Communist and Post-Communist Studies 45 (2012) 131–139

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Regimes and peace processes: Democratic (non)development in Armenia and Azerbaijan and its impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

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A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:
Available online 7 April 2012

Keywords:
Conflict resolution
Democratisation
Outbidding
Fragmentation
Karabakh

A B S T R A C T

The lack of democratisation in Armenia and Azerbaijan is by many observers argued to constitute a key obstacle to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, but other observers contend that the problem is that the respective leaderships are not sufficiently secure to agree to a difficult compromise. This article, however, finds that the relationship between regime types and conflicts is a lot more complex than is often argued in the literature, and that the Karabakh peace process has been undermined by the worst of two worlds: intense elite competition, but without the restraint and widened participation that democratisation could provide.

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The Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh gained de facto independence in 1994, after a bloody two-year war with Azerbaijan, yet it has failed to gain international recognition. Continuous attempts have been made to reach a peaceful settlement, but all have been fruitless and the conflict has for years appeared stuck in an immutable stalemate. One of the explanations for this lack of progress points to the type of regimes found in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Laurence Broers (2005), for example, argues that the two regimes have promoted a culture of homogenizing militancy which now leaves them little room for difficult compromises on the Karabakh issue. The solution to this problem, he contends, is to be found in democratisation: "only democratic dividends deriving from improved state–society relations may ultimately furnish the necessary resources to break the current impasse in the peace process". Several other observers reach similar conclusions. Arzu Abdullayeva, argues that the leaders have monopolised the peace process and concludes that the lack of democracy in both Armenia and Azerbaijan constitutes the greatest obstacle to achieving peace.[1]

The regimes are argued to feel compelled to reify a hard-line stance on the Karabakh issue, since they are not sufficiently strong in their domestic mandates (Broers, 2005). But this could also lead to the conclusion that *less*, not more, democracy is needed. It is, for example, often argued that no progress is possible when elections are looming (Babayan and Perch, 2006), and observers frequently point to the political insecurity especially of the Armenian president as a significant obstacle to a settlement (Cornell, 2011: 137). This has, to a large extent, been the approach adopted by the international mediators, resulting for example in the muted international criticism of the 2008 Armenian presidential election. It has, in any case, been questioned if the democratisation that some observers are calling for is even possible in the context of war legacies and unresolved conflict.

The seeming inability of the two regimes to agree to a compromise settlement can therefore be construed both as an argument *for* and *against* further democratisation. This debate has a parallel in the theoretical debates over the effect of democratisation on conflict and conflict resolution. After the end of the Cold War, democratisation was seen almost as

[1] Author's interview (Baku, 12 June 2009).

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doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.03.005

a panacea for peace and prosperity, but optimism was quickly replaced by pessimism. Rather than promoting peace and stability, a number of authors argued that democratisation breeds instability and insecurity (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995; Paris, 2004). When it comes to conflict resolution, many analysts similarly point to the need for a strong leader who is able to bring followers along, marginalise spoilers and agree to a peace agreement without the risk of outbidding from more extreme rivals. This would indicate that democratic, and in particular transitional leaders, would represent an obstacle. Other analysts, however, disagree: if a settlement is to stick, then there is a need for a representative leader who enjoys popular legitimacy. These questions tend to be under-analysed in existing literature and much of the debate has been based on general assumptions of ethnic outbidding. Moreover, there is often insignificant attention paid to the ways in which the regime is itself affected by the conflict and war. The experience of war has, as Shale Horowitz (2003) has demonstrated, a significant impact on subsequent attempts to democratise, and the relationship between regime types and armed conflicts is therefore more complex than what is often assumed in the literature. This article finds that the Karabakh peace process has suffered from the worst of two worlds: intense competition, especially in Armenia, but without the restraint and widened participation that democratisation can provide.

Regime types and conflict

Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (1995: 5) significantly qualified the democratic peace thesis (Maoz and Abdolali, 1989) when they found that "*in the transitional phase of democratization, countries become more aggressive and war-prone, not less*". In the transition from one regime to another, they argued, elite competition is likely to be intense and competitors are likely to "play the ethnic card" in order to mobilise popular opinion. Since institutions are still being established, there is no one to rein them in (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995). This deceptively simple explanation has gained widespread popularity: democratisation is dangerous, it risks spreading instability and war (Chua, 2004). It has, however, been challenged by more recent studies which find that democratisation *reduces* the risk of war, be it intra-state or inter-state, and that only certain forms of transitions are associated with a higher risk of violence. Michael Ward and Kristian Gleditsch (1998), for example, found that only rocky or especially rapid transitions or reversals are associated with warfare, while the Political Instability Task Force found that "partial democracies" are particularly prone to instability (Goldstone et al., 2005). But this more nuanced view has also been challenged. James Raymond Vreeland (2008) argues that even the relationship between 'partial democracy' and civil war disappears if the experience of political violence is removed from the definition of the former.

The relationship between regime types and the outbreak of war therefore remains contested, and another aspect of the effect of regime types on the dynamics of a conflict has been left under-analysed: How do different regime types affect the prospect of conflict resolution? This is not about the risk of fragmentation or polarisation as such, but about *intra*-communal relations: what is the nature of internal divisions and what kind of relationship between leaders and followers do we find?

Effect of regime types on conflict resolution

There is a growing acknowledgement in the literature that internal structures or dynamics matter for the development of intra-state conflicts and wars; for their outbreak, conduct and duration (King, 2004: 434). Although the effect of regime types on the prospect of conflict resolution remains largely neglected, it is possible to identify three competing views: democratisation makes a settlement less likely, more likely, or has no significant effect.

Most literature would argue that any form of democratisation will have a negative impact on the prospect for a peaceful settlement. Kathleen Cunningham et al. (forthcoming), for example, find that the more fragmented a separatist group is, the more violent a conflict is likely to be, and such fragmentation is positively associated with higher degrees of democracy. The negative effect of democratisation is based on internal competition for hegemony, which not only appears to make the conflict more violent but also promotes political radicalisation (Tezcür, 2010) and makes it harder for an incumbent leader to accept a compromise solution. A leader who chooses to accept a settlement will fear being outbid by more extreme rivals who can and will play "the ethnic card" and take advantage of popular antagonisms and fears (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Horowitz, 1985; Mitchell, 1995). Spoilers who seek to undermine a settlement (Stedman, 1997) are in a sense empowered by the existence of free competition; they do not even have to resort to violence to bring it down. Based on this, one could be tempted to conclude that what is needed for conflict resolution to succeed is strong leadership (Nordlinger, 1972), and this may well come in an authoritarian form.

Outbidding should, however, not automatically be assumed. Not all spoilers are successful, not all populations are antagonised. Michael Findley and Peter Rudloff (2009) actually find that increased fragmentation makes a negotiated solution *more* likely: a split allows for moderates to push forward, while radicals may be left marginalised. And Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter (2002) argue that democracy, including the holding of referendums, can serve to undermine spoilers. It is also worth remembering that an authoritarian leader cannot necessarily be assumed to have the necessary leeway to agree to a difficult compromise. Popular constraints may not be significant, but the continued power of an authoritarian leader still depends on being able to bring followers and supporters, such as the military, along to a new position. It is in any case, one thing to reach a compromise agreement; it is quite another to make it stick, and this may be very difficult with a narrow agreement, which is essentially based on the will of a single authoritarian leader. Some authors would therefore argue that there is a need for broadening the process, for including other levels of society and thereby prepare them for a compromise solution (Lederach, 1998). Such a strategy is much more likely to be chosen if political reforms have been introduced. The

effect of democratisation, moreover, goes beyond its impact on leadership security and can have a more indirect effect on settlement negotiations. Democratisation brings with it a degree of pluralism that significantly affects internal power relations; it has the potential to move the conflict parties away from military logics and zero-sum thinking.

The effect of democratisation on the prospect of conflict resolution therefore remains unclear. Is the prospect for a peaceful settlement undermined by intra-communal violence and electoral outbidding or is it improved by a widened process involving leaders with a clear popular mandate?

Democratisation in the context of war and unresolved conflict

Now it may be argued that any attempt to analyse the effect of democratisation on settlement talks is a misnomer, since democratic procedures are likely to be dispensed with following the outbreak of violence. But we actually find considerable variation: in some conflicts, elections are still held and the leaders find themselves somewhat constrained by popular opinion. This is particularly likely in a situation of "no war, no peace" (Walker, 1998) such as that which characterises the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh; warfare has, in these cases, ceased but the conflict remains unresolved and may well revert to violence.

Even if the violence has ceased, or a temporary lull is experienced, the legacy of war and the persistence of an unresolved conflict is, however, likely to significantly constrain political competition. It is therefore not enough to look at the internal dynamics, we must also analyse how these are affected by the ongoing conflict and war (Kenny, 2010: 552). Horowitz (2003) argues that the negative impact of war on political and economic reforms works through three main mechanisms: 1) distraction from any peacetime political and economic reform agenda; 2) military defeat and disruption and associated weakening and militarization of state authority and 3) post-war economic isolation. War is likely to have empowered the military and concentrated power in the hands of the president, while the opposition often remains weak (Curtis and De Zeeuw, 2010). The experience of war, it is assumed, can radicalise popular attitudes, thereby reducing the influence of more moderate alternatives.

Therefore, the relationship between regime types and conflict is complex, and case studies rather than, or in combination with, large N-studies are needed in order to fully capture this complexity. This article analyses how attempts to find solutions to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – from its outbreak to the present – have been affected by the regime types found in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and how the regimes have in turn been affected by the ongoing conflict. It is based on elite interviews, conducted by the author, in Yerevan in 2006 and 2008 and in Baku in 2009. Grasping more fully the relationship between regime types and conflict resolution is important, not just because it would fill a gap in the literature, but because it has important policy implications – for the case of Nagorno-Karabakh and also more generally. Should democratisation be promoted, despite the context of war, instability and unresolved conflicts? Or should mediators aim to legitimise and strengthen authoritarian leaders?

Armenia and Azerbaijan: war, unresolved conflict and democratic reversals

The experience of war and unresolved conflict has had a significant impact on the political systems in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Democratic stagnation and reversals have characterised both cases and 'hybrid regimes' have resulted. This does not mean, however, that popular legitimacy is of no importance. Moreover, despite similar experiences of conflict and war, the pattern of development is not identical in the two cases, which illustrates the complex effect of war and conflict on regime types.

Nationalism, interrupted democratisation and war

The period leading up to the Karabakh war was in both cases marked by intense competition and increasing militancy, but the levels of democracy varied. Armenia started out as a promising candidate for democratic transition. Democratic principles played a central role in the independence movement (Malkasian, 1996), and the Armenian National Movement (ANM) became the first non-communist group to come to power in a Soviet Republic (De Waal, 2003: 56). Popular mobilisation driven by the Karabakh issue was crucial in this development; it constituted "*the locomotive of democratisation*" and "*disorder and democratization advanced apace*" (Rutland, 1994: 844, 857). By early 1990, the ANM had virtually taken over the running of the republic from the Communist Party (*Ibid*. 850), and this position was confirmed in elections a few months later. We therefore see how a looming ethno-nationalist conflict can work as a catalyst for democratisation, and not only a by-product of democratisation. The resulting democratisation was, however, also distorted by this path of development. Paramilitary formations sprang up in 1990 and armed clashes became commonplace. In response, a state of emergency was declared and the paramilitary groups were disarmed – or relocated to Karabakh. The leader of the ANM, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, thereby established himself as a "*firm and capable leader*" (*Ibid*. 853), but his rule was not unproblematic. The 1991 elections were surrounded by controversy and the period afterwards saw continued gridlock between president and parliament. Nationalism and the looming conflict "*pushed other issues off the political agenda, and strengthened the power of the presidency at the expense of the parliament and political parties*" (*Ibid*. 839).

Political transition in Azerbaijan was characterised by an even bumpier road and was similarly affected by, and in turn affected, the outbreak of conflict. There was no democratic transition in the pre-war period, but this does not mean that there was no mobilisation for democratic reform. As in Armenia, the looming inter-ethnic conflict led to mass mobilisation and

Rasim Musabekov (2005) argues that the conflict over Karabakh from the beginning "*served as a key impulse mobilising the population for social and political reforms*" and thereby "*paved the way for the first democratic processes in Azerbaijan*" (also Cornell, 2011: 50). The reformist Popular Front was created in 1988 and organised a wave of protests linked to Karabakh (De Waal, 2003: 82). This led to a crisis of power; the local Communist Party lost control over the republic and the Popular Front became increasingly militarised, with the leadership unable to rein in local branches (Cornell, 2011: 52–55). Instead of democratisation, a military crack-down by the Soviet Army resulted. Although the pre-war period in Azerbaijan was not a period of democratisation, it was certainly marked by intense competition and in this competition the rivalling groups used the Karabakh factor to further their personal cause (Musabekov, 2005; Cornell, 2011: 56–57).

In Azerbaijan, the fundamental issue of power had therefore not been resolved, and the wartime period came to be marked by fierce competition, occasional violence and military coups, but also by a short-lived democratic experience. The Communist government did not fully control the country's fighting forces and the risk of a civil war with the nationalist opposition loomed large (De Waal, 2003: 163). This domestic instability significantly affected Azerbaijan's (lack of) military fortunes in Karabakh and the war in turn directly impacted on the political scene, as governments in Baku "*rose or fell as a result of developments on the battlefield*" (Musabekov, 2005). President Ayaz Mutalibov relied on small internal security forces, fearing that a professional army might threaten the regime (Horowitz, 2003: 37), but this not only made it more difficult to win in Karabakh it also added to instability in Baku. In the spring of 1992, the opposition forced Mutalibov to resign following the Khojali massacre in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which hundreds of Azeri civilians were killed, and amid accusations that the government had not been protecting the town. New presidential elections were called for three months later (De Waal, 2003: 172–173). However, the fall of the important town Shusha caused a new political crisis. Communist deputies tried to restore Mutalibov to office and a shoot-out followed when the opposition ousted him anew. The following month, in elections that have been assessed as "*probably as good as what was possible in the chaotic circumstances*" (Cornell, 2011: 65), the leader of the Popular Front, Abulfaz Elchibey, was elected president (De Waal, 2003: 182). During the Popular Front's rule the news media and political system, for the most part, remained free (Cornell, 2011: 67) and Elchibey, moreover, managed to create the semblance of an army which initially enjoyed military successes in Karabakh (*Ibid*. 72). Elchibey's rule did, however, not have staying power (Musabekov, 2005) and the government's downward slide once again began in Karabakh: it lost control over forces on the front, then the government itself began to crumble and the state degenerated into free-for-all corruption (Cornell, 2011: 72–74). Elchibey surrendered power in June 1993 when the dissident commander Suret Husseynow and his men began moving on Baku. The Popular Front, in desperation, invited Heidar Aliyev, the former Communist leader, to come to Baku. Aliyev quickly consolidated his power and four months later he was credited with receiving an improbable 98.8 pct of the vote in the presidential elections. The result was "preordained" (De Waal, 2003: 225) and Azerbaijan's Freedom House ranking changed from "partly free" to "non free" (Freedom House, 2011a)[2] but Aliyev appeared to enjoy the popular legitimacy that the more democratic Elchibey had been unable to maintain (Cornell, 2011: 78).

Compared to Azerbaijan, the political scene in wartime Armenia was positively stable. Levon Ter-Petrosyan stayed in power throughout the war, and his rule was in fact bolstered by the ongoing war and resulting hardship. Due to economic blockades from Azerbaijan and Turkey and the crisis in Georgia, Armenia was struggling for its economic survival and, for example, only recovered a decent power supply in 1996 (De Waal, 2003: 206). Instead of leading to domestic instability, this hardship fostered a spirit of wartime solidarity and mobilised popular support for the Karabakh war (*Ibid*.). This does not, however, mean that internal divisions were entirely absent. Rivalry continued behind the scenes and it was significantly affected by the Karabakh war. The ongoing war and the lack of complete central control over the coercive forces provided an opportune environment for the shadow economy and the "mafia" was a powerful behind-the-scenes actor (*Ibid*.). Moreover, important divisions existed between Ter-Petrosyan and the leaders in Karabakh (Rutland, 1994: 856; Caspersen, 2008). Following pressure from Yerevan and from military forces, the Karabakh parliament in the summer of 1992 introduced military rule with a state defence committee assuming all executive powers (De Waal, 2003: 196).[3] But divisions persisted[4] and a serious rift soon re-emerged between Ter-Petrosyan, who supported a diplomatic settlement, and the Karabakh leaders, who wanted to press their new military advantage. These divisions came into the open during the attack on Kelbajar in March 1993 when Ter-Petrosyan called on the Karabakh president to halt his forces (De Waal, 2003: 212–213). Behind the apparent political stability, divisions therefore persisted and these significantly affected the conduct of war and created an important legacy for the post-war period.

In both cases, the Karabakh conflict played a key role in the initial popular mobilisation which led to the emergence of democratic processes. This highlights the close relationship between nationalism and democracy (Schnapper, 2002) and points to the reverse causality of what Mansfield and Snyder (1995) describe: democratisation may lead to conflict, but conflict can also lead to democratisation. Democratisation under those circumstances, however, takes a specific form. The Karabakh conflict was used as a pre-text for concentrating power and growing militancy also followed. The conflict is often seen as a bottom-up conflict (Kaufman, 2001), but the restrictions on political competition and popular participation mean

[2] The Freedom House ranking is based on an assessment of political rights and civil liberties.

[3] Author's interviews with David Shahnazaryan, former Karabakh negotiator for Armenia (Yerevan, 6 September 2006) and Manvel Sarkisian, political analyst (Yerevan, 9 September 2006).

[4] Author's interviews with Levon Zourabian, former advisor to Ter-Petrosyan (Yerevan, 4 September 2006) and Manvel Sarkisian, political analyst (Yerevan, 9 September 2006).

we cannot explain the descend war without also considering elite dynamics (Melander, 2001). These dynamics became even more pronounced during the war, even though Azerbaijan did have a short-lived experience of a democratising regime. Democratisation is clearly a tall order in the context of military conflict, but the wartime period also showed that the outbreak of war does not have a uniform effect on the regime: It can lead to instability and violent infighting, but can also foster a closing of ranks.

With the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1994, the situation changed anew. The "men with the guns" were no longer the only ones in control and other political issues became salient. However, the legacy of the war continues to have an important impact. Its effects include: a significant refugee population, former combatants who form potentially important pressure groups, and a general homogenisation of society. Moreover, the unresolved conflict results in continued militarisation (Bagdasarian and Yunusov, 2005). This may be one of the reasons why, in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the post-war trend has been one of increasing authoritarianism rather than democratisation. This should not be taking to mean that popular attitudes are of no importance. Both countries have had experience, however short-lived, with more democratic systems and greater political freedoms and combined with the nationalist mobilisation caused by the Karabakh conflict this has created an expectation of popular sovereignty. "*Implicit popular legitimacy*" matters (Cornell, 2011: 174) and the leaders are not unconstrained.

Democratic reversals: impact of war and unresolved conflict

Following the signing of the ceasefire agreement, Armenia spent the next few years in "*continuous political turbulence*" (De Waal, 2003: 251). Ter-Petrosyan was facing declining popularity and in a bid to retain control he chose to severely restrict political competition. The main opposition party was banned prior to the 1995 parliamentary elections and significant irregularities marked Ter-Petrosyan's victory in the 1996 presidential elections when he moved tanks on to the streets of the capital and had several opposition leaders detained (*Ibid*. 257). Ter-Petrosyan's hold on power therefore came to depend on the power ministries, the Karabakh leaders and the army, rather than the general population. These forces were responsible for removing him from power in 1998, when they argued that he had adopted a too moderate position on the Karabakh conflict (Croissant, 1998: 122–123. Laitin and Suny, 1999: 155–156). In October 1999, Armenia was plunged into a new and more serious political crisis when five gunmen stormed the National Assembly and assassinated the prime minister, the parliament speaker and several other senior government officials. The end of the war was therefore accompanied by a reduction in political freedoms, but an increase in internal rivalry.

It took more than a year for Ter-Petrosyan's replacement, Robert Kocharyan, to re-establish his authority after the parliamentary shootings (De Waal, 2003: 266), but he eventually removed many of the restrictions that Ter-Petrosyan had imposed on political and press freedom (Horowitz, 2003). Armenia was, however, still very far from a model democracy and Kocharyan's reelection in 2003 was widely viewed as flawed (Freedom House, 2011b). Turbulence and restrictions on political freedoms returned in the violent aftermath of the disputed 2008 presidential elections: 10 people were killed and 200 injured in violent clashes between the police and demonstrators and a state of emergency was declared by the outgoing president. The new President, Serzh Sargsyan, is generally viewed as a weak leader without sufficient clout to agree to difficult compromises (Cornell, 2011: 137), and the issue of Karabakh remains salient in the continued political rivalry.

In contrast to Armenia, the post-war period in Azerbaijan has been characterised by increased stability. The signing of the ceasefire agreement allowed Aliyev to tighten his control; he gradually cleared the field of actual and potential opponents, beginning with the army and rebellious militias. Moreover, Aliyev was able to use increasing oil revenues to stabilise the country (De Waal, 2003: 251–252). This increased control enabled him to abolish the state of emergency (Musabekov, 2005), and in 1998 he was re-elected president "*with a predictably vast majority*" (De Waal, 2003: 252). Gradually, however, Aliyev's grip on power began to lessen, in part due to concerns about his ill health and lack of an obvious successor (*Ibid*.; Cornell, 2011: 102).

In 2003 he was replaced by his son, Ilham Aliyev, who was elected president in an election marked by irregularities. Initial predictions were for the younger Aliyev to be unable to preserve his father's iron grip on power (ICG, 2010: 2), but he has defied these predictions and established himself as a strong leader. The resulting stability has, however, come at the price of "*the consolidation of authoritarian rule, greater suppression of freedoms and an increased reliance by elites on corruption and patronage networks to dominate virtually all aspects of public life*" (*Ibid*. i). Throughout this period, both Aliyevs have used the unresolved conflict over Karabakh to justify repressive measures. They invoked the need for stability arguing that Azerbaijan's defeat had been due to the domestic turmoil that characterised the pre-war and wartime periods (Musabekov, 2005).

Both in Armenia and in Azerbaijan we therefore see democratic reversals in the post-war period. Armenia's political rights went from 4 to 5 in 2005 and to 6 in 2009 (1 signifies the highest level of rights and 7 the lowest) and the country is classed as "partly free" (Freedom House, 2011a). Azerbaijan's political rights remain at 6 but a downward trend is recorded and the country is classed as "non free" due to its worse record on civil liberties (Freedom House, 2011c). Laura Bagdasarian and Arif Yunusov (2005) describe the situation as a 'no war, no peace syndrome', which is marked by militarisation, stalled democratisation and the internalisation of identities of victor and victim.

The nature of the regimes nevertheless differs: whereas wartime Armenia was characterised by relative stability and Azerbaijan was embroiled in turmoil, the roles were largely reversed in the post-war period. The question is therefore if the impact of the war and the unresolved conflict is really that significant. Hratch Tchilingirian (2005) has, for example, argued that the lack of democracy is not due to the Karabakh conflict; rather it is due to a combination of regime-induced and

inherited systemic problems. Conflict and war do not always undermine democratisation; democratisation can co-exist with, and even be spurred by, ongoing conflict (Horowitz, 2003: 26). But the above analysis suggests that regimes that manage to instrumentalise the conflict tend towards becoming 'hybrid' or 'semi-authoritarian' regimes; that is pluralistic regimes that combine a rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, and the existence of some democratic institutions, with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits (Cornell, 2011: 93; Diamond, 2002). How do such hybrid regimes affect attempts at conflict resolution?

Too much or too little democracy for conflict resolution

In order to assess the effect of hybrid regimes, it is firstly important to recognise the variations found within this category of regimes. The level of competition and the regime's stability varies in particular. Moreover, a hybrid regime does not entail complete autonomy for the leadership; they are often significantly constrained by rivalling elites *and* by the general population. Hybrid regimes have by a number of authors been linked to the risk of instability (Ward and Gleditsch, 1998), while others have argued that it makes difficult compromises less likely (Horowitz, 2003). The Armenian and Azerbaijani political systems certainly appear ill-suited for negotiating a peaceful settlement, and raise the question: is the problem one of "too much or too little" democratisation? Or: is the deciding factor the degree of internal competition, rather than the nature of the regime?

During the war, the Armenian president was having significant difficulty controlling the Karabakh leaders and this appears to have led to a delay in reaching a ceasefire agreement. It is, however, noteworthy that Ter-Petrosyan was constrained by actors with whom he was *not* engaged in direct political competition, but was nevertheless unable to use Armenia's political and military leverage to get them to toe the line. He feared that such pressure would result in a domestic backlash (Caspersen, 2008). The worry was not so much about democratic competition but rather about his lack of a stable powerbase and his insufficient control over the power ministries and the army. These were precisely the forces that managed to oust Ter-Petrosyan after the war, when he agreed to a phased solution to the Karabakh conflict (*Ibid.*).

In the case of Azerbaijan, one could speculate that the return of Aliyev in 1993 and the calming down of the political situation facilitated the acceptance of the May 1994 ceasefire agreement. Aliyev did indeed start negotiating as soon as he took over power, but he was also tempted to try to retake Azerbaijan's lost territories (De Waal, 2003: 227), and when the Bishkek protocol was finally signed it was notably not signed by Aliyev personally. Instead, the agreement was signed by the deputy speaker of parliament. The reason was apparently that Aliyev feared a domestic backlash and lack of agreement within the governing ranks (*Ibid*. 238). At this point Aliyev had not yet established a monopoly over the use of force, (Cornell, 2011: 86–87) and while the lack of stability clearly affected the conflict, it cannot therefore be concluded that the signing of the ceasefire agreement was due to the political stability brought on by a more authoritarian leadership.

Despite the democratic reversals, competition remained intense in both cases and the actual or potential outbidding reduced the leeway enjoyed by the leaders. The decisive audience for this competition was, however, often not the general population. For example, the coups and attempted coups in Azerbaijan were staged by hardliners unhappy with military losses, or with their own lack of power. Similarly, when Ter-Petrosyan was ousted from the Armenian presidency in 1998, the decisive actors were found within his own ranks; not in the opposition and not in the general population. It is noteworthy that his successor, the former president of Nagorno-Karabakh, Robert Kocharyan, had a bumpier accession to power than anticipated and had to rely on support from the state media, and allegedly vote fraud, to ensure his victory in the 1998 presidential elections (De Waal, 2003: 262).

To this day, the leaders of both countries face significant competition both from the opposition *and* from within the ruling elite; in the case of Azerbaijani politics, the latter even appear to be the more important division (Cornell, 2011: 119). Any attempt to agree to difficult compromises on the issue of Karabakh is therefore likely to be constrained. In Armenia, power is fiercely contested and the "Karabakh card" is used by the opposition to denounce the ruling regime (Tchilingirian, 2005). The current Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan is widely viewed as a weak leader, but even his more powerful predecessor Robert Kocharyan, was under pressure when negotiating a settlement for Karabakh. There were speculations that the 1999 parliament shootings were linked to the Karabakh talks, and although this has not been substantiated (De Waal, 2003: 266), it is suggestive of an atmosphere in which a compromise agreement would carry significant risks. Such risks do not necessarily come in the shape of a gun, but could also be of a political nature. Thus, during the 2001 Key West talks the Armenian parliament clearly rejected the proposals that Kocharyan brought back for consultations (*Ibid*. 267). After the disputed 2008 elections, international pressure for an agreement on Karabakh increased and the opposition announced that it was suspending its mass actions for two months (Grigoryan, 2008). Officially this was to enable the president to negotiate in earnest and reach an acceptable agreement,[5] but there were also concerns that the ongoing talks would otherwise be used as an excuse to crack down on the opposition.[6]

In Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev is usually seen as a stronger leader and Cornell (2011: 153) assesses that he would be able to carry a settlement. However, Aliyev Senior's attempts to agree to a settlement illustrate that not even an authoritarian leader

[5] Author's interview with David Shahnazaryan, Director of Concord (Yerevan, 20 October 2008).

[6] Author's interviews with Haroutin Khachatrian, journalist and political analyst (Yerevan 19 October 2008) and Levon Zourabian, coordinator of the Armenian National Congress (Yerevan, 9 November 2008).

can expect unconditional support from within his own ranks. Thus, when Heydar Aliyev in 1999 considered a settlement which involved a territorial exchange, it led his closest circle of advisors to resign (De Waal, 2003: 264. Cornell, 2011: 144).[7] In 1997–1998 Aliyev had, in an attempt to immunise himself from opposition criticism, published all the hitherto secret proposals on Karabakh. This strategy succeeded in demonstrating that the opposition lacked alternatives, but it did not give Aliyev the necessary leeway to compromise. Similarly, when he consulted his domestic base during the Key West talks, he was not even able to secure the approval of his inner circle (Musabekov, 2005). Since Ilham Aliyev came to power there has been a certain hardening of position on the Karabakh issue and the use of more belligerent rhetoric. This may have been necessary for Aliyev to consolidate his power, and is primarily meant for an internal audience,[8] but it constrains his ability to agree to a settlement.

Is the problem therefore the risk of a backlash from the general population? It does not appear so: the talks have so far failed either due to a lack of willingness to compromise or due to the inability of the leaders to ensure the support of their own ranks. But popular attitudes are not without importance. Cornell (2011: 174) argues that although voters have not been permitted to determine the outcome of an election in Azerbaijan or to remove an incumbent from office, the general population have at important turning points influenced outcomes. For example, when Aliyev was facing a coup attempt in 1994 and appealed for popular support, people showed up in their thousands (*Ibid.*), and the rumours of a 'territorial swap' in 1999 led to large demonstration which increased fears that a settlement would endanger Aliyev's rule (*Ibid*. 145–146). Similarly, when Ter-Petrosyan was ousted by his three closest allies in 1998, it mattered that his popular legitimacy had been eroded through electoral fraud and post-election violence. The lack of popular support weakened him in the internal competition.

Even in hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes, it is therefore not just about unconstrained elite competition in institutions that are nominally democratic but lacking in substance. This is symptomatic of the problems often identified in the Karabakh peace process. The two societies have been militarised and radicalised through a discourse of 'othering', and the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders are now worried that they will not be able to persuade them to compromise; Bagdasarian and Yunosov (2005) argue that there is therefore a perception that it is the societies and not the political elites who are not ready for resolution of the conflict. The chairs of the Minsk Group certainly supported this view when they, after the breakdown of the Key West talks, declared that the two presidents were "*ahead of their people*" (Cornell, 2011: 147). International mediators have generally drawn the conclusion that the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders therefore need to be insulated from popular pressure. Thus, in connection with the fraudulent 2000 Azerbaijani elections Aliyev reportedly created expectations in the West that an agreement was imminent and the Western embassies, as a result, pressured the opposition to stop their protests and rallies, arguing that internal stability was needed.[9] The same thing appears to have happened following the 2008 Armenian elections. Sargsyan was needed for a compromise agreement and instead of criticising the elections and the violence that followed, the international mediators sought to bolster his position.[10] The most significant threat to compromise arguably comes from *within* the ruling elite and the leaders can therefore be said to have used the ongoing conflict to avoid international pressure for reform. It could, however, also be hypothesised that authoritarian leaders tend to mistrust the population and therefore really do fear involving them in the process.[11]

Democratisation is frequently seen as a threat to conflict resolution, but the above analysis has clearly demonstrated that the leaders of semi-authoritarian regimes are not immune to political insecurity and also frequently lack the necessary leeway to agree to difficult compromises. Moreover, if these leaders do decide to compromise they cannot count on the possible positive effects of democratisation: they lack the genuine popular mandate that could bolster them against more radical rival when trying to make concessions. This does not mean that democratisation will necessarily have a positive effect on conflict resolution, but popular attitudes cannot be ignored anyway and *if* the spoilers, who are trying to bring down an agreement, are unrepresentative, then democratisation offers a way of strengthening more moderate forces. There is little to indicate that the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders are currently unrepresentative when it comes to the issue of Karabakh, but the secretive nature of the talks has hardly been conducive to the creation of more moderate views. Perhaps mindful of possible backlashes, Ilham Aliyev has begun to involve civil society organisations in the peace process, but little is done to prepare the general population for a compromise.[12] What we get therefore appears to be the worst of both worlds: intense political competition, often behind the scenes, without the accountability and gradual development of more positive-sum attitudes that democratisation *could* result in.

Conclusion

It has been variously argued that the lack of progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process is due to either too much or too little democratisation in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In a sense, both are right. The preceding analysis has tried to demonstrate that the process suffers from significant intra-communal divisions, but without the positive effects that genuine democratisation could provide. So which direction would be more promising? Even completely authoritarian leaders may, as

[7] Author's interview with Eldar Namazov, political analyst and a former chief advisor to Heydar Aliyev (Baku, 16 June 2009).
[8] Author's interview with Fariz Ismailzade, political analyst (Baku, 11 June 2009).
[9] Author's interview with Ilgar Mammadov, political analyst (Baku, 19 June 2009).
[10] Author's interview with Levon Zourabian, coordinator of the Armenian National Congress (Yerevan, 9 November 2008).
[11] Author's interview with Avaz Hasanov, political analyst (Baku, 11 June 2009).
[12] Author's interview with Eldar Namazov, political analyst and a former chief advisor to Heydar Aliyev (Baku, 16 June 2009).

argued above, face a significant backlash if they agree to far-reaching concessions, and studies have shown that consolidated democracies are more stable than consolidated autocracies (Hegre et al., 2001). Even if democratisation does not necessarily lead to instability and continued radicalisation, it is also not a panacea for conflict resolution either. Its positive effect depends on the spoilers of peace being unrepresentative, and any move towards further democratisation in Armenia and Azerbaijan would therefore need to address popular attitudes and broaden the peace process. This could be a by-product of democratisation but it is not guaranteed.

The effect of regime types on the prospect for conflict resolution has until now been under-analysed. Much of the debate has been based on general assumptions of outbidding, or borrowed from the much-contested argument that democratisation breads instability. But although electoral outbidding can indeed be observed in some cases, the assumption of almost-automatic outbidding is often misleading: damaging internal rivalry does not depend on democratisation and often has little to down with 'playing the ethnic card' and appealing to an antagonised public. This article has argued that the greatest obstacle to conflict resolution appears to come from regimes that have only seen very partial democratisation; political systems where limited democratic institutions and often intense elite competition co-exists with weak institutional checks and unclear popular mandates. Partial democracy can therefore be said to be associated with instability, as suggested in the literature, but it is not because of spoilers outbidding their rivals by appealing to extreme popular views. Popular attitudes can, on the other hand, not be ignored. Some level of popular legitimacy is important for a settlement to be sustainable, even though the most significant threat to peace often comes from within the ruling elite.

These findings have important policy implications, but they are complicated by the fact that the regime type is itself affected by the experience of war and unresolved conflict. This article has argued that these conditions tend to lead to exactly the kind of regime that is not conducive to conflict resolution. So is genuine democratisation even possible? Although there might be a tendency towards hybrid regimes, the analysis also pointed out that an intensifying conflict, along national lines, can act as an impetus for democratisation. Similarly, the legacy of war, or even the persistence of an unresolved conflict, does not mean that democratisation is impossible. Other cases in the Caucasus have, for example, progressed further when it comes to democratic reforms, and a case such as Serbia demonstrates that democratisation can indeed take place in the context of war legacies and an unresolved conflict. Although significant, the obstacle posed is not insurmountable, but in order to progress it is imperative to gain a fuller understanding of the complex relationship between regime types and conflict resolution.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was funded by a grant from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2728)

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