New structures, old foundations

state capacities for peace

Hratch Tchilingirian

**Hratch Tchilingirian is Associate Director
of Eurasia Research Programme in the
Judge Institute of Management,
University of Cambridge, and holds a
PhD from the London School of
Economics and Political Science.**

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are characterized by a number of deficiencies in terms of their democratic transitions. Yet it would be a mistake to attribute them to the Karabakh conflict and its consequences. Other post-Soviet states lacking secessionist conflicts do not exhibit superior democratic credentials, as the examples of Belarus or Turkmenistan demonstrate. Rather, the absence of desired levels of democratic development in Armenia, Azerbaijan and other states in the region is due to a combination of regime-induced and inherited systemic problems. Consideration of these problems is relevant because, as case studies have shown, states well endowed with popular mandates and substantive democracy are more likely to provide longer-term solutions to armed conflicts.

Dilemmas of charismatic leadership

After a decade of peace talks since the ceasefire of May 1994, the statements of the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia are telling. Speaking in September 2005 President Ilham Aliyev made it very clear: "We are creating a strong military potential, and the enemy must know that Azerbaijan is capable of liberating its lands at any moment", adding that Baku is doubling its military budget in 2006 to about US$600 million. His Armenian counterpart, Robert Kocharian, former president and a native of Karabakh, put it more bluntly: "Nagorno-Karabakh has never been part of Azerbaijan and never will be. This is the bottom line. Beyond [that] one can think of some solutions and invent new statuses". To the disappointment of most mediators and outside observers, these statements are not utterances merely for domestic audiences, but a reflection of where the political leaders stand.

Such deterministic views on the part of political leaders have had a great impact on public perceptions. Indeed, the over-dependence on and centrality of individual leaders – rather than institutions and wider society – in resolving the conflict is a major part of the problem.

For instance, in 2002 Heydar Aliyev claimed: "If I cannot resolve the Karabakh problem then no one in the world will resolve it". Similarly, many think Karabakh-natives Kocharian or Serzh Sarkisian, Armenia's Defence Minister, are the only people who can 'sell' an agreement to Armenians. Since the end of the Soviet Union, virtually all the countries emerging as independent states are run by various kinds of 'charismatic authority'. As the German Sociologist Max Weber defined it, charisma is "a character specifically foreign to everyday routine structures" of governing, based on "the validity and practice of personal qualities" rather than set rules. This implies a lack of strong state institutions, low and slow levels of democratic development, a crude political environment and related structural capacity problems. Indeed, charismatic authority in these newly emerged republics has put the independence of the various branches of government into question: neither the legislative nor the judiciary branches are independent from the influences of the executive.

In terms of conflict resolution, the question is whether a charismatically led state with critical structural weaknesses – such as Azerbaijan, Armenia or Georgia – is in a position to resolve conflicts within its borders and offer the necessary guarantees of rights to its former autonomous regions. Leadership and governance problems and the lack of structural capacity are compounded by the absence of convincing plans for resolution of the conflict. The lack of a 'sellable' proposal as to how Azerbaijan intends to reintegrate the Armenians of Karabakh into the Republic of Azerbaijan has pushed Karabakh Armenians further away from such a 'reunion'. Since the ceasefire in 1994, Baku has not provided *credible guarantees* or *tolerant democracy* even within Azerbaijan. If a government is not willing to tolerate political opposition inside the country, its capacity to deal constructively with the 'enemy' outside is clearly in question. Other than the promise to grant 'high autonomy' to Karabakh, Azerbaijan has not elaborated on the specifics of what it is willing to offer, nor is there any public discussion of what autonomy would mean for the granting state and how would it benefit the receiving society. This lack of public discourse on the promised autonomy and its benefits – coupled with continued bellicose statements by senior government officials in Baku – gives little reason for the Karabakh Armenians to trust Azerbaijani intentions. Instead, the lack of seriousness with which proposals for self-government are treated has contributed to Karabakh's growing integration with Armenia in recent years.

The 'Karabakh factor' in Armenian politics

Armenia also suffers from 'charismatic authority', the ramifications of which have played out differently. The

'Karabakh card' has been variously used and exploited by opposition parties in Armenia to denounce the ruling regimes. The most well known case is the forced resignation of Levon Ter-Petrossian, who was accused of defeatist policies on Karabakh by a large spectrum of political parties and former allies. In recent years, President Kocharian's credentials as Karabakh 'war hero' have not allowed him to escape criticism that under his presidency the conflict between Karabakh and Azerbaijan has been transformed into a bilateral conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Karabakh sidelined in the negotiations process. As expressed by opposition party leader Stepan Demirchian, the fear is that Armenia might thus be forced to make territorial concessions to Azerbaijan (for example, by ceding parts of Armenia's southernmost Meghri region). The argument is that Armenia's sovereign territory should not be subject to negotiations, a position held by both opposition parties and those in the ruling coalition.

However, the lines between differences over methodologies of conflict resolution and outright criticism of the sitting regime are often blurred. Because opposition parties generally lack broad political bases, their political activity tends to focus solely on criticism of the ruling authorities. Yet their criticisms of the government have been ineffective and do not offer viable alternative political or economic policies for Armenia or for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Their scattered public support is less in recognition of their policies or ideology than an expression of dissatisfaction with the Kocharian government. As in Azerbaijan, there is no margin in the political arena for positions associated with compromise. No party in Armenia would want to appear to be 'giving up' Karabakh; when 'moderates' refer to 'territorial concessions' similar to the 'land for peace' approach in Israel, it is the return of occupied Azerbaijani territories *outside* Karabakh, not Karabakh itself, that is implied.

The Armenian diaspora, although expressing growing dissatisfaction with Kocharian's government over corruption, protection of legal rights and a host of socio-economic problems, has on the whole been supportive of Karabakh's bid for separation from Azerbaijan, especially through large financial assistance programs. Armenia and Karabakh have also benefited immensely from the lobbying efforts of diaspora communities in the US, Europe and Russia. However, it is important to note that lobbying efforts are conducted in coordination with Yerevan and Stepanakert, and that the diaspora as such does not represent a different agenda or "vision" for Karabakh. Just as with Armenian-Turkish relations, it is very unlikely that the diaspora would interfere with the Armenian government's or Karabakh Armenians'

policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. While certain groups in the diaspora might disagree with the terms of an eventual peace agreement, by and large Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and the resolution of the conflict are considered as matters best decided by the societies affected by it.

Exclusionary politics

The personalization of politics and government has also contributed to extreme forms of 'othering': that is, the demonization and exclusion of the 'other group', whether Armenians in Azerbaijan or Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Karabakh. This has been an overlooked aspect of the conflicts in the Caucasus. The conflicts in this region are primarily rooted in problems of restructuring of minority-majority relations and not necessarily the 'historical' animosities often presented in the media. The 'othering' discourse makes the relationship of the minority (Karabakh Armenians) with the majority (Azerbaijanis) even more tenuous. President Kocharian, for instance, said in January 2003:

> " The Armenian pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, and the attempts at mass military deportation of Armenians from Karabakh in 1991-92 indicate the impossibility for Armenians to live in Azerbaijan in general. We are talking about some sort of ethnic incompatibility…"

His Azerbaijani counterpart at the time, Heydar Aliyev, was just as undiplomatic when he claimed in 2001 that, "Armenian aggressors do not differ in any way from Hitler's armies, from German fascism".

Such a discourse overshadows centuries of neighbourly relations among diverse peoples in this region. Especially in recent years, the positive aspects of relations between ethnic groups have rarely been discussed in the societies of the South Caucasus. Only when outsiders or journalists ask do individuals tend to recount examples or experiences of good relationships with the 'other'.

Beyond the structural weaknesses of the metropolitan states and the lack of convincing offers for reintegration of the former autonomies, the ideological and social discourse of 'othering' presents the most formidable problem to conflict resolution. If a lasting peace is ultimately a process of reconciliation between societies, it is imperilled by the persistent demonization of the 'other' prevalent in the South Caucasus. For the Azerbaijanis, the 'othering' discourse is rooted in the sense of military defeat, loss of territory, socio-economic conditions and, most importantly, the plight of the nearly 800,000 refugees and internally displaced

persons (IDPs). The frustration and the enormous problems the refugees and IDPs face in their daily lives present powerful emotional and political bases of 'othering'. The Armenian discourse of 'othering' is primarily rooted in a sense of national victimhood and irredentism rooted in the memory and fear of genocide, both in history and modern times. Further, Armenians popularly equate Azerbaijanis with 'Turks', thus transferring the historical animosity towards Turkey to Azerbaijanis.

The issue is not whether the 'othering' discourse is justified or whether there are legitimate reasons for such a discourse, but its sociological implications for conflict resolution. Crucially, the strict *us-them* divide, as well as the process of projecting individual acts or particular events on entire populations, makes the peaceful resolution of the conflict increasingly unlikely. Instead the extreme 'othering' discourse has led to more militancy in societies that under such circumstances are far from engaging in a process of reconciliation.

New structures, old foundations

Resolving decades-long conflicts has proven to be complex and difficult for far more developed states and fully-fledged democracies such as Israel and Cyprus, let alone developing states such as Armenia and Azerbaijan. The state restructuring process and the modernization of state and government from the remnants of the former system is still ongoing in the South Caucasus. One generalization that could be made is that statehood – or the determination of type of statehood – is still evolving. More than a decade after independence, the question whether to have a presidential or parliamentary model of statehood is still actively debated in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The constitutions of the three republics are still being amended and reshaped. The make up, sphere of competencies and ethics of the civil service are still under discussion. These questions are also prevalent in Karabakh (and the region's other *de facto* states), but with one important difference: due to international non-recognition and a dire need for essential resources, the question in Stepanakert is about the level and intensity of integration with Armenia.

The radical restructuring of former power relations between the autonomous regions and the metropolitan states, and the *de facto* 'new order' that exists in Karabakh comprise the first phase of the reorganization of the state in the South Caucasus. However, while externally the new order has not been internationally legitimated, the most essential feature of the independence of the former Soviet autonomies is the comprehensive redrawing of political, social, economic and national boundaries. For the elite and society of Karabakh, this is the most significant achievement of independence. As far as they are concerned, Karabakh Armenians are no longer a minority in a titular state, but the majority in a restructured state. They are no longer dependent on decisions made in distant centres of power, but decide upon their own course of action.

Given this context, compromises and accommodations agreed upon by the parties require basic structural capacities that a granting and receiving entity must have. The question is whether a still-evolving state possesses such stable structures. It is important to distinguish the internal and external bases of structural weaknesses. Internally, the starting point of state rebuilding is the dilapidated infrastructure inherited from Soviet times: South Caucasian states are engaged in a process of building new structures on old foundations. For the *de facto* states, structural weaknesses are largely due to external factors, the most critical of which are the lack of formal international support, foreign investment, aid for rebuilding infrastructure, communications with the outside world (especially in information and technology) and substantial assistance for development of civil society. The denial of such international assistance and engagement, notwithstanding the work of NGOs, is meant to punish secessionism and somehow force a negotiated end to the conflict. But this has had other consequences: deepening isolation and a reinforcement of suspicions that the international community is not impartial and favours the position of the metropolitan states.

Minorities in autonomous republics were not regarded primarily as citizens of the majority's state, but defined by the majority as the 'other': the Armenians were 'non-Azeris', 'settlers' or 'latecomers' in the majority's state. With independence, minorities now see themselves as having eliminated the 'social control' of the majority, the heavy burden of being the 'other'. If Cyprus and Palestine/Israel are any indication, the resolution of the conflicts in the South Caucasus will take a very long time. Mediation and efforts to find solutions should not only look for political will and a sellable agreement, but an understanding of leadership and structural capacity, democratic development and inter- and intra-society discourses.