
CAN ARMENIAN PRESIDENT COUNT ON RUSSIA'S SUPPORT FOR HIS PLANS TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER?

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In two months, Armenians will be called upon to vote in parliamentary elections based on the track record of President Serzh Sarkisian and the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) he heads. And despite widespread popular discontent, due partly to the deteriorating economic situation and partly to lingering doubts over the legitimacy of its victory in the 2012 ballot, the HHK is likely to poll enough seats to garner a majority in the new legislature and form a coalition government.

That Sarkisian will then succeed in taking over the role of prime minister when his second term expires in early 2018 and the country switches from a semipresidential to a parliamentary system in line with constitutional amendments narrowly approved in a referendum in December 2015 is not a foregone conclusion, however, especially given indications that Moscow may prefer to see incumbent Prime Minister Karen Karapetian retain his post.

Over the past six years, Sarkisian has repeatedly pledged substantive reforms and greater democratization but failed to deliver on those promises. In a speech in December 2010 to mark the 20th anniversary of the founding of the HHK, Sarkisian warned that the current political situation could lead to "stagnation" without the desired "deepening of democracy" and "consistent introduction of European standards into all spheres of our state, public, and economic life." Sarkisian called for the introduction of "European-style democracy and the rule of law" as a basic "requirement of society," adding that "European rules of the game" must prevail.

Sarkisian also formally pledged to "democratize Armenia's political system" and called for a "civilized dialogue" among all political parties and groups. Overall, the speech created the impression of a new political opening on the part of the authorities.

Similar promises figured prominently in Sarkisian's speeches in the run-up to the February 2013 presidential election in which he defeated seven challengers to win a second term with 58 percent of the vote. (As in 2008, international election monitors registered widespread violations during the voting that led some voters to question the validity of the officially promulgated results.)

But not only was the renewed promise of reform not honored, just six months later, in September 2013, Sarkisian angered many Armenians by walking away from three years of successful talks on an Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, he committed the country to membership of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Over the past 12 months, however, two interlinked events have served to bring home the message to Armenia's leaders that, as HHK parliamentarian Hakob Hakobian admitted in early November, prevarication is no longer an option and change is urgently needed. The first was the four-day war in early April along the 230-kilometer Line of Contact separating Armenian and Azerbaijani forces dug in east of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Some 70 to 80 Armenian servicemen died during the fighting, in which Azerbaijan succeeded in retaking a very small part of the territory over which it had lost control in the early 1990s.

Those Armenian losses were in part the consequence of conscripts being issued insufficient equipment and hampered by shortages of ammunition and weapons. Those failures reinforced the perception that official corruption, which the authorities have for years downplayed and sworn to curtail, has become entrenched and endemic to the point that it now poses a direct threat to national security.

The second was the seizure of a Yerevan police station in July by members of the armed militia Sasna Tsrer, which has close ties with the radical group Founding Parliament, to demand Sarkisian's immediate resignation, and the release of Founding Parliament leader Zhirayr Sefilian, who had been arrested one month earlier on suspicion of plotting a coup. The several dozen gunmen occupied the building for two weeks before surrendering, during which time thousands of people rallied repeatedly in support of their demands.

Five weeks later, Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamian, who in the wake of the April fighting had announced yet another major reform drive intended to render the state "more efficient," was constrained to step down. Reportedly at Moscow's insistence, Sarkisian named to replace him Karapetian, 53, a former Yerevan mayor who for the previous six years had held senior executive positions with the Russian gas giant Gazprom.

If Russia's concern was that Sarkisian, who did not make any public comment on the Sasna Tsrer hostage-taking until five days after it began, was losing his grip, Sarkisian may in turn have been persuaded that Karapetian is competent to deliver the kind of tangible change for the better that the population so desperately wants. Announcing Karapetian's appointment, Sarkisian declared that the new premier will launch "a great wave of changes," including "sweeping reforms" intended to "give new impetus to economic development."

Like Sarkisian and former President Robert Kocharian, with whom he is reportedly on good terms, Karapetian was born in Nagorno-Karabakh. He is reputed to be a competent economic manager: Gagik Tsarukian, the former wrestling champion, wealthy businessman, and chairman of the Bargavach Hayastan party, the second largest in the outgoing parliament, professes "a high regard" for him and says he "knows what he's doing."

Karapetian does not have his own power base in Yerevan, however, which may explain why some of his ministerial choices to replace Abrahamian's appointees were virtual unknowns. And so far he has trod carefully. True, in his initial pronouncements he, too, promised systemic change with the aim of improving Armenia's "extremely grave" economic situation. But although he has vowed to

crack down on tax evasion and corruption, and to create "equal conditions" for all businesses, he was ambivalent with regard to economic monopolies, which he said were not invariably a bad thing.

That reluctance suggests Karapetian may be wary of incurring the enmity of powerful figures within the HHK who hold such monopolies on the import of strategic commodities. Veteran politician Vazgen Manukian, who himself served as prime minister in the early 1990s, said he hopes Karapetian will not only challenge the monopolists but find a way to "skillfully exploit" the differences between various factions within the country's leadership.

Addressing a HHK congress in November, President Sarkisian said Karapetian (who on January 26 was named HHK first deputy chairman) will retain his post as prime minister after the April 2 parliamentary ballot. That assurance suggests Sarkisian is confident that under the new electoral code, the HHK will emerge as the senior partner in a broad-based coalition "government of national accord."

How long Karapetian will continue to serve in that capacity is not clear, however. The constitutional amendments approved in December 2015, which will take effect after Sarkisian's second presidential term expires in March 2018, stipulate that cabinet ministers must be selected from among parliamentarians. But Karapetian is technically not eligible to run for parliament in light of the requirement that candidates must have lived in Armenia for four years prior to the ballot. And although Sarkisian initially denied that he planned to remain in power as prime minister after his second term ends, he has since declined to rule out that possibility.

Ultimately, Russia may prove to hold the key to Karapetian's future, just as it is believed to have engineered his appointment. During his visit to Moscow last week, he was given a red-carpet reception and reached agreement with his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, on creating a fund that will promote Russian investment in Armenia. In addition, several dozen Russia-based businessmen of Armenian extraction published a formal statement pledging "full support" for the reform program adopted by Karapetian's cabinet.

RFE/RL's Armenian Service quotes the daily Haykakan Zhamanak as inferring from that demonstration of support that Moscow now regards Karapetian, not Sarkisian, as its main partner in Armenia.

Kaynak/Source: