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# Armenian Leaders Set For Sharp Pay Rise

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The Armenian parliament debated on Thursday a drastic increase in the salaries of high-level state officials, including President Serzh Sarkisian, which is sought by the government but rejected by most opposition forces.

A relevant government bill submitted to the National Assembly applies to the head of state, government ministers, senior law-enforcement officials as well as parliament deputies. In particular, it would triple the monthly salaries of President Sarkisian, Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian and parliament speaker Hovik Abrahamian. The president would get 1.3 million drams (\$3,260) a month, almost nine times more than the current average wage in Armenia.

Opposition lawmakers condemned the government initiative, saying that the country's political leaders have no moral right to earn much more without corresponding increases in other public sector salaries, pensions and social security benefits paid to low-income Armenians.

'These officials deserve dismissal, rather than a pay rise,' said Nikol Pashinian, an outspoken deputy nominally affiliated with the Armenian National Congress (HAK). 'During their rule poverty in Armenia has risen from 27.6 percent to 35 percent and emigration has intensified. One might think that the results of their tenure have been disastrous for Armenia because they have been poorly paid.'

'What should Serzh Sarkisian's salary be raised for? For occupying Yerevan with tanks on March 1, 2008? Or for making Armenia an object of ridicule in Europe and Russia?' charged Pashinian. He also condemned the fact that the government proposed the measure after deciding to scrap meager benefits paid to thousands of unemployed people.

Another HAK lawmaker, Aram Manukian, rejected a government argument higher wages would decrease corruption among various state officials. Manukian argued that the Armenian judiciary remains rife with corruption despite the fact that judges currently earn even more than the president of the republic. 'Corruption can be eliminated only by a political will,' said Manukian.

Davit Harutiunian, a senior lawmaker from Sarkisian's Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), agreed with this assertion. But he insisted that the authorities will complement the pay rises with other anti-corruption measures.

For his part, Galust Sahakian, the HHK's parliamentary leader, rejected the opposition criticism, saying that much better pay for top Armenian officials is 'a matter of the state's dignity.' 'If you don't want extra pay, donate it orphanages,' he told opposition parliamentarians.

The government bill is also opposed by deputies representing Raffi Hovannisian's Zharangutyun (Heritage) party and Gagik Tsarukian's Prosperous Armenia. Zharangutyun's Zaruhi Postanjian called it 'immoral.'

But with the HHK controlling the majority of parliament seats, the government will almost certainly push the bill through the National Assembly.

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