
Armenian Scenario

RIA Novosti - 7/2/2008

Moscow. (Vyacheslav Nikonov for RIA Novosti) - On February 19, a head of state will be elected in what is for us a friendly and very important country. The elections in Armenia are very similar to those Russia will hold in March.

The successor of the current president will run for the top position; he is being opposed by representatives of the former government, and his long standing opponents. As in Russia, the current government's nominee - Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian - has every chance of success.

As in Russia, the popularity of the current government in Armenia rests on economic success. When Robert Kocharian's team came to power ten years ago Armenia was in a desperate position. It had suffered several years of economic dislocation, absence of electricity and heating. Today, Armenia, a country with no energy resources or any other tangible natural resources, has one of the world's most dynamic economies. Its economy grew by 13.6% last year, one of the fastest rates in the world. But statistics as such are of little interest to the voters. What matters for them is how those statistics reflect their well-being. During the past year, average incomes increased by 24.7%, while inflation did not exceed the Russian old dream rate of 6%.

Last year's parliamentary elections testified to serious public support for the current government. The ruling Republican Party, led by Sarkisian, together with its ally and rival Prosperous Armenia, headed by Gagik Tsarukian, received more than half of all votes and two thirds of seats in parliament. Now this alliance has shored up its power even further - at the presidential elections Tsarukian will support Sarkisian. This partnership is as hard hitting as that between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in Russia. The latest polls give Sarkisian 47.5% of all votes, which are likely to guarantee his victory in the first round.

Today, Yerevan looks like an enormous construction site. The prime minister and his political consultants do not have to ponder over election scenarios - Sarkisian is travelling all around the country, and telling his compatriots about ambitious plans for spreading the gas network, road and house construction, and the eradication of poverty. He does not need a detailed program, and has drafted a short document on the consolidation of statehood and promotion of the principles of justice. Sarkisian cannot be accused of weakness or lack of experience - before heading the government, he served in various positions in security-related ministries, and his name is associated with military victories in Karabakh.

Relations with Russia and the West are a big part of the election campaign.

It is hard to notice anti-Russian attitudes in Armenia - Russia is associated with hope and support. But the same is true of anti-Western sentiment, which is only natural considering the existence of the influential Armenian Diaspora countries such as the United States and France. Sarkisian has a well-deserved reputation of a pro-Russian politician. He has known Putin for a long time, since he worked in CIS security-related agencies. But he is quite open to cooperation with the West, which practically eliminates the possibility of a foreign country conducting a large-scale campaign against him, as has sometimes happened in post-Soviet republics.

In this position it will be difficult not to win. No opposition candidate stands a chance, unless the government makes the mistake of paying too much attention to them. For the time being, the most prominent rival is the recent

Speaker of Parliament and close associate of the current leader Artur Bagdasarian, who the polls put in second place with 13.4% of votes. He has suddenly turned into a vociferously pro-western critic of the regime.

An active participant in every recent campaign, the leader of the National Unity Party, Artashes Gegamian, is in fourth place with a rating of 4.7%.

Ex-Prime Minister Vazgen Manukian, and the leader of the historical Dashnak Party Vice-Speaker of Parliament Vaan Ovannesian are well known in the country. But the biggest sensation was the decision of the first Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian to run for the presidency. It has given not quite understandable hope to many opponents of the current government to defeat it. It is comparable to Mikhail Gorbachev running in the election race in Russia (he ran for the presidency in 1996 but with no success).

Ter-Petrosian is trying to prove the unprovable - that he was a more successful leader than Kocharian and Sarkisian. But his compatriots have not forgotten the first half of the 1990s. Moreover, Ter-Petrosian had to resign when under Western pressure he displayed readiness to make tangible concessions on Karabakh and relations with Turkey. Such conduct is not forgiven in Armenia. It will be difficult for him to prove his good attitude to Russia. It was he who shut down all the Russian schools in the country.

Half of the voters will not support him under any circumstances, and he can hardly hope for more than third place and 7% of votes.

Could the consolidation of the opposition change the situation before the elections? It seems unlikely, primarily because none of the opposition leaders is accepted by the others. Ter-Petrosian, who is the loudest in claiming the leadership of the opposition, is also the most resented by the others. Sarkisian's opponents will not form a political alliance. The West is not likely to support an oppositionist, either. Moreover, now that international observers have, with a few reservations, declared the elections in neighboring Georgia quite legitimate, they will find it rather difficult to give the Armenian elections a lower rating for fear of looking ridiculous. Unlike in Georgia, the elections in Armenia are being held according to schedule; TV channels have not been shut down; opposition supporters are not behind bars or in exile, nor under criminal investigation. International monitoring will be very serious - almost 300 observers in 1,923 constituencies.

Russia would like to see Armenia a stable and dynamically developing country with a responsible government oriented towards constructive relations with it. Strategically, Sarkisian's nomination suits Moscow, which has given him support at the top level. It would be appropriate to take steps that would demonstrate our readiness to render Armenia substantial economic assistance.

Regrettably, the pro-Russian forces in Armenia have been recently weakened by Moscow's decision to increase prices on gas exports.

Considering our financial capabilities Russia should list Armenia as a priority recipient of its direct foreign aid. The main thing is not to overdo with the public demonstration of our support. The United States has been giving tangible assistance to Armenia for a long time. Our policymakers should consider the role Armenia could play in building relations with Georgia. For Armenia, which is under transport blockade, transit via Georgia is a lifeline. The more tense Russian-Georgian relations are, the more this lifeline is threatened.

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