
Will Armenia Turn Orange ?

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This year will be one of the most important in Armenia's post-Soviet independent history.

With the parliamentary election set for May 2007 and the presidential election for March 2008, this South Caucasian republic is in for 12 months of intense election battles.

The winner of the presidential race could be determined by the parliamentary election. Under the 2005 constitution, the party that wins control of parliament will nominate the prime minister and the speaker, and will have an opportunity to fight for the presidency in 2008.

Presidential elections in all former Soviet republics carry the risk of political upheavals. There has not been a change of power at all in some of them, including Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics. But elections in Ukraine and Georgia were accompanied by upheavals later called "orange" or "color" revolutions, with public clashes, turbulent demonstrations, and a transfer of power to a new, less legitimate government.

When election results are contested in a former Soviet republic, the West, represented by state and supra-national democratic institutions, usually denounces the excessive use of administrative resources by the ruling party. Partly with that as a justification, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, the administrations of the United States and EU countries, and other Western agencies invariably take the side of the force that contests the election results.

The pro-government political parties in Armenia appear to have the strongest positions now. Many believe that they will share victory in the parliamentary elections and therefore posts in the government and the leadership of the new parliament. This is quite likely because the current Armenian opposition parties are dependent on their leaders, and the general public knows very little, if anything, about their programs.

The forces that rely on Western political and social values and development paths stand apart from the other opposition parties. One of them is the party of the former speaker of parliament, Artur Bagdasaryan. Another is the movement led by Raffi Ovannisyan, former minister of foreign affairs and a U.S. national who has become an Armenian citizen.

Inspired by the example of neighboring countries, the new pro-Western forces in Armenia attend all meetings of international organizations, tirelessly proclaim their commitment to European values, and complain that Armenia is so far not up to the European mark.

European organizations give such figures a pat on the back and try to involve them in their activities. Some of these figures have earned quite a reputation, while others are staying in the shadows, and their involvement in the work of foreign organizations has so

far remained unnoticed by the Armenian, let alone Russian, public.

Shavarsh Kocharyan, a deputy in the Armenian parliament, was on the Armenian delegation to PACE for several years and was removed in 2006. This, however, has not stopped him from maintaining, and possibly strengthening, his ties with that influential European body.

Since leaving, Kocharyan has been invited to Strasbourg three times, attending PACE meetings on trips paid for by the organization.

The heads of the Council of Europe's observer missions at elections are traditionally appointed by one of the CE parties on a rotating basis. When the head of a mission for the Armenian elections was selected, it was the turn of the European Democrats, a party dominated by ethnic Russians. Many expected that the post would be given to a Russian, but the PACE Bureau changed the rules of the game, and the post was given to Leo Platvoet of the Netherlands.

A change in Armenia's policy, or a political destabilization of the republic, could undermine Russia's influence in the region, which largely depends on its alliance with Armenia. Therefore, Russia needs Armenia to remain stable and stick to the same policies after the parliamentary and presidential elections. It will also benefit if the forces wishing to strengthen the alliance with Russia remain at the country's helm.

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