.

The elections were filled with voter intimidation and ballot-stuffing. All across the country, government buildings were turned overnight into offices of the incumbent's campaign. Especially in rural areas, mayors kept villagers in total fear. All state resources — ministries, schools, the police and the army — were deployed to carry out another systematic forgery of the national will.

I don't know if what happened during the Armenian election campaign will ever be written about. I ran against fear and hopelessness with a modest \$200,000 campaign fund and 20 minibuses that were packed with young volunteers. They traveled across Armenia, delivering to every last village a vision of hope, a plan of action and a modest slogan: "It's possible."

I myself did not stop working for those 27 days of campaigning. For the most part, I worked alone. I walked into farms and flea markets and met hundreds of Armenians who lived in poverty, who had no jobs and who dreamed of leaving their homeland. I shook their hands and shared their glance, and I said, quite simply, "Hello." And they responded in kind: "Hello."

That was our secret covenant.

Then on election day, the miracle happened. The government machine failed in almost every major city. Even according to official results Sargsyan lost by large margins. In Gyumri, Armenia's second-largest city, I received 70 percent of the vote against the incumbent's 27 percent.

Given these losses, for Sargsyan to win on paper, he had to manipulate votes in rural areas where more than 100 percent of voters supposedly turned out to vote unanimously for him. According to the official results, I received 36 percent of the vote, and the incumbent 58 percent.

But the people were not fooled by those numbers anymore. Everybody knew what had happened. The Armenians had begun to believe again. They had defeated the fear, cowardice and cynicism that lives inside each of us. They had elected, against all odds, a new president.

Today the people have gathered at Liberty Square again. I am here, too. Except now, I no longer have the video camera on my shoulder. The video cameras are aimed at me. I have declared, here at Liberty Square, a hunger strike against the fear, corruption and cowardice of our government.

And now, 25 years later, I must look into the eyes of these people, and I must tell them it's not over. Our independence is just beginning. Twenty-five years later, democracy has finally arrived in Yerevan.

This time, however, we shall not squander our victory. We shall stay here to the very end of this unprecedented movement until the will of the Armenian people is recognized, once and for all, at Liberty Square.

Raffi Hovannisian served as Armenia's foreign minister from 1991 to 1992.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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