
West Unprepared To Meddle In Armenia.

By Emil Danielyan for EurasiaNet
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The US and the EU are unlikely to ostracize Armenia, despite election warnings

The US and the EU are stepping up pressure on the Armenian government to hold free-and-fair parliamentary elections on 12 May. They have warned that if the upcoming vote is deemed fraudulent, Yerevan could forfeit hundreds of millions of dollars in additional development assistance, and undermine its efforts to forge closer links with the West.

However, analysts are skeptical that the warnings will have much influence on the behavior of President Robert Kocharian's administration. The outcome of the parliamentary balloting will go a long way toward determining the political futures of both Kocharian and his most powerful associate, Defense Minister Serzh Sarkisian, many Armenian political observers believe. Some say that neither the US nor EU is prepared to take the kind of action that would seriously challenge the president's nearly decade-long grip on power.

None of the presidential and parliamentary elections held under the Kocharian administration until now were judged democratic by Western monitors. The most recent of those polls, held in early 2003, were marred by reports of widespread ballot box stuffing, voter intimidation, vote buying, and other irregularities.

US and EU officials say the upcoming elections offer a unique opportunity for the South Caucasus state to end its post-Soviet history of electoral fraud. "People [in the West] feel that there can be no more excuses," said one Western diplomat in Yerevan. "The Armenian economy is growing, and there is no active war in Nagorno-Karabakh. So it's time for Armenia to graduate into a normal political life."

Cory Welt, a senior Russia and Eurasia analyst at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, agreed, saying that a clean election would give a "huge boost" to Armenia's international reputation. "As time goes on, there are [fewer] reasons, not more, for Western states to promote engagement with an Armenian government that seeks to rule through anti-democratic methods," he told EurasiaNet.

The issue was reportedly high on the agenda of Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian's 5 March talks in Washington with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Top State Department officials, including Rice, have repeatedly warned that if the forthcoming elections again fall short of democratic standards, Yerevan will risk losing US\$235 million in US economic assistance promised under the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), a program designed to spur political and economic reforms in developing nations. Armenia was deemed eligible for the scheme, unveiled by President George W Bush in 2004, despite being one of the world's leading per-capita recipients of American aid.

Testifying before a foreign aid subcommittee of the US House of Representatives on 15 March, the head of a US government agency administering the MCA, John Danilovich, said he "communicated" with Kocharian earlier this year to reiterate Washington's "concerns that

elections be held in a correct manner." One of Danilovich's deputies, John Hewko, visited Yerevan for the same purpose earlier in March.

"We expect to see significant improvement over past elections," Hewko told reporters there.

For its part, the EU is tying the proper election conduct to Armenia's participation in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) framework that entitles the country, along with neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan, to a privileged relationship with the bloc, better access to its market, and greater EU aid. Each of the three regional states signed with the EU last November its own ENP action plan, each of which includes provisions designed to promote democratization.

The EU's Brussels-based special representative to the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, discussed preparations for the May polls with senior Armenian officials during an early March visit to Yerevan. "It is the first major election taking place in the South Caucasus after we finalized the action plans," Semneby told RFE/RL. "And for that reason it has an importance that goes beyond the borders of Armenia."

Failure to ensure its freedom and fairness would mean that Armenia has lost an opportunity to build a "firm relationship" with the EU, he warned.

Yet neither loss of the MCA funds, nor exclusion from the ENP would threaten the political survival of Armenia's two most powerful leaders accustomed to Western criticism. Kocharian is believed to be planning to hand over power to Sarkisian and remain in government in some capacity after completing his second and final term in office in less than a year from now. Continued control of the Armenian parliament is seen as critical for the success of this putative scenario.

The US and the EU have so far left no indications that, in the event of another deeply flawed election, they would openly challenge the legitimacy of the authorities in Yerevan. "I don't think the West will take any sharp steps against Kocharian's regime," Aleksandr Arzumian, a former foreign minister opposed to the current Armenian government, told EurasiaNet. Arzumian dismissed the Western incentives for Armenia's democratization, saying that they alone will not prevent fresh vote rigging.

According to analyst Welt, Washington's "only really significant lever" is MCA aid and a "US stamp of approval" which it would give to Yerevan. "Whether such US approval really matters to Armenia's authorities is another question," he said. "If they believe they have sufficient support from countries like Russia and Iran, then termination of MCA aid will mean little."

Another factor that may prompt the Bush administration to tread lightly is connected with the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, some observers believe. American, French and Russian diplomats who are trying to broker a solution hope that Kocharian and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev will meet shortly after the Armenian elections and finally cut a peace deal. Diplomats privy to the peace process say Aliyev and Kocharian have already essentially agreed on the basic principles of a peaceful settlement proposed by the mediators. Washington, which has long held a Karabakh settlement to be a top policy priority for the region, seems unlikely to undercut either leader under the current circumstances.

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