
ARMENIAN CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM DELAYED INDEFINITELY

- 20.05.2020

RFL/RL (18 May 2020)

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian has confirmed that due to the coronavirus pandemic his administration will not hold anytime soon a planned referendum on its controversial bid to oust most members of Armenia's Constitutional Court.

Pashinian said over the weekend that they might be replaced instead by the Armenian parliament dominated by his loyalists.

Armenians were scheduled to vote on April 5 on draft constitutional amendments ending the powers of seven of the nine Constitutional Court judges who had for months been under strong government pressure to resign. Pashinian has repeatedly accused them -- and Constitutional Court Chairman Hrayr Tovmasian in particular -- of maintaining ties to the corrupt former regime and impeding judicial reforms.

Tovmasian and opposition figures have dismissed these claims, saying that Pashinian is simply seeking to gain control over Armenia's highest court. They also believe that the proposed amendments run counter to other articles of the Armenian constitution.

The referendum was postponed on March 16 when the Armenian government declared a state of emergency to deal with the coronavirus outbreak in the country. The government last week extended it by another month, until June 14. Under Armenian law, no elections or referendums can be held during emergency rule.

In a relevant development, Justice Minister Rustam Badasian on May 14 asked the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe to advise the government on the resolution of the ongoing crisis over the Armenian Constitutional Court.

The government had previously declined to send its constitutional changes to the Strasbourg-based commission for examination. Badasian's move was a further indication that the referendum has been postponed indefinitely.

Pashinian said that the vote cannot be held at least before May 2021, implying that it has been effectively cancelled.

We were thinking that we will hold this referendum this year and hold another referendum [on amending the constitution] during the next parliamentary elections in 2023, he told a weekend

news conference. But this timetable is not quite working out because of this epidemic.

We therefore appealed to the Venice Commission, and are now discussing ways of partly or fully resolving the Constitutional Court issue in the parliament, he said.

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