

Armenia: a contested success for Pashinyan

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On 20 June, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won the early parliamentary elections in Armenia. According to complete, albeit unofficial, data, it won 53.9% of the vote, enabling it to form a government on its own. It was followed by the Armenia bloc, headed by former president (1998–2008) Robert Kocharian and supported, among others, by the Dashnaksutyun party with 21%, the I Have Honor Alliance, formed by the former ruling Republican Party of Armenia, with 5.2%, and oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan's Prosperous Armenia Party with 3.9%. According to the law, which stipulates that there must be a minimum of three entities represented in the parliament, the first three groups should land seats in the National Assembly (although the I Have Honor Alliance did not reach the electoral threshold, which is 5% for parties and 7% for blocs). The turnout was 49.4%. The Armenia bloc has already stated that the results are disputed and has announced that it will not currently recognise them.

The election proceeded in a nervous atmosphere. The prosecutor's office received more than 300 signals about various types of violations: attempts to buy votes, (illegal) campaigning on election day, intimidation of voters, etc.; two cases of using firearms were also reported. Six criminal cases have been initiated and pre-trial proceedings are pending in almost 150 cases.

Commentary

- The elections took place more than seven months after the defeat in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The defeat has weakened the position of Pashinyan and his group, but the opposition has been unable to remove him from power either through street demonstrations or behind-the-scenes pressure (those calling for his resignation included President Armen Sargsyan and the hierarchs of the Armenian Apostolic Church including Catholicos Karekin II). Pashinyan also managed to stop an attempted military coup (on February 25, a group of high-ranking officers of the General Staff called on him to resign immediately). According to polls, he remained the most popular politician in the country, still enjoying the support of over 33% of respondents in early spring (other activists could count on less than 10%). This state of affairs was influenced by the general demoralisation of the public, humiliated by the defeat in the war and tired of permanent instability, also that related to the COVID-19 epidemic. Also working in the prime minister's favour was the lingering resentment against the previous elite, associated with the so-called Karabakh clan and the Republican Party of Armenia, and personified in particular by former president (2008–2018) Serzh Sargsyan. The threat of an escalation of tensions (including the unstable situation in the south of the

country and Azerbaijan's increasing attempts to unilaterally demarcate the national border) and fear of further coup attempts forced Pashinyan to undergo electoral verification and to renew his mandate, especially as support for him was slowly but steadily losing steam.

- The situation on the political scene was changed by Kocharyan's decision to run for election. He also belongs to the previous elite but, unlike Serzh Sargsyan, he has not been actively involved in politics for over a decade, which has allowed him to present himself as a new force. Furthermore, he is associated with Armenia's greatest military successes – he headed the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic during the victorious first war with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. Criminal cases are pending against Kocharyan – they involve the unlawful use of the military against demonstrators after the 2008 presidential election (ten casualties), which is perceived by his supporters as a personal vendetta by Pashinyan, who was subsequently sent to prison. During the campaign Kocharyan held a lot of election meetings and even visited small towns, which certainly contributed to the increase of support for the Armenia bloc. He also accused Pashinyan of making serious mistakes during the autumn war, as well as of grossly neglecting relations with the allied Russia (this was a lightly concealed accusation of treason).
- All indications are that Kocharyan will not accept defeat and will maintain that large-scale irregularities have taken place. It is to be expected that after the official results are announced – and after the rejection of any protests filed by his bloc – he will call on his supporters to hold mass demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. It cannot be ruled out that Russia will support him, more or less openly. This is indicated not only by his good personal contacts with the Russian elite (including President Vladimir Putin) and his frequent private visits to Russia, but also by the results of a poll released after the vote, which the Russian news agency RIA Novosti conducted on its own from June 6–14. Unlike other polls, it indicated a victory for the Armenia bloc (32%) ahead of the Civil Contract (24%), Prosperous Armenia (4%) and the I Have Honor bloc (2%). Most likely, these results will be cited by politicians contesting Pashinyan's success. Since the prime minister will certainly not step down of his own accord, Armenia may face a prolonged period of internal turbulence, which may be exploited by Azerbaijan, which seeks to unblock communication routes as soon as possible and launch a land connection with Nakhchivan and Turkey on its own terms (Armenia wants this road to run inland, and not in the south, along the border with Iran, since it would be more difficult to police it there).
- The post-election political process that is just beginning in Armenia will be key to the country's future. It is to be expected that, immediately after the official results are announced and the new parliament is sworn in, Pashinyan will once again assume the crucial position of prime minister in the local system. His continued stay in power may mean a slightly more diversified foreign policy (after the vote, he thanked the Russian president and prime minister for their support for Armenia and the Armenian people, but then also addressed words of gratitude to the presidents of the US, France and Iran, the prime minister of Georgia and the head of the European Commission, as well as the leader of unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh). Pashinyan is likely to seek the normalisation of relations with Turkey, the unblocking of regional transport and communication routes taking into account the Armenian's objections, and internal reforms (including speeding

up the implementation of anti-corruption legislation). Kocharyan's return to power would most likely see Armenia become more dependent on Russia and a freezing of the peace process, as well as it refraining from any contacts with Turkey and, in the internal arena, the preservation of the old oligarchic-clan system (the elite, ousted from power three years ago, still holds considerable financial and economic assets).