
Armenia Ends State of Emergency

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Doubts remain about the future of democracy in the country

26 March 2008: Last Friday saw the end of a state of emergency in Armenia with the army withdrawing from the capital Yerevan, leaving doubts about the future of democracy in the country and the likelihood of continued political stability. What began a month ago with the opposition parties' rejection of the February 19th presidential elections transformed into mass street protests, escalating into clashes with the police and the declaration of a state of emergency by outgoing President Robert Kocharan.

Since order was first imposed on March 1st, the Armenian government has arrested more than 100 opposition activists and leaders, including several members of parliament and a former foreign minister, who are currently still being held. The opposition candidate, Mr. Ter-Petrosian, has himself been placed under house arrest. Two important stories have emerged from this crisis, one dealing with the election itself and another concerning a rapid deterioration of stability brought on by a political dispute.

The February election resulted in a 53% winning majority for the incumbent party candidate, Mr. Sarkisian, versus 21.5% for Mr. Ter-Petrosian of the opposition. Stunned by the outcome, opposition leaders declared the election a sham, citing numerous irregularities, and called for a new poll to be held, which was rejected by the government. The results were also rejected by Arthur Baghdasaryan, the former speaker and leader of the Ornats Yerkir party, who placed third. Members of the opposition have pointed to reports of vote buying, multiple voting and ballot box stuffing, suggesting it was rigged by president Kocharan in favor of his party's candidate. It's been reported that a combination of biased media, vote rigging, and public support from the president are the factors contributing to Mr. Sarkisian's victory.

The government claims these charges are false, and is supported by the report of the OSCE observers at the election, who stated that the "presidential election in Armenia was conducted mostly in line with the country's international commitments, although further improvements are necessary to address remaining challenges." It also noted substantial progress in the handling of the process compared to previous votes. Since the initial protests, the constitutional court has ruled on the opposition's formal appeal, confirming the existence of voting irregularities but stating that these are insufficient to invalidate the entire election, denying a request for a re-vote.

Not uncommon in the Caucasus, the context of this election is far from simple, in part due to the background of the candidates. Armenia has endured long standing economic and political problems, including endemic corruption and a lack of public trust in the government.

Public discontent with the economy stems from unemployment and a rising currency value that has not made staple goods more affordable due to the continued presence of import monopolies. Disillusion has grown with the government because of its failure to address these issues and the perception that parliament members are more focused on personal gain rather than the public interest. The perpetuation of a frozen conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which has prevented improvement in relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, looms over the country's domestic problems and remains unresolved by previous administrations.

This situation has exacerbated bitterness on the opposition side as many were expecting a change in political leadership, voting against current problems that have been associated with president Kocharan's administration and arguing for reforms in the electoral process. Mr. Sarkisian is not viewed with much higher regard. Unfortunately, Levon Ter-Petrosian is no reformer himself and is not a newcomer to the political machine in Yerevan. He served as the country's first elected president demonstrating little success in addressing the same domestic issues while in office. This explains why analysts say his calls for reforms to the electoral process—after claiming the recent election a fraud-ring of hypocrisy. Mr. Ter-Petrosian is widely considered to have rigged the 1996 election, due to voting irregularities that took place at the time, and is remembered for ordering tanks onto the streets of Yerevan to quell subsequent protests. In this context, February appears to be a case of history repeating itself. Thus far, the situation in Armenia has yielded no clear heroes for the democratic process on either side of the political divide, nor validity to either claim.

The circumstances of the breakdown in public order that took place on March 1st have themselves been a subject of dispute. After banning public demonstrations, the government ordered police units to break up the sit in protest taking place in the capital's central square.

Opposition activists regrouped, barricading themselves in other sections of the city, leading to violent clashes that resulted in eight deaths and the institution of a state of emergency. The authorities claim that protesters were armed and that a spree of arrests was necessary because of a plot to carry out a coup by force against the government. Mr. Ter-Petrosian alleges that the weapons were planted by state security services to justify forcibly removing the protesters and subsequent detentions of opposition members. What is clear is that the government lost control of the situation in Yerevan, resorting to restrictions on the media and the use of the army to deal with protesters. A recently passed law banning demonstrations if they are perceived to threaten public order represents a return to a well remembered undemocratic past.

Current prospects for political reconciliation remain low and Mr. Sarkisian has undertaken a policy of co-optation having convinced the Ornats Yerkir party and its leader Arthur Baghdasaryan to join his government. With this recent revelation it appears that the opposition and Mr. Ter-Petrosian may have to accept their defeat in the elections. However, the events of the past month have reflected poorly on the president-elect, despite his effort to keep a low profile throughout the state of emergency. Robert Kocharian's methods in dealing with the opposition will be perceived as being for Mr.

Sarkisian's benefit, and the outgoing president may have considerably damaged his own, already waning, reputation in public. This will make a possible bid

for Prime Minister, in the style of Putin, a difficult proposition in the future.

Still dealing with the fallout from elections in Kenya, international pressure has come down for a restoration of political stability in Armenia, with both Russia and the U.S. issuing statements to this effect. A peaceful protest recently took place in the capital, which the police approached without attempting to disperse the demonstrators, suggesting that the government no longer perceives a threat from the opposition. The upcoming presidential inauguration on April 9th will test this newly established quiet, representing the next likely flashpoint of political tension, and by all indications cementing Mr. Sarkisian's victory in the elections.

Although his government has not yet announced a political agenda, in a recent joint column with Mr. Baghdasaryan in the Washington Post he stated that first on the list of issues is "the long standing conflict over who should control the Nagorno-Karabakh region between our country and Azerbaijan" with the second being normalization of relations with Turkey, along with recognizing the need to tackle corruption. For an administration conceived in a state of emergency, it remains to be seen whether Mr. Sarkisian will be able to tackle Armenia's three longest running problems—assuming of course that the current stability survives his inauguration.

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