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Elections in Armenia – the burden of the governing party's victory

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The parliamentary election on 2 April has led to the consolidation of Armenia's political scene. The number of groupings represented in parliament has been reduced by half (to four), and the governing *Republican Party of Armenia (HHK)* has achieved a result that will allow it to form the government by itself. The governing party's success is partly an effect of the popularity of Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan, who has strong links with the Kremlin, and the dominance of the Republican Party of Armenia in the country's political and economic life. HHK's victory has strengthened Karapetyan's position and weakened that of the present party leader, President Serzh Sargsyan. The governing party will now be isolated in facing the increasing Russian pressure on Armenia to agree on concessions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, something the Armenian public is not ready for (controversies over Nagorno-Karabakh were largely avoided during the election campaign). Thus the HHK's spectacular victory entails increasing tension inside the party which will have to face Russian pressure. HKK will have to make socially controversial decisions and will not have the opportunity to share the responsibility for them with other political forces.

Another stage of the political system reform

The parliamentary election on 2 April was held in accordance with the new regulations which limit the possibilities of electoral fraud on election day but which fail to guarantee a fair election campaign. HKK's dominance in the country's political and economic life, the prime minister's popularity and the practice of buying and selling votes (which is generally accepted among the Armenian public) were the main factors that helped the party to win the election. Other measures used by HKK included intimidating voters and the informal use of administrative instruments. As a result, the party achieved a sweeping victory with voter turnout exceeding 60%, contrary to forecasts from public opinion research centres linked to the president, which predicted a slight advantage for HHK

According to the allocation of the 105 seats in the new parliament by the Central Election Commission, the Republican Party of Armenia will take 58 seats, the Tsarukyan Alliance (a party formed by oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan) will have 31 seats, the newly established opposition alliance Way Out with Nikol Pashinyan as leader takes 9 seats,(and the nationalist grouping Dashnaktsutyun won 7 seats. The latter was the only party, apart from the HHK, to have strengthened its position in parliament. This distribution of the seats enables the Republican Party of Armenia to form the government by itself. This must take

place before 27 May according to the law.

The parliamentary election was another stage of transition from the presidential to parliamentary political system. In line with the constitutional amendments adopted in the referendum at the end of 2015, the newly elected parliament will have stronger prerogatives after the term of the incumbent president, Serzh Sargsyan, has expired in spring 2018. The new president will be elected by parliament. According to initial plans, the change of the political system was to enable Sargsyan to maintain power, since he would swap the presidency for the post of prime minister next year. However, the defeat in the so-called 'Four-Day War' with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016 and the fact that Karen Karapetyan became the prime minister (in September 2016) have thwarted Sargsyan's political calculations. He must respect the popular Prime Minister Karapetyan, who has the reputation of being Moscow's man.

The problematic victory

According to Sargsyan's calculations, the parliamentary election was meant to tidy up the internal political situation, create conditions for launching the process of normalising relations with Azerbaijan and ease the widespread frustration among the public. The election result has thwarted these calculations – the HHK will most likely govern the country by itself and assume full responsibility for its unpopular decisions.

The election has strengthened Prime Minister Karapetyan's position; his popularity is high and he is viewed by President Serzh Sargsyan as a threat to his position in the party. Karapetyan joined the party at the time of his nomination for prime minister and has good relations with the Kremlin. Sargsyan still has the greatest chance of maintaining power after the change of the political system in spring 2018 and of taking the office of prime minister. However, his position will weaken if Armenia decides to make concessions in the context of regulating relations in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Kremlin will most likely intensify the pressure on Armenia in the coming months to accept the so-called 'Lavrov Plan'. This plan provides, for example, for returning some of the territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. This scenario is difficult to implement due to huge public resistance. The only party that supported returning the territories to Azerbaijan, the National Congress, has found itself outside parliament after the election. Even though the HHK has won the election, it still has to respect expectations of the public as regards the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and has no public mandate to make any serious concessions. The governing party's consent to implement Moscow's scenario would most likely provoke a destabilisation of the country, street protests and the activation of the opposition. In turn, if no concessions are made, the risk that Azerbaijan will resume armed conflict will be high.

The HHK's victory also means the entrenchment of the existing oligarchic and political system. The interpenetration of the business and political circles of Armenia prevents structural reforms and a reversal of the negative trends towards the pauperisation of society, emigration, and increasing frustration among the Armenian public.