

## Armenia's Referendum : What Impact On Presidential Elections ?

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On November 27, many Armenians voted in a referendum on proposed constitutional amendments, and according to official reports showed overwhelming support for constitutional reforms in the country. The passage of the constitutional amendments in Armenia is going to impact the upcoming presidential elections in 2008, while the profile of the Armenian Diaspora and their role in the formulation and implementation of the country's domestic and foreign policies may have serious regional consequences.

**BACKGROUND:** According to official results published by the Armenian government and currently disputed by the country's political opposition, 93.3 percent of 1.5 million voters expressed their support for the proposed constitutional amendments on November 27. As such, the new constitutional amendments entered into force on December 7, 2005. Meanwhile the Prosecutor-General's office set up a special commission to investigate the reported voting irregularities.

The many constitutional amendments have diluted the power of the president, strengthened the parliament, speeded up the formation of an independent judiciary, made the position of Yerevan city mayor elected, established a system of checks and balances in the government and, among other changes, also allowed for the institution of dual citizenship. These new realities will affect the formulation of Armenia's domestic and foreign policies. An important economic and political factor that has been enhanced in the country and subsequently will affect the region is the increased role of the Armenian Diaspora provided by the new Armenian constitution. As citizens of Armenia, Diasporan Armenians will gain the right to vote, the right to buy and own land, enjoy legal protections of private property laws, and the ability to run for political office in case they have successfully established that they have resided in Armenia for at least ten years. The only law that may hinder a Diasporan Armenian from enjoying those rights and most likely to be amended in the near future upon the successful conclusion of military reforms currently underway in Armenia, is the law which requires every male Armenian citizen to serve in the Armenian military.

**IMPLICATIONS:** It would be foolish to assume that all Diasporan Armenians will start applying for citizenship in the Fatherland. However, those who are most likely to line up at the doors of Armenian consulates and embassies around the world will be the Armenians who left Armenia in the last 15 years and subsequently adopted the citizenship of their host countries, as most of them still have members of their families, relatives and friends residing in Armenia and continue to maintain plots of land and property in their native land. Their number range from 700,000 to nearly a million people. Most are currently residing in Russia, the United States, and Europe.

The second category of Diasporan Armenians who are most likely to express an interest in adopting Armenian citizenship are likely to be from neighboring countries, specifically from Georgia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and a number of other Middle Eastern states. Their motivation to get Armenian citizenship will be the better living standards enjoyed in Armenia as compared to those available in their host countries, together with a familiar business environment, where bribery, corruption and the importance of having influential patrons in the local or state government could easily determine how successful their business are. Existing family ties with extended family members currently residing or studying in Armenia could be another motivation to do so.

The third category of Diasporan Armenians likely to apply for Armenian citizenship will be the Armenians currently residing in the United States,

Canada and Europe for a long time. Many of these maintain active participation in their local communities and continuous ties with their Fatherland. Hundreds of them are engaged in charity work or have already established their businesses in Armenia. Others take active part in fundraisings, fellowships and volunteer work associated with rebuilding Mountainous Karabakh or getting their graduate education in Armenia. The increasing business participation of Armenian Diasporans from the west who are used to do business in more transparent and less corrupt environments without any political patronage may have significant results upon the struggle against corruption in Armenia. They may also accelerate a notch the developing market economy in the country, where the laws of supply and demand would reign supreme, at the expense of reduced government involvement in the country's economy. The adoption of Armenian citizenship by tens of thousands of Armenian Diasporans around the world, often with conflicting cultural backgrounds due to the influences of their upbringing in their host countries and contrary political views about democracy, electoral process and the role of government in the lives of its citizens, and the extent of acceptable government involvement in the economic performance of the state, could significantly affect the outcome of political campaigns in Armenia, especially that of presidential elections in 2008.

Up to now, the current government in Armenia was somewhat successful in maintaining a balance in its foreign policy by subscribing to a self-proclaimed policy of geopolitical complementarity. Balancing between the often clashing interests of Russia and the West in the region, Armenia has to a great extent managed to assuage Russian fears of losing the region, avoided to provoke the ire of the United States, and developed the vital business dealings with Iran. Armenia has also managed to maintain a non-hostile policy toward Turkey and publicly supported Turkey's membership in the EU. The government also managed to implement a controversial deployment of Armenian peace-keeping troops in Iraq, despite opposition at home and by Iraqi Armenians.

However, the forthcoming increase of Armenian electorate at the expense of additional voters from Diaspora may change the political playing field in Armenia and significantly alter Armenia's foreign policies in the region. Specifically, the anti-Turkish feelings of most of the Diaspora will most likely affect Armenia's support for Turkish membership in the EU and furthermore bring up arguments of legal charges against the government of Turkey, requesting financial compensations and return of territories that these groups claim were illegally seized during the Armenian Genocide. Moreover, Armenian citizens voting from the Diaspora, who are residing in Russia, CIS or the Middle East are more likely to support a pro-Russian candidate in the upcoming 2008 presidential elections in Armenia, while those residing in the United States, Canada and Europe are more likely to vote for a pro-western candidate. The amounts of funds that may begin to pour in from the Diaspora, in support of one or another candidate, may directly affect the outcome of the presidential elections and subsequently determine the foreign policy orientation that a new president would follow.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The practice of dual citizenship will attract more Diasporan Armenians back to Armenia and encourage them to invest more in their native country. As such the GDP of Armenia is expected to rise increasingly as more Diasporan Armenians take comfort that their investments and the inviolability of their property will be constitutionally secured and upheld in court. But the adoption of dual citizenship has a great potential to affect the political situation in the country and influence the formulations and implementations of domestic and foreign policies by the government. The political and economic strength of the Armenian Diaspora will become more decisive in the Armenia's foreign policy orientation, and has a potential to undermine the policy of geopolitical complementarity currently pursued by Yerevan.

The 2008 Presidential elections could also bring forth clashes of interests between the regional and great powers of the east and west, who will most

definitely clamor to see an Armenian president who is most fitting to their national interests in the region. Armenia as part of the CIS or some greater body under Russian tutelage, or Armenia as part of NATO and an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic community, are both possible future scenarios.

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