

Armenia: Divided Opposition Pulls its Punches

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Squabbling coalition has little to fear from disorganised rivals.

The newly-elected Armenian parliament's first steps have exposed a potentially damaging split in the country's small opposition movement.

The government began its term by ratifying a European protocol on the unconditional repeal of the death penalty, the move sparking political tensions among the opposition, with the Justice bloc boycotting the vote while another faction, the National Accord, backed the government.

This highlighted a rift within the Armenian opposition, which holds only 26 seats in the new 131-strong parliament, elected in a May 25 parliamentary ballot.

"The opposition is weak, poorly organised, and lacks an ideology," Gegam Manukian of the government party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutiun, ARFD, told IWPR. "They cannot even find common ground on such a matter as abolition of the death penalty."

The only matter the two leading opposition factions seem to agree on is that the president should resign. "Our political objective is clear - the current regime must go," said Albert Bazeian, chairman of the political council of the Republic party (which is not connected to the government party, the Republican Party of Armenia, RPA).

Meanwhile, the opposition seems eager to contribute to constructive lawmaking. The Justice bloc, for one, has drafted amendments to the Referendum Act, and is working on a series of important changes to the electoral code.

Factions loyal to the government have been caught unawares by this. On the parliament's first day in office, the majority declined to debate the opposition-proposed draft laws - on protecting the vulnerable from utility price hikes and free textbooks for children from disadvantaged backgrounds - as part of the autumn session's agenda.

As these proposals failed, it became clear that, apart from a few veteran parliamentarians, the opposition lacks political influence.

"None of the opposition leaders wield enough political clout to challenge either Robert Kocharian or his second in command, Defence Minister Serge Sarkisian," said David Petrosian, political commentator for the Noyan Tapan news agency.

Moreover, the opposition lacks a common ideological platform. The Justice bloc is a rather thrown-together alliance of random political forces united out of necessity.

Some analysts saying change in Armenia is impossible unless the opposition puts up a common front.

Even the government is torn apart by political contradictions. Some observers believe the ruling coalition - which comprises Orinats Erkir (Country of Law), OE, ARFD and RPA - lacks coherence.

"What kind of coalition can three parties form, when two of them are ideological rivals, and the third - Orinats Erkir - has no ideology at all," George Hakobian, chairman of the opposition Hnchakian Social Democratic Party, told IWPR. "This bubble is soon going to burst."

The future of Armenia's border with Turkey is a major moot point for the pro-government coalition factions. While OE wants the frontier opened with no strings attached, ARFD rules this out unless Ankara recognises the 1915-1922 Armenian genocide.

The three coalition parties squabble about many different matters from the death penalty to privatisation of hospitals, but, so far, they have been able to strike some sort of compromise.

Tensions were recently aggravated by a controversy about the distribution of middle- and low-ranking government posts. OE and ARFD were bitterly disappointed when the majority of ministerial and committee posts went to the RPA.

The Dashnaks demanded equal opportunity for all coalition members, but Republican leader Galust Saakian advised his partners to put professionalism before political ambition.

"These three parties do not trust each other - they are only looking out for number one," said Hakobian.

Vardan Khachatryan of the opposition Socialist Armenia Party told IWPR, "The president and his loyal coalition can only hold out as long as they support each other. The regime will stand for as long as Robert Kocharian cements it."

However, the president and his coalition may be in for more challenges this autumn, when the Justice bloc plans to contend the results of Armenia's March presidential ballot in the European Court.

A number of international institutions - including the OSCE and the Council of Europe - had many doubts about the poll, which the Justice bloc claims was rigged.

The Armenian constitutional court, which reviewed the Justice bloc's complaints, had recommended that a referendum on the result of ballot be held within 12 months. But the government has simply ignored this, as the court's decisions are not binding under Armenian law.

The opposition has seized on this as evidence of government weakness, but Manukian argues that were this the case it would never undertake a radical reform in public administration, the economy, and other fields. "A fragile, unfairly elected government could never act with such resolve," he said.

The authorities will have to display steely resolve this autumn and winter when the cost of natural gas, electricity, water and bread is set to go up - developments likely to fuel social and political tensions.

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