
Armenia's Government : What Chance For Change?

By Marianna Grigoryan
EurasiaNet - 17/4/2008

As Armenia's new government takes shape, domestic attention is focusing on how the administration headed by newly inaugurated President Serzh Sarkisian will put to rest lingering tension from the March 1 clash between police and opposition supporters. For now, no clear policy trends have emerged.

At latest count, 10 people were reported to have died from the March 1 violence; scores remain in prison for allegedly fostering the unrest. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Discussions about government posts are still ongoing, but a rough outline of a cabinet has emerged. Following the April 9 appointment of Central Bank head Tigran Sarkisian as prime minister, President Sarkisian on April 14 named as defense minister Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Seyran Ohanian, a former head of breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh's military, and Eduard Nalbandian, Armenia's ambassador to France, as foreign minister.

Justice Minister Gevorg Danielian (ruling Republican Party of Armenia), Agriculture Minister David Lokian (Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutiun) and Sports and Youth Affairs Minister Armen Grigorian (Prosperous Armenia Party) will retain their posts.

Tigran Sarkisian (no relation to the president) will have until April 29 to decide on his full cabinet.

The 48-year-old prime minister describes himself as a "tough hands-on manager." True to his reputation of being apolitical, he has stated that he will not join the Republican Party, and that he intends to tackle Armenia's "oligarchic economy" with the same resoluteness that he used in overseeing the banking sphere. "Now the arena has been enlarged, we have to go down the same path," Sarkisian told journalists on April 11.

The choice of Sarkisian, a non-party career economist, has been welcomed by some opposition figures, and hailed by ruling party members as a sign that Armenia is serious about cleaning up its public administration. "I think it was the best choice that Serzh Sarkisian could make," commented economist Tatoul Manaserian, an opposition sympathizer. "I am an opposition figure, but it is not always that you have to be an opponent. I think that our government needs professionals exactly like Tigran Sarkisian."

Opposition-friendly media have lauded Sarkisian for managing Armenia's banking system "with an iron rod." "Without his [Sarkisian's] agreement, not even a fly can buzz in this system," the Zhamanak Yerevan newspaper said in a commentary last year.

Sarkisian has indicated that a similarly sharp eye will be trained on the government. "I will make sure that ministers strictly perform their duties. Otherwise, public appraisals will be given of their activities," Sarkisian stated in an interview with Aravot daily on April 12.

Tigran Sarkisian's ties to international financial circles are what caught the eye of other party members. "Those who manage finances, they know the weight of these finances and ways to spend money," succinctly noted senior Republican Party member Galust Sahakian during a meeting with journalists over the weekend.

Some international organizations will be keeping an eye on Tigran Sarkisian's performance in areas outside banking, however.

On April 15, the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe added to those evaluations a draft report on the situation in Armenia. The draft attributes "the underlying causes of the crisis" to "the failure of the key institutions of the state, including the parliament and courts, to perform their functions in full compliance with democratic standards and the principles of the rule of law and the protection of human rights."

The draft report envisages suspension of Armenia's PACE voting rights if reforms in these areas are not forthcoming.

David Harutiunian, head of Armenia's parliamentary delegation to PACE, has stated that the government doesn't "hesitate to come up with self-criticism," and that "much can be done" before the assembly's next full session in June, the Panorama.am news site reported.

Meanwhile, a US congressional hearing on April 17 will examine the events of March 1 and subsequent government actions; the hearing will also consider Armenia's qualifications for \$235 million in aid assistance from the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

In response, one senior Republican Party lawmaker commented to EurasiaNet that "external dictates or pressure" is not needed for Armenia to make necessary reforms. "It is a long time now that we have spoken about the need for these reforms and these reforms must be made in all cases," said Armen Ashotian. "Armenia has certain commitments, however, they are not more than [those set forth by] Armenia's Constitution and domestic demands."

One independent analyst, though, questions whether or not the "ambitious programs" for the "second phase" of reforms promised by President Sarkisian will come to life or not. "We still have to wait until the final formation of the government," said Yervand Bozoian.

"Authorities, in their turn, have many times spoken about reforms, however these still remain words."

Editor's Note: Marianna Girgoryan is a writer for the ArmeniaNow.com weekly in Yerevan.
