

**Simon Payaslian.** *The Political Economy of Human Rights in Armenia: Authoritarianism and Democracy in a Former Soviet Republic.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2011. ix + 417 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84885-811-4.



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After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many in the West expected a flowering of liberal democratic regimes across Russia and Eurasia. However, seventy years of Soviet rule left an indelible mark. New international norms of democracy and human rights were blended with existing cultural and political practices. In turn, most post-Soviet countries have become hybrid regimes that exhibit a mixture of democratic and authoritarian forms of government. In the *Economist's* "Democracy Index 2011," Armenia is classified as a hybrid regime and sits between Niger and Iraq in their rankings of democratization.[1]

In this book, Simon Payaslian draws on his extensive knowledge of Armenian history to explain the partial democratization of post-Soviet Armenia and its troubled human rights record. Payaslian argues that the Armenian government has "failed to meet the human rights standards established in both the Constitution of the Republic and international human rights law" (p. 280). Since 1994, Armenia has lacked both free elections and "effective democracy," meaning a vi-

brant public sphere, civic engagement, and accountability for rulers during the legislative process. As Payaslian writes, "effective democratic institutions are a consequence rather than a precondition of a democratic mass culture" (p. 10). According to Payaslian, the key to Armenia's incomplete transition to democracy lies in culture and history.

Armenia has a democratic constitution, but the absence of democratic traditions or a human rights culture has allowed the rise of an increasingly authoritarian leadership in which personal authority is more powerful than the rule of law. Payaslian studies political culture, which includes society's expectations of government as well as political leaders' practices of rule. This approach allows for a study of culture and history "from below" as well as post-Soviet political institutions and policy decisions "from above."

Building on his earlier work *The History of Armenia* (2007), the chapter on history and political culture offers a survey of Armenian history

with a focus on law, rights, and political practices. Payaslian's narrative discusses early Christian laws as well as Armenian law codes from the Middle Ages. Under the Bagratuni government in the eleventh century and Cilician government in the fourteenth century, Armenia was independent, with its own legal culture and juridical practices. Armenian laws were not dissimilar from European laws that regulated property rights, marriage, and other customs. The courts were divided between parallel systems of church and secular courts. However, the fall of the Cilician Kingdom in 1375 began a period of foreign rule that lasted roughly until 1911. As subjects of the Persian, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet empires, Armenians adapted to the statist and authoritarian political cultures of their rulers. They learned to work within imperial governments and bureaucracies. Because of foreign rule, the "experiences of Western modernization diverged considerably from the evolution of Armenian history" (p. 58). Payaslian uses modernization theory to argue that Armenia's development was interrupted by foreign rule. Partial democratization after 1911 and the resurgence of authoritarian practices are, in part, the result of disrupted modernization. This argument presumes that free Armenians would have taken a nonauthoritarian path without "foreign" (i.e., non-European) intervention.

Payaslian's narrative places a premium on self-rule and marks a firm division between independent Armenian governments and governments under foreign rule. This framework highlights the importance of empires and colonialism in the development of Armenian politics, culture, and economic life. However, many aspects of modernization continued to take place under authoritarian rule. In the late Soviet period, for example, literacy rates and education were comparable to other advanced industrial societies. The Soviet Armenian government took extensive efforts to modernize, industrialize, and urbanize society. It promoted a mass culture that was predominantly secular. The prominence of tradition-

al aspects of rule, such as patron-client relationships, corruption, and patriarchy in otherwise modern societies, remains a central problem for the study of "neo-patrimonial" societies.

The focus on independent Armenian governments and the struggle for independence is certainly important. Opposition to Russian, Ottoman, and Soviet rule highlights the linkage of rights ideas and the movement for Armenian independence. National liberation from foreign rule became a prerequisite for the creation of Armenian rights laws. For example, Hakob Shamirian's pamphlet "Vorogayt parats" (1773) calls for a democratic Armenian state with a constitution and parliament. His future state would protect freedom of speech and religion while preserving patriarchy and gender inequality. Shamirian imported Enlightenment ideas and adapted them to Armenian culture. This work is part of an important intellectual tradition of Armenian rights thinking. In the 1960s, international human rights and national independence became linked with opposition to Soviet rule. Armenians met independence in 1911 with a rich knowledge of rights ideas, but no practical experience in democratic government or a popular "spirit of democracy."

In chapter 3, Payaslian's text shifts to a study of political elites and institutions in post-Soviet Armenia. While political figures were committed to building democracy, after 1994, President Levon Ter-Petrosyan used various crises, including the 1988 earthquake, the war in Karabakh, and economic depression, to justify increased executive authority. Debates and massive protests surrounding the first post-Soviet constitution led to the unjustified arrest of many opposition figures. The constitution of July 1995 granted the president the power to dissolve the National Assembly, and to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, cabinet figures, regional governors, and the mayor of the capital city Erevan. An amended constitution that was adopted in 2005 retains these presidential powers. "Having replaced the old au-

thoritarian system, the new post-Soviet leaders in Armenia,” writes Payaslian, “rather than promote democracy and human rights, themselves became the architects of an authoritarian regime” (p. 99).

While the Armenian constitution establishes guarantees of human rights and acknowledges the preeminence of international law and decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, in practice, Armenians are arrested for their political beliefs, beaten by police, or subject to other rights abuses. Women are underrepresented in government with only 5.3 percent of the 131 deputies in the National Assembly. The office of the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) remains a positive force with limited resources and authority. *The Political Economy of Human Rights in Armenia* offers detailed chapters on political rights, civil liberties, and social and economic rights, as well as the rights of refugees and internally displaced people in Armenia. Payaslian concludes that, because of its political culture and institutions, Armenia is not likely to emerge as a democracy in the near future nor will its human rights record see improvement.

This text offers a rich study of the resilience of authoritarian practices in post-Soviet Armenia. Its exploration of Armenian history highlights the legacies of foreign rule and the crises of the 1990s. The impact of single-party politics, a centralized economy, and mass violence during the Soviet period remains less clear. A more regional focus would have allowed for comparison with other post-Soviet countries, particularly Georgia and Azerbaijan. To what degree has the rise of Russia as a regional power since 2000 affected Armenian politics?

Finally, Payaslian works from the premise that human rights are a “universally accepted standard.” While this offers a legal basis for the claim that Armenia has failed to protect human rights, Payaslian’s explanation of this failure is primarily cultural. If Armenia lacks a “culture of human rights,” then cultural engagement will do

more to encourage positive change than chastising the government for failing to follow “imported” norms.

Note

[1]. Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2011: Democracy under Stress. A Report from the Economist Intelligence Unit,” *The Economist*, [www.eiu.com](http://www.eiu.com).

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[2] Simon Payaslian, *The History of Armenia* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

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