
AROUND 16,000 RALLY IN ARMENIA AGAINST NEW PM

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More than 16,000 people rallied in Armenia's capital on Wednesday to protest the election of former president Serzh Sarkisian as prime minister, viewed by the opposition as a power grab.

Protesters staged a day-long march through central Yerevan, briefly blocking entrances to government buildings, and in the evening gathered in the Republic Square where a 30-metre Armenian national flag was unrolled.

Some demonstrators banged drums and shouted: "Armenia without Serzh!"

Protest organisers have vowed to mount a nationwide campaign of "civil disobedience" in opposition to the Kremlin-backed Sarkisian who was on Tuesday elected to the post of prime minister after a decade serving as president.

Opposition MP Nikol Pashinyan - the leader of the pro-Western Civil Contract opposition party - has called for "a peaceful velvet revolution" and urged his supporters to set up "revolutionary committees" across the country.

But the number of demonstrators dwindled on Wednesday, compared with Tuesday's rally of some 40,000 - the largest Armenia has seen in years.

"We have a revolutionary situation in Armenia. If the number of protesters grows, Sarkisian will be forced to step down," demonstrator Anahit Arustamyan, 42, told AFP at the rally.

Another protester, 31-year-old Shavarsh Vardanyan, said Armenia needs "radical, serious political change".

Authorities said that dozens of demonstrators had been detained and urged the protesters to disperse.

"We call on protest organisers to stop illegal actions," the interior ministry said in a statement.

Protesters have held rallies over recent days to denounce Sarkisian's efforts to remain in power as prime minister under a new parliamentary system of government.

Constitutional amendments approved in 2015 have transferred governing powers from the presidency to the premier.

Russian President Vladimir Putin called Sarkisian late Tuesday to congratulate him on his election, the Kremlin's spokesman said.

"We are watching the events that are unfolding in Armenia and - most importantly - hoping that everything will be within the legal framework," said Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Sarkisian, a former military officer, has been in charge of the landlocked South Caucasus nation of 2.9 million people for a decade.

The 63-year-old also held the office of prime minister from 2007 to 2008.

On Wednesday he appointed former PM Karen Karapetyan as First Deputy Prime Minister and re-appointed at their posts Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan and Defence Minister Vigen Sarkisian.

Political analysts said it was too early to call the protests the start of a revolution but warned that the authorities could lose control of the situation.

"The scale of protests proves that huge public anger has grown over the past few years," political observer Stepan Safaian said.

"But the opposition lacks political resources to force Serzh Sarkisian to resign."

Analyst Gela Vasadze agreed.

"The overwhelming majority of the country's population wants political change," he told AFP.

"The chances of the ongoing protests growing into a revolution are low, but in case the authorities fail to deliver on the people's main demand - the demand for change - a revolution will not take long to arrive," he added.

The country's new president, Armen Sarkisian, was sworn in last week but his powers will be weaker under the new system of government.

Even though the two men share the same surname, they are not related.

Protests began in Yerevan on Friday and have since spread to the country's second and third largest cities, Gyumri and Vanadzor.

On Monday police used stun grenades against protesters who tried to break through a barbed wire cordon to get to the parliament building.

Authorities said 46 people, including six police and opposition leader Pashinyan, sought medical help.

After Serzh Sarkisian was first elected in 2008, 10 people died and hundreds were injured in bloody clashes between police and supporters of the defeated opposition candidate.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/18/around-16000-rally-armenia-against-new-pm/>

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