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Armenia: the prime minister and the parliament are in bitter conflict

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A conflict over a snap parliamentary election which, according to the constitution, is not scheduled until 2022 is taking place in Armenia. The dispute escalated when, on 2 October, the parliament accepted amendments to the act on regulations of the house's work imposing restrictions on holding early elections. In response to this, tens of thousands of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's supporters took to the streets on his appeal, blocking the building of the National Assembly. Pashinyan announced on 8 October that he would hand in his resignation in the near future – the resignation of the head of government opens up the possibility of a snap election (on condition that the parliament is not able to choose his successor during two subsequent votes).

Commentary

- Pashinyan, who became prime minister (the crucial office in the Armenian political system) as a result of the revolution in spring 2018, has been making efforts to push through a snap election because the present composition of the National Assembly is preventing him from consolidating power, including conducting the promised reforms. In a parliament consisting of 105 seats, the prime minister may count on the votes of the Way Out bloc (9 seats) and 8 independent MPs. He may also be backed by the grouping led by the oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan (31 seats), even though its representatives voted for the controversial amendments (however, before that they had *en masse* supported Pashinyan). Pashinyan's strengths include above all his enormous popularity (in September municipal elections in Yerevan his bloc garnered 79.4% of the votes) and his ability to mobilise supporters, with whose help he can successfully apply pressure on his opponents.
- The opposition centred around the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA, the former governing party) has a parliamentary majority and has been making efforts to block the snap election, fearing marginalisation and loss of influence. The RPA has 50 seats and is supported by the parliamentary faction of the Dashnaktsutyun party (7 seats) and also has major financial assets and a network of old connections, including law enforcement structures and the judiciary. The opposition leaders, including the former presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan have good contacts with the ruling elite of the Russian Federation.

- A parliamentary election would be a logical crowning of the Armenian revolution. However, given the recent developments, the chances of a compromise have become slender. Regardless of this, a more likely scenario would see Pashinyan able to overcome the opposition's resistance and push through a snap election in December 2018. To make this plan real, it is necessary in addition to mobilising Tsarukyan's grouping also to gain support from several deputies from the RPA. One proof that gaining this support is possible is the letter from a group of MPs, including members of the RPA, published on 9 October backing this solution. Furthermore, the prime minister may once again resort to the pressure of the streets. A confrontational variant in which the RPA pushes through the election of its own candidate for prime minister after Pashinyan's resignation seems less likely. This solution can be lobbied for by the opposition leaders fearing the loss of their assets and personal liberty (combating corruption is a priority for Pashinyan, and the charges brought against Kocharyan concern the deaths of the demonstrators in 2008 and may result in his imprisonment for many years). The choice of this solution would mean a new wave of protests and the threat of destabilising Armenia, which might entail Moscow's intervention.