

ILKKA RONKAINEN



HOW TO BRING DOWN AN OLIGARCHY II

Lessons from the Armenian Revolution

for Revolutionaries in the 2020s

,

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Table of Contents

A Note Before the Preface	11
Preface.....	12
PART ONE: WHAT ARMENIA PROVED	16
The Moment of Truth After the Armenian 2018 Revolution	16
The Moment of Truth After Armenia’s Second Revolution 2026	19
The Achievements and Reality of Armenia's Velvet Revolution	27
PART TWO: A HANDBOOK FOR REVOLUTIONARIES	41
Why the Old Revolution Theories Are Not Enough?	41
Revolution Redefined	47
How Is This Book Organized	48
Mission and Values: What a Revolutionary Movement Stands For	51
Mission: What Revolution Is For.....	51
Why Do Values Come First?	52
Values as Ignition.	55
Values as Destination.....	56
Values in Action.....	60
Creativity as a Value	61
Trust in People — Every Step Counts.	62

Hypocrisy Kills a Revolutionary Movement.....	64
Goals and Objectives: Turning Direction into Action	66
Why Do Goals Matter?	66
Objectives: The Practical Version of a Goal.....	72
Strategy: How We Get to Where We Want to Go	75
It is Time for a Hybrid Strategy	76
Strategy One: Distributed Nonviolent Resistance	77
Strategy Two: Building a Parallel Reality — Immediately	79
"Better World" — A Tool for Building a Parallel Reality.....	82
The Two Strategies Together Are Strong.....	87
Organization and Leadership: Building the Movement That Cannot Be Stopped	89
How Organizations Have Evolved	89
The Revolutionary Organization: Seizing Power	91
The Organization of Parallel Reality Building	93
What This Community Looks Like in Practice?	95
Leadership: From Commands to Enabling.....	97
The Difference Between Corporate and Community Leadership	99
Revolutionary Leadership	99
What Great Revolutionary Leaders Have in Common	100

Why Revolutionaries Often Fail in Government?.....	102
Revolution Requires Deep Leadership	110
Three Critical Factors in Revolutionary Leadership ..	111
Leading Parallel Reality	112
Leadership Decides Everything.....	113
From Crowd to High-Performance Team: The Full Journey	118
Implementation: Turning Strategy into Action	123
Purpose and Direction	123
Responsibilities Must Be Clear	124
Communication and Transparency	126
Commitment.....	127
The Capacity to Adapt.....	128
Joy and Humor	130
Sharing Good Practices	131
Good Practices of the Armenian Revolution.....	131
The Implementation Checklist.....	138
Risk Management: What Can Go Wrong and How to Prepare	140
The Iron Heel: The Risk of Violent Suppression	140
Provocation: The Trap That Must Not Be Sprung	143
The Mole: The Risk of Internal Infiltration	145
Fragmentation: The Risk of Internal Collapse	147

Parallel Reality Risks: When the Revolution Is Done in Everyday Life	149
Slowness: The Slow Draining of Energy	149
Disagreement: The Risk That Diversity Becomes Division	151
A Final Note on Risk	153
Revolution in State Apparatuses	155
Revolutionary Theories Forget the Building of the Revolutionary State	155
Why Do Theories Forget the Building?	156
Did 2018 the Armenian Revolutionaries Have a Plan for Building the Revolutionary State?	158
How Does a Revolution Resolve the Question of the State?	165
Revolutionary Models of the Twenty-First Century	166
The Parliamentary Path: The Armenian Model, 2018	167
The Negotiated Revolution: Ukraine, 2004.....	170
The Modern Military Coup: Egypt, 2011 and Bangladesh, 2024.....	172
Direct People's Power: Libya, 2011	174
The Power Vacuum: Syria, 2011—.....	174
Things Revolutionaries Must Have Resolved Before Launching a Revolution.....	176
A Hybrid Strategy for the Transfer of Power	176

Strategy 1: Making Use of the Existing Parliamentary System.....	177
A State of Democratic State of Emergency and the Calling of New Elections	178
The First Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: The Police and the Army	180
The Armenian Revolutionary Government and the Apparatus of Violence: A Strategy of Moderation	182
What Did the Armenian Revolutionary Government Do with the Army?	186
Lessons for Future Revolutions	191
The Second Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: Establishing a Truth Commission	193
The Third Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: Protecting National Wealth.....	197
The Fourth Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: Taking Control of Borders and Transportation Routes.....	199
The Fifth Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: Holding Elections	202
The Sixth Task of the Democratic State of Emergency: Reforming the State's Official Organization	206
The Other Tasks of the Democratic State of Emergency	210
Strategy 2: Building a New State Through Parallel Reality	216

Making Use of the Parallel Reality Strategy	216
Phase 1: Building Parallel Organizations	217
Phase 2: Founding Assemblies.....	217
Phase 3: Forming Higher Councils	218
Why Is This Better Than a Traditional Parliament? .	219
What This Book Has Argued — and What Comes Next	221
A Letter to the Reader.....	226
Bibliography	228
Appendix 1: Better World — Change Leader Training Program	232

A Note Before the Preface

While this book was being written, Armenia held its parliamentary elections on June 7, 2026.

I expected the revolution to lose.

I had spent months documenting what the 2018 Velvet Revolution had left unfinished — the untouched bureaucracy, the surviving oligarchic networks, the judiciary that never became independent, the civil society that remained too thin. By the spring of 2026, the accumulated weight of those failures seemed likely to end the political project that had begun in the streets eight years earlier. I was so convinced of this that I gave my previous book a subtitle that already read as an epitaph: *And What It Left Unfinished*.

Then came the result.

Civil Contract won 49.75 percent of the vote and an absolute parliamentary majority. In the days that followed, the new government launched what it has called a second revolution — one explicitly intended to complete what 2018 began.

I read the government program with a peculiar sensation. The agenda it set — dismantling oligarchic ownership structures, recovering illegally acquired assets, reorienting foreign policy toward Europe, confronting the Church's

political power, reforming the state from within — was almost precisely the list of unfinished tasks I had written about. Not because anyone had read my manuscript. But because the problems were real, and real problems eventually demand real answers.

I did not believe Nikol Pashinyan's government was capable of this. I was wrong.

What this means for the argument of this book — and for the movements this book is written for — is significant. Armenia has now demonstrated something that very few revolutionary movements have ever achieved: a transformation confirmed not once but twice, first in the streets and then at the ballot box, with the second mandate explicitly directed at what the first left unfinished. That is why this is no longer only a book about how to bring down an oligarchy.

It is also a book about what happens next — and why that second question is the harder one.

Preface

I was born in an attic room just after the Second World War, on a former battlefield at the eastern edge of Finland. I was fortunate in my timing: the war was over, and ahead lay decades of human progress. My life's purpose has been to help people grow and break the chains that prevent true humanity.

My life has had three shining moments.

The first came through music. In the 1960s, youth became, for the first time, a global force with its own identity — and rock music was its language. The Rolling Stones, The Who, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, The Beach Boys... — this was my world.

In 1970, at the Isle of Wight Festival — “European Woodstock” — I stood among 600,000 people, hands raised in peace signs, singing John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance.” That was my first shining moment.

The second came through politics. My studies in sociology and philosophy led me into radical student movements. In 1973, at the World Festival of Youth and Students in East Berlin, I met activists and leaders from across the world. I encountered representatives of liberation movements from Vietnam, South Africa, Namibia, and Mozambique. In the years that followed, many of them liberated their countries from the yoke of colonial rule.

Berlin became my university of revolution.

My adult life moved from activism into public service and then into consulting. I worked in building the Finnish welfare state — a project that, in many ways, realized the ideals I had once imagined. When *Newsweek* named Finland the world’s best country in 2010, it felt like a quiet confirmation that something had gone right.

Then came the third moment.

After retiring in 2007, I moved to Armenia, my wife's homeland, hoping to contribute to its development. Instead, I encountered an entrenched oligarchic system. I stepped away from politics — until one evening, returning home in April 2018, I found my neighborhood under police lockdown. A velvet revolution had begun.

As a sociologist, I recognized immediately what I was witnessing. I walked the streets of Yerevan day after day, speaking with people, observing events, and writing each evening. The result was a Finnish-language diary of the revolution, completed just fifty days after the revolution ended. This revolutionary diary, translated into English, has been published in my book, *How to Bring Down an Oligarchy I — The Armenian Bloodless Revolution and What It Left Unfinished*.

After the revolution, I believed similar systems in neighboring countries might fall. I was wrong.

Instead, the world has moved in another direction — toward what I call global feudalism.

Its features are familiar from medieval feudalism: concentrated power, dependence in exchange for protection, inherited advantage, and elites operating above the law. The difference is scale. Today, power is organized not around land but around data, platforms, and capital. A

small number of actors control the infrastructure through which modern life flows.

States increasingly behave like medieval courts. Great powers act without consequence. Smaller states seek protection. Birth geography once again shapes destiny.

In this world, democratic control weakens — and collective action becomes more necessary.

The aim of this book is simple: to show that change is possible.

The old Latin saying: "Nomen est omen" ("name is omen") holds true for me. In Finnish, my name "Ilkka" carries the meaning of freedom fighter. The name comes from Jaakko Ilkka, a sixteenth-century peasant leader who rose against the king and the feudal lords of his time. His motto was: "Better death on the gallows than the life of a serf." Five centuries later, the struggle he named has not ended. It has only changed its form.

Loviisa, Finland

September 6, 2026

Ilkka Ronkainen

PART ONE: WHAT ARMENIA PROVED

The Moment of Truth After the Armenian 2018 Revolution

The senior civil servant leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes — and began to snore.

It was June 2018. I stood at the front of a room in the Armenian Government House, mid-sentence, presenting what I believed were the most important questions facing the country after its revolution. I had just asked: *What kind of society does Armenia want to become?*

No one answered.

No one objected.

No one engaged.

One of the highest-ranking officials in the room had simply fallen asleep.

At that moment, I understood something with complete clarity: **the revolution had not reached the state.**

After the Armenian Revolution of 2018, I believed that a long-held dream might finally come true — the dream that had first brought me to Armenia: to help build one of the best-governed countries in the world.

A new government had taken power, formed by people who had just led a successful revolution but had no experience governing a state. I knew how difficult real

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

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

Eight years of governing followed: wars lost, oligarchs regrouping, a pandemic, the displacement of a hundred thousand people. And then, in June 2026, the people voted again — and gave the unfinished revolution a second mandate.

Armenia has now done something that almost no revolutionary movement in history has achieved: transformed itself twice, first in the streets and then at the ballot box, each time directing its energy at what the previous phase left unfinished.

How to Bring Down an Oligarchy II is not a theory of revolution. It is a practical guide — a business plan for democratic movements at a time when the old models are no longer enough.

The world has changed since 2018. Power has dispersed into platforms, algorithms, and faceless violence. Global feudalism is real — and it has studied Armenia's lessons carefully.

But one thing has not changed.

Power exists because people cooperate with it. When that cooperation ends, power ends.

This book tells you how to end it — and what must be built before, during, and after. Mission and values. Goals and strategy. Organization and leadership. The proven practices of the Armenian Revolution. Building a parallel reality.

Everything you need — except the first step. That one is yours.

Ilkka Ronkainen (born 1949) is a Finnish social scientist, management consultant, and author. He helped build one of the world's most admired public sectors in Finland, moved to Armenia in 2010, and witnessed the country's bloodless revolutions. Ronkainen is also an Armenian citizen and has written over twenty books about society, leadership, revolution and his own life.

