

Armenia: Pashinyan's bloc wins the election

Wojciech Górecki

The My Step coalition led by the acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan won the early parliamentary election held in Armenia on 9 December by a landslide. According to unofficial results provided by the Central Election Committee, it garnered 70.4% of the votes. The other groupings which also made it to the parliament are: Prosperous Armenia led by oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan (8.3%) and Bright Armenia led by Edmon Marukyan (6.4%). Neither the Republican Party of Armenia (4.7%), which governed the country before the election, nor Dashnaktsutyun (3.9%) reached the election threshold (5% for political parties and 7% for coalitions). Voter turnout reached 48.6%.

The most frequent irregularities reported by national observers included the failure to guarantee the secrecy of voting and pressure on voters (proof of which are reports of them being brought in an organised manner to the polling stations in cars). Regardless of these incidents, the Armenian organisation Independent Observer is of the opinion that the recent election raised much fewer reservations than the previous one which was held in April 2017. This opinion has been confirmed by the OSCE observer mission. Peter Osuský, the mission's special coordinator, said at a press conference that the election was held in an atmosphere of freedom and public trust.

Commentary

- The result achieved by the My Step coalition (a constitutional majority) is proof of Nikol Pashinyan's continuing high popularity and public trust. Pashinyan, after the protests in spring this year, took the office of prime minister, a key position in Armenia's political system (he resigned for formal reasons in order to cause the dissolution of the parliament and the scheduling of a snap election). The success of My Step has been additionally strengthened by the good result achieved by the pro-European political party Bright Armenia led by Edmon Marukyan – in the previous term this party along with Pashinyan's Civil Contract party and the Republic party formed the Way Out Alliance. The third grouping to enter parliament, Prosperous Armenia, has also backed Pashinyan in numerous votes over the past few months.
- The constitutional majority achieved by Pashinyan (the Republican Party of Armenia had one until recently) will make it easier for him to conduct the reforms he promised after the successful protests: combating corruption in a more effective manner, economic reform and holding those guilty for the deaths of the ten demonstrators during the developments in March 2008 accountable. It should be expected that after the

parliament is sworn in, Pashinyan will return to the formal position of the head of government. At the same time, the total power he has gained and the absence of a strong opposition in parliament may cause the risk that the new elite will be tempted to excessively centralise power in future, which would be detrimental to the process of repairing the state and democracy.

- Even though the defeat of the Republican Party of Armenia marks the end of this grouping in its previous form, the politicians and businessmen linked to it still have significant assets at their disposal which they have accumulated over the more than two decades of the party's dominance on the political scene. There are many signs suggesting that Pashinyan will take measure to attempt to bring back at least part of these assets to the treasury by striking deals or resorting to penal sanctions. Proofs of this include on the one hand Pashinyan's announcement that some former senior officials have agreed to pay funds accumulated by them to the state budget (US\$30 million by Serzh Sarkisyan's brother, Alexander and US\$20 million by the former head of the Customs Committee) and on the other the detention of Robert Kocharyan (he served as the country's president from 1998 to 2008 and is an oligarch whose fortune is estimated at US\$4 billion) just before the election. Kocharyan is accused of shared responsibility for the deaths of the demonstrators in 2008. It should be expected that some of the oligarchs will make efforts to weaken Pashinyan by discrediting him. It cannot be ruled out that this was the goal of publishing a recording on YouTube of Pashinyan's wiretapped conversation with the head of the National Security Service, Artur Vanetsyan.