
OSCE : Armenia Vote Mostly OK

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An influential international observer mission said Armenia's presidential election was "mostly in line with the country's international commitments, although further improvements are necessary."

The generally approving assessment of the observers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe could undermine the momentum of opposition protesters who allege widespread fraud in Tuesday's voting.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information.

AP's earlier story is below.

YEREVAN, Armenia (AP) - Some 7,000 opposition supporters protested in Armenia's capital Wednesday as officials said an initial ballot count showed that the prime minister had won the presidential election outright.

Riot police were dispatched to the election commission headquarters, while police patrolled streets near the protest, where demonstrators claimed that the Tuesday vote was rigged.

The allegations of fraud and threats of mass protests have raised concerns about the stability of the volatile, strategic country, located at the juncture of the energy-rich Caspian Sea region and southern Europe and bordering Iran.

A preliminary count of all ballots showed Prime Minister Serge Sarkisian had nearly 53 percent of the vote, Central Election Commission chief Garegin Azarian said - enough to avoid a runoff. Top opposition candidate Levon Ter-Petrosian had 21.5 percent, Azarian said.

Ter-Petrosian supporters gathered in a central Yerevan square near the election commission building to protest. The commission headquarters, a five-minute walk from the square, were cordoned off by metal barriers and a few dozen helmeted riot police with truncheons stood guard.

"I have no doubt that the authorities have falsified the election and I will protest with all those who also feel cheated," said Simon Grigorian, a 38-year-old engineer.

A senior Ter-Petrosian aide, Nikol Pashinian, urged the crowd to stand up for justice. "It would be a crime on our part to leave the country to this criminal regime," Pashinian said.

Sarkisian was groomed by outgoing President Robert Kocharian and was widely expected to win, in part because of favorable media coverage and support from the state bureaucracy. He has also benefited from recent economic improvements.

The president is the country's top leader, holding more power than the prime minister.

Ter-Petrosian accused the authorities of resorting to ballot-stuffing, vote buying and beating his activists who monitored the election. His side has asserted that he was actually the winner.

"These figures have nothing to do with reality, we are overwhelmingly ahead

of them," his spokesman Arman Museian said of the results announced by the election commission.

Observers from a Moscow-led group of ex-Soviet republics as well as from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe were monitoring the vote, and the OSCE was to release its assessment later Wednesday.

Sarkisian and Ter-Petrosian - Armenia's first president after the 1991 Soviet collapse - were the two top contenders vying to lead the South Caucasus nation, where more than a quarter of its 3.2 million people live in poverty despite some economic progress in recent years.

The election campaign was dominated by the country's economic revival and efforts to resolve the status of Nagorno-Karabakh - a mountainous region in neighboring Azerbaijan that has been under ethnic Armenian control since a cease-fire ended six years of fighting in 1994.

Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia on Sunday added an element of uncertainty for Armenians, many of whom see clear analogies between Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian government says the region should be recognized as a sovereign state, while Azerbaijan says it will never cede its territory.

Armenia experienced an economic collapse after the Soviet breakup and in the face of blockades by Azerbaijan and its key ally Turkey, which is outraged by efforts to win international recognition of the killing of 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks in the World War I-era as genocide.

The blockades have hamstrung Armenia's economy and cut it out of lucrative regional energy and transport projects.

The U.S., whose large Armenian diaspora has a strong lobby in Congress, has poured some \$1.7 billion in aid into the country since 1991, encouraging economic and political liberalization.

Armenia is eligible for millions more in U.S. aid, but a questionable election could jeopardize Washington's support.
