
PASHINIAN CLAIMS ARMENIAN RULING PARTY DEFECTIONS, WARNS PM

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Armenian opposition leader Nikol Pashinian says he has warned acting Prime Minister Karen Karapetian against imposing a state of emergency as new antigovernment protests erupted on the streets of Yerevan.

In a rally in the central Republic Square late on April 25, Pashinian also claimed that some lawmakers within the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) were ready to drop Karapetian and support a "people's candidate" as the Caucasus country's new prime minister.

Pashinian also claimed that Karapetian was not "backed" by Russia, which is Armenia's main ally, and that he had received assurances from Russian officials that Moscow would not intervene in Yerevan's internal affairs.

Pashinian warned Karapetian that "the people will blockade" the parliament building if he tries to nominate a new candidate for prime minister.

"From this moment, I also warn Karen Karapetian not to even enter any government building," Pashinian told the rally. "We, the people, have won, and no one can dare doubt this fact."

The comments came after the long-dominant Republican Party's junior partner decided to quit the alliance with the governing coalition, dealing a blow to the HHK, which opponents accuse of clinging to power after its leader quit the prime minister's post following nearly two weeks of demonstrations.

"Bearing in mind the current situation, we announce the termination of our participation in the political coalition," the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, also known as Dashnaktsutyun, said in a statement, adding that parliament should elect a prime minister who "enjoys the people's confidence."

Dashnaktsutyun is the junior partner with the HHK in parliament with seven seats. The HHK has 58 in the 105-seat parliament, meaning it could still hold power if it has no defections among its members.

However, the splintering of the ruling coalition could be cause for concern for the government amid continuing protests over the HHK's hold on power and as other political forces began to take sides.

An opposition bloc announced on April 25 that it would officially nominate Pashinian as the next prime minister.

Armenian opposition figures rejoiced at the resignation on April 23 of longtime leader Serzh Sarkisian following 11 days of demonstrations.

But many critics demanded that the HHK also cede power to prevent Sarkisian from ruling Armenia as de facto head of a "shadow government."

The catalyst for the protests was Sarkisian's shift to the newly powerful post of prime minister after a decade as president -- a move critics charged was a blatant bid to cling to power when he reached the limit of two straight presidential terms.

Pashinian on April 25 launched a fresh demonstration on the streets of the capital after the cancelation of planned talks between himself and acting Prime Minister Karen Karapetian, a senior HHK member who said he rejected Pashinian's conditions for the negotiations.

Police were deployed in the city center as the new protest began, casting new uncertainty over the country's political future.

"I believe that our nonviolent, velvet revolution has sent a clear message that...the Republican Party can no longer be in power," Pashinian said.

We demand that the Republican Party give up its power and...unequivocally recognize the victory of the people," he said, speaking through a bullhorn as he marched at the head of a column of protesters in his trademark camouflage T-shirt.

The Republicans must also be "deprived of their power" so that Sarkisian cannot rule Armenia as de facto head of a "shadow government," Pashinian added.

Pashinian called for snap elections to parliament, which is now dominated by the HHK, and for a "the people's candidate" to be chosen as interim prime minister until the vote is held.

The bearded 42-year-old has made it clear he wants to hold that post, saying on April 25 that he would "accept this responsibility...if the people give it to me."

Protesters marching with Pashinian voiced their support, chanting "Reject Serzh and Karen" and "Nikol -- prime minister!"

During the rally, activist Ruben Rubenian shouted to the cheering crowd that "we expect that all factions of the National Assembly will nominate Pashinian by consensus and elect him prime minister."

The HHK has suggested it is open to potentially holding early parliamentary elections but wants to remain at the head of government in the interim.

"The logical solution is that political parties -- within the framework of our constitution and the

law -- sit down and discuss whether there is a need for early elections" and when they could be held, Karapetian told a news conference on April 25.

He said that "equal rules of the game [must] be applied to all."

President Armen Sarkisian -- a relative figurehead under the new system and no relation to the former prime minister -- said in a statement that he would start consultations with "parliamentary and nonparliamentary representatives" to try to find "a way out" of the country's political crisis.

Pashinian said that acts of civil disobedience by his supporters had expanded to include a blockade on a customs post on the border with Georgia, which lies between Armenia and Russia.

Meanwhile, the Prosperous Armenia Party led by wealthy businessman Gagik Tsarukian -- whose bloc has the second-largest faction in parliament -- called on its members to "be with the people" in the streets.

The Heritage party, which has no parliament seats but whose leader, Raffi Hovannisian, came in second in the 2013 presidential election, according to official results, did the same.

Another group, the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, urged Karapetian to "step down and force the parliamentary majority to elect a people's candidate as prime minister."

It said in a statement that any other course of action could have "irreversible and dangerous consequences."

Edmon Marukian, a member of parliament's opposition Yelk faction, said there were already enough votes in parliament to nominate Pashinian -- who is one of the three formal leaders of Yelk -- as a candidate for the prime minister's post.

In parliament, where at least 27 votes are needed to nominate a candidate for the prime minister's post, Yelk has nine lawmakers and Tsarukian's BHK has 31 seats.

"A situation has been created when, without the Republican Party giving up power, nothing will move," Marukian told RFE/RL while marching with protesters.

"With the BHK, we already have 40 seats and we are 13 seats short" of the votes needed to elect Pashinian prime minister, Marukian said.

He said he believed the groups can get "the missing votes" from members of the Republican Party, which has 58 seats in parliament, and its now former coalition partner Dashnaktsutyun, which has seven.

But Vahram Baghdasarian, the leader of the HHK parliamentary faction, told RFE/RL that his party remained "united" and that none of its members would break ranks.

The HHK is backing President Armen Sarkisian's calls for dialogue, Baghdasarian said, adding: "Political dialogues will be held. We will make a decision. The Republican faction is united. When we make a decision, we will [announce it]."

Asked if the HHK might back Pashinian's demand for a "people's candidate" as interim prime minister, Baghdasarian said: "We cannot say that. A people's candidate is a relative concept."

"We will move in accordance with the constitution and will not violate any clause of the constitution," he said. "We'll talk about the rest later."

Russia -- which has a military base in Armenia and dominates regional security and economic groupings that include the ex-Soviet republic of about 3 million -- said it was "very carefully monitoring this situation."

"We still consider that this is a domestic affair and hope that our Armenian friends will be able to resolve this situation and find a stable structure and a consensus decision soon," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

The Kremlin later said President Vladimir Putin had spoken to his Armenian counterpart on April 25 to discuss the situation.

"Vladimir Putin and Armen Sarkisian emphasized that to overcome the internal crisis as soon as possible, it is of importance to show restraint and responsibility and readiness to solve the existing problems through constructive dialogue in strict compliance with the constitution," the Kremlin said.

The United States and the European Union have called for restraint and political dialogue.

"It remains imperative that the current situation is resolved swiftly and peacefully," read a joint statement released by the EU delegation and the embassies of EU states in Yerevan. "A national dialogue involving all political stakeholders remains crucial."

<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-opposition-leader-pashinian-calls-for-renewed-protests-after-negotiation-karapetian-cancelled-hhk/29190858.html>

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