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# U.S. Critical Of Armenian Vote, Arrests

By Emil Danielyan

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The United States has criticized the Armenian government for its handling of last week's presidential election and expressed serious concern at the ensued arrests of several top allies of the main opposition candidate, former President Levon Ter-Petrosian. It has also urged the authorities in Yerevan not to use force against tens of thousands of his supporters demonstrating against the official vote results.

In a statement issued late Thursday, the U.S. mission to the OSCE headquarters in Vienna said Washington is "very concerned" about the arrests and the reported closure of Ter-Petrosian's campaign offices across Armenia. "These kinds of actions are not consistent with democratic principles, and we urge the Government of Armenia to uphold the rule of law and international democratic standards in proceeding on these cases," it said.

The authorities ordered the crackdown on the Ter-Petrosian-led opposition in response to its non-stop street protests in Yerevan which the former Armenian leader hopes will force a re-run of what he regards as a fraudulent vote. President Robert Kocharian has accused his predecessor of seeking to return to power "by illegal means" and threatened "sharp" government measures.

The U.S. statement submitted to the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna welcomed the fact that the authorities have so far refrained from using force against tens of thousands of protesters. "This peaceful exercise of the freedom of assembly, coupled with effective, non-violent crowd management, is a notable achievement and a sign of democratic progress," it said. "We call on all sides to ensure that this peaceful situation continues."

The U.S. mission further stated that the February 19 vote was "far from perfect" even if it was found by Western observers to have been administered "mostly in line" with democratic standards. "Although the administration of the election procedure was mostly in line with OSCE standards, key OSCE commitments, regarding the planning and execution of democratic elections, remain unmet in Armenia as noted in the OSCE [observers'] preliminary findings," it said. "We call on the Government and people of Armenia to address these concerns."

The statement pointed to instances of ballot stuffing, vote-buying multiple voting and voter intimidation reported by Armenian and foreign observers. It also cited "disturbing irregularities" reported during the recount of ballots in some polling stations. "Because of such real and perceived irregularities, we remain concerned that the level of trust among the Armenian electorate in their election process remains dangerously low," added the statement.

The U.S. State Department's initial reaction to the conduct of the election was clearly more positive, with a department spokesman congratulating Armenians on their "active and competitive" election.

Ter-Petrosian welcomed the latest U.S. statement as he addressed tens of thousands of supporters who gathered in Yerevan's Liberty Square for a tenth consecutive day. "This is a serious approach which proves that the United States does not trust these elections," he said.

Ter-Petrosian also renewed his strong verbal attacks on the OSCE observers, accusing them of applying "double standards." "They can turn a blind eye on things that would be considered immoral and illegal in their countries," he

charged.

Geert Ahrens, head of the long-term observer mission deployed in Armenia by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, rejected the criticism as "unfair." In an interview with RFE/RL, he also said that the mission's preliminary assessment of the election conduct given on February 20 was not as positive as has been widely construed in and outside the country. "When we say 'mostly,' this is not a compliment," he said.

Ahrens stressed in particular that the presidential ballot was more flawed than last May's Armenian parliamentary elections which the OSCE described as "largely" democratic. "I would say 'largely' is 80 percent to 90 percent, while 'mostly' can be 51 percent or 75 percent but not more," he said. "This preliminary statement clearly says that the overall quality of these elections was not as good as the one held a year ago."

The German diplomat also echoed the U.S. concerns about the post-election crackdown on the opposition. "We do observe all these events and we are discussing this with the authorities, including the public prosecutor," he said. "Our legal analyst is following these procedures very closely. We would not do this if we had no concern."

According to the government-controlled Central Election Commission, Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian won the election outright with 52.8 percent of some 1.63 million votes which it says were cast by Armenians. The more detailed data released by the CEC show that he avoided a risky run-off with Ter-Petrosian thanks to 242 of Armenia's 1,923 polling stations where he polled more than 80 percent of the vote. The total number of votes cast for the prime minister there stands at approximately 82,000, or nearly twice the margin of his first-round victory.

In 75 of those precincts, Sarkisian's vote tally exceeded a staggering 90 percent, sharply contrasting with the suspiciously poor performance of Ter-Petrosian and another major opposition candidate, Artur Baghdasarian. The CEC gave the two men 21.5 percent and 16 percent of the national vote respectively. But paradoxically, they got no votes at all in more than 40 mostly rural polling stations, even though they did relatively well in some of the neighboring precincts.

Ter-Petrosian, for example, won 640 votes in one polling station in the electoral district No. 23 of the eastern Gegharkunik region but did not get a single vote in seven other local precincts. "In those precincts, we either had proxies forced out or had no proxies at all," said Artak Zeynalian, a senior member of the ex-president's campaign team. "It is obvious that blatant falsifications were done there."

Ahrens said OSCE observers are "analyzing" the highly uneven distribution of votes. "We have of course seen that there is a number of polling stations with improbable results," he said, adding that the mission will raise the issue in its next post-election report due next week.

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