

ILKKA RONKAINEN

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# HOW TO BRING DOWN AN OLIGARCHY I

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**Armenia's Bloodless Revolution**

*— and What It Left Unfinished*

Ilkka Ronkainen

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**Armenia's Bloodless Revolution and What**  
**It Left Unfinished**

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## **Preface 2018**

On May 8, 2018, Nikol Pashinyan was elected prime minister of Armenia, bringing a peaceful revolution to its conclusion and dismantling the country's entrenched oligarchic system.

How did this happen?

Just weeks before the revolution began, Pashinyan's party held only 7.8 percent of the seats in parliament — the result of the March 2017 elections, widely described by international observers as Armenia's freest and most honest in years. Yet the ruling Republican Party, backed by oligarchs, retained a commanding majority. Pashinyan refused to accept that result as the final word.

He launched a march — two weeks through the countryside, followed by two weeks in the capital, Yerevan — calling on Armenians to take to the streets. The response was overwhelming. That 7.8 percent became a majority in the squares and boulevards of the city. By early May 2018, a Gallup poll found that 99.1 percent of Armenians supported him.

How was that possible?

Even Pashinyan himself might have said: "I'm prime minister — this wasn't supposed to happen." He arrived in Yerevan with just a few dozen marchers, intending only

to block the appointment of former President Serzh Sargsyan as prime minister. No one believed that such a small, exhausted group could spark a revolution.

The march was meant to end on the day of the parliamentary vote. When that vote went against him, Pashinyan did not concede. Instead, he made an obscene gesture toward the Armenian parliament and called on the people to rise and make a revolution. He succeeded — without a single death — and was elected prime minister. Armenia’s Velvet Revolution unfolded with a speed and improbability that still demand explanation.

I had a front-row seat. My home stands directly next to the parliament building, and our neighborhood was cordoned off for much of the revolution. This book is an account of what I saw and experienced through, supplemented by interviews with activists, available data, and a Gallup survey conducted during those days.

I wrote this book as an expression of gratitude to the Armenian revolutionaries. They gave me one of the most remarkable periods of my life and restored my belief that a bloodless revolution is possible. May the world see more freedom, democracy, equality, and humanity.

Many Finnish friends read my manuscript, encouraged me to continue, and offered invaluable feedback. I thank them all. I am especially grateful to the Armenian

revolutionaries who spoke openly about how everything unfolded.

Yerevan, Armenia, June 15, 2018

Ilkka Ronkainen

## **A Note Written 2026**

When I wrote the preface above, just weeks after Armenia's revolution, I believed we were witnessing the beginning of a chain reaction — those oligarchic systems in neighboring countries, including Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, would fall next. I was wrong. No such regime has fallen since. Instead, we have entered a new era that I can only describe as global feudalism.

Revolutions often appear morally clear while they are happening. Only later does the more difficult question emerge: can the moral energy that destroys an old order also build a durable new one?

This book was originally published in Finnish in 2018. The first part reflects what I wrote immediately after the Armenian Revolution May 2018. In the second part, I examine what I have learned from that revolution eight years later, April 2026.

One reason for publishing this book in English is simple: I want to reach those who live under oligarchic rule. I felt compelled to act because the influence of leaders such as

Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin shapes my daily life more than the actions of my own government. The world increasingly finds itself subject to forces beyond democratic control — and only collective action can change that.

My hope is that the experiences and lessons learned described in my books will help challenge oligarchic power wherever it holds people captive.

Loviisa, Finland, May 1, 2026

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**Part One: Armenian Revolution  
Diary 2018 – A Bloodless  
Revolution Is Possible**

First published in Finnish on June 26, 2018

## **Armenia: A Country That Refuses to Die**

Armenia is a country that should not exist.

By every measure of geopolitical logic, it should have been absorbed, erased, or forgotten centuries ago. It sits at the crossroads of empires — Persian, Ottoman, Russian, Soviet — each of which has, at various points, conquered or attempted to erase it. It has no oil. No ocean access. Two of its neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan, have at times denied its right to exist.

And yet Armenia is still here.

It has been here, continuously, for three thousand years. Three thousand years ago, Armenia was a regional power stretching from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. Today it is a small, landlocked republic. What happened in between is one of the most remarkable stories of national survival in human history — and understanding it is essential to understanding the revolution of 2018.

## **How a Finnish Consultant Ended Up Next Door to a Revolution**

I should explain how I got Armenia.

In 2010, after a thirty-year career as a public administration consultant in Finland, I retired. I moved to Yerevan, Armenia — first part-time, then permanently. My home sits on a dead-end street called Demirchyan

**In the spring of 2018, one man began by walking.**

**Twenty-six days later, the oligarchy fell — without a single death.**

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Ilkka Ronkainen lived next door to the Armenian parliament. He walked the streets of Yerevan, watched a revolution take shape from twenty meters away, and wrote every evening.

This book is his account of what he saw — and what it meant.

The first part is a day-by-day diary of Armenia's Velvet Revolution. The second asks the harder question: eight years later, what did the revolution deliver? Elections became free. The economy grew. Fear weakened. But the deep structures of oligarchic power adapted rather than disappeared — and the work of building something durable enough to replace them remains unfinished.

**Armenia proved that a population can withdraw its consent from a corrupt system and prevail.**

*What it could not yet prove is how to make that change permanent.*

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*“Power is not untouchable. Systems that appear permanent are not permanent. Fear is not permanent.”*

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Ilkka Ronkainen is a Finnish social scientist, management consultant, and author who helped Finland build one of the world's most admired public sectors, moved to Armenia in 2010 to develop the oligarchic country. He witnessed Armenia's bloodless Velvet Revolution. Ronkainen has written over twenty books about society and his own life.

