
Armenia : Between A State Of Emergency And A Presidential Inauguration

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The February 19 elections and the March 1 tragedy have revealed a deep split in Armenian society. Public debate in the country is focused on finding a way out of the crisis. While a new governmental coalition is taking shape prior to the official presidential inauguration on April 9, the opposition continues to make its views known, despite restrictions. Rumours have also circulated about possible negotiations between official election winner Serzh Sarkisian and opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian.

The tragedy was the March 1 clashes that left eight dead and more injured. The 20-day state of emergency imposed on Yerevan that evening held without any apparent violation, due largely to supporters loyal to former president Levon Ter-Petrosian who respected the leader's call for respect of the emergency rule.

Ter-Petrosian had run for presidency in the February 19 elections, pulling in 22 percent of the vote, according to official results.

With more than 52 percent of the official vote, Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian was declared winner of the contest, despite claims by Ter-Petrosian and his supporters that the vote was rigged and that Ter-Petrosian was the actual winner.

The events of February 19 and March 1 reveal a schism in Armenian society. While Sarkisian certainly has his supporters, many Armenians are severely critical of the ruling authorities and have taken great risks to demonstrate their opposition. This activism prompted Ter-Petrosian to declare "I woke up society. It is probably the most important deal of my life."

State of emergency

During the state of emergency, Sarkisian and his supporters scored a number of key victories. First, on March 8 the Constitutional Court rejected Ter-Petrosian's appeal to nullify the February 19 vote.

Instead, the court confirmed Sarkisian's election as the next president. Second, more than a hundred people were arrested on charges of organising or participating in the violent actions of March 1. Among the detained are three members of the National Assembly. One of them, Sasun Mikaelian, was reported to possess illegal weapons. A number of people, including Khachatur Sukiasian, another MP, are in hiding. Third, the authorities amended a law on public demonstrations to allow the government to deny permission to hold rallies, provided the police have information that demonstration may cause disorder. Subsequent requests for pro-Ter-Petrosian rallies have been rejected.

All of these changes took place in the presence of visiting political delegations from the Council of Europe, the European Union and the United

States. Most of the foreign groups arrived with the goal of helping the government and Ter-Petrosian establish dialogue to mediate the situation. The Council of Europe and the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights criticised the restrictions on public demonstrations. In return the Armenian authorities spoke of their "possible revision" in the near future. The international delegates also called on the authorities to stop human rights violations, particularly politically-motivated arrests and detentions. While the authorities claim that only those involved in violent actions are being detained, Ter-Petrosian has said that his supporters and activists, including some who were not in Yerevan on March 1, are being targeted.

A new coalition

On March 21, the state of emergency was lifted. Troops controlling central Yerevan were pulled out and restrictions on mass media, including blocks on national and international websites, were lifted.

A four-party coalition government agreement was also signed. Led by Sarkisian's Republican party and its previous coalition partner, Bargavach Hayastan (Prosperous Armenia), the coalition also contains the ARF Dashnaktsutun party. That party's inclusion is somewhat surprising, given that its presidential candidate, Vahan Hovhannesian, had resigned following the news that he received only six percent of the vote and the party had hinted that it might withdraw from the government in protest of the elections' poor organisation.

By far, however, the most unexpected coalition member is the Orinats Yerkir (Country of Law) opposition party. That party's leader Artur Baghdasarian garnered 17 percent of the February 19 vote after running on a radical opposition platform. Many expected him to join forces with Ter-Petrosian, but claiming to be acting "for the sake of the country" on February 29 Baghdasarian announced a 180 turn to join Sarkisian in the government. Although no agreement on the distribution of ministerial portfolios has been reported, Artur Baghdasarian is expected to take the post of Secretary of the Security Council.

With the formation of the coalition, the overwhelming majority of the National Assembly's 131 members support the future government. Only seven members of the Zharangutiun (Heritage) party and four other deputies, three of them detained and one in hiding, stand in opposition of the Sarkisian administration.

Continued opposition

Apart from one trip to the Constitutional Court, Ter-Petrosian has reportedly not left his residence since March 1. Since the tragic events that Saturday he has made only one public appearance, an interview, the content of which, due to media restrictions, local media did not report. He said that given the fact that the Constitutional Court's verdict came during a state of emergency, Sarkisian's legitimacy is doubtful, He also said he was ready to co-operate with authorities according to the conditions suggested by the EU, which call for the release of political detainees and the carrying out of an independent international investigation into the events of March 1.

Because all the public events have been banned, Ter-Petrosian's supporters have organised nightly "political walks" through downtown Yerevan. Co-ordinated over the internet, up to one thousand people with otherwise nothing

in common, have been walking through the city streets carrying candles and portraits of those who died on March 1.

Each day police have arrested several of the walkers, but in all cases they have been released later the same day.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that the political teams of Sarkisian and Ter-Petrosian are holding negotiations. The nature of relations between the two political heavyweights will likely come into focus only after Sarkisian is inaugurated on April 9.
