

Armenia: Is Ex-President Plotting Comeback?

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Yerevan is rife with speculation about whether Levon Ter-Petrosian is planning to run again in next February's presidential elections.

He has said nothing yet - but already the prospect of former Armenian leader Levon Ter-Petrosian participating in next year's presidential elections has captivated Yerevan and changed the country's political map.

As far as anyone knows, Ter-Petrosian, independent Armenia's first president from 1991 to 1998, is busy writing a monograph on the relations between the Armenians and the Crusaders. A well-known scholar of Middle Eastern languages, he continues to be on the staff of Yerevan's famous Institute for the Study of Ancient Manuscripts, known as the Matenadaran.

In the four and a half years since he stepped down as president, Ter-Petrosian has avoided contact with journalists and made no public statements. The only time he spoke publicly was during the October 1999 crisis that followed the shootings in the parliament, when he urged Armenians to unite around President Kocharian.

It was Kocharian, at the time Ter-Petrosian's prime minister, together with his then defence minister Vazgen Sarkisian (one of those killed in the assembly shootings) who forced the ex-president's resignation in February 1998. They were worried that Ter-Petrosian was prepared to make too many compromises to Azerbaijan, by agreeing to a new draft peace plan over the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh.

Since then, the former president has refrained from making any critical remarks about his successor, Kocharian. His most negative comments were recorded last year when, in an interview with the French magazine L'Express, he called the current leaders of Armenia "political maximalists".

"I don't know whether the current leaders of Armenia will learn the advantages of pragmatism?" he asked. "The country is losing its human resources. The longer compromise waits (over Nagorny Karabakh), the less benefit there will be from it. In 1998 Armenia could have got terms which exceed the current ones."

The topic of Ter-Petrosian's possible return first surfaced in Armenia last spring. He has refused to comment on it, and his entourage has been vague, while not ruling out the possibility. "Ter-Petrosian will take part in presidential elections only if he is fully convinced that he possesses the necessary support of the electorate," said his press secretary, Levon Zurabian.

Inevitably, conspiracy theories have begun to swirl. The well-known Armenian political scientist Igor Muradian told the Yerevan newspaper Ashot Ashkhar that US deputy secretary of state Mark Grossman had made the initiative to promote Ter-Petrosian's candidacy for next February's ballot.

"In Washington an attempt is being made to initiate Levon Ter-Petrosian's candidacy in the presidential elections, although it has not been sanctioned either by the president of the USA or the secretary of state," Muradian said.

President Kocharian's closest ally, Armenia's defence minister Serzh Sarkisian, dismissed these reports.

"I don't think that the leadership of the USA will look for a candidate in Armenia to lobby for it, in light of the relations that have formed between the two states, when the president of Armenia had the chance to talk to the president of the USA and the defence minister has made two official visits to Washington in two years," Sarkisian told the Golos Armenii newspaper. "The people who are circulating rumours like this are deceiving themselves."

Another veteran Armenian politician, Vazgen Manukian, who contested the 1996 presidential elections with Ter-Petrosian and believes that he was cheated of victory, said he does not believe his old rival will run again for president. "His entourage is more interested in this [than he is]," Manukian told IWPR.

This makes more sense, if you consider that Ter-Petrosian's party, the Armenian National Movement, ANM, suffered a resounding defeat in the 1998 elections, and took three years to recover. The party was the first in Armenia to form a special election team to coordinate its plans for next year's parliamentary and presidential ballot. The ANM might be able to restore the support of that section of the electorate, which used to be loyal to it as a ruling party, if it could exploit the "brand-name" of Ter-Petrosian.

Former foreign minister and the chairman of the ANM, Alexander Arzumanyan, said that the party would "definitely put up its own candidate in the presidential elections", which would be chosen at the party congress, scheduled to take place this autumn.

The head of the ANM's party headquarters, David Shakhnazarian, who was national security chief under Ter-Petrosian, said that the party "had five or six real candidates for the post of head of state". He conceded, however, that Ter-Petrosian's candidacy "would be the most expedient".

Another version of events has it that the Kocharian administration itself is generating rumours of the former president's return to boost itself.

In an editorial with the headline "Tangled Games", the opposition Yerevan newspaper Aravot, which does not conceal its sympathies for Ter-Petrosian and the ANM, wrote, "Many members of the opposition are completely convinced that a confrontation between Kocharian and Ter-Petrosian is to the benefit of the current authorities. Moreover, they themselves thought it up, as the ANM has no chance of scoring a success in the elections and Levon Ter-Petrosian is a fairly cautious politician, who well understands that the time has not yet come, when the people will ask him to return."

Other parts of the Armenian opposition seem distinctly rattled by the rumours of the former president's return. Artashes Gegamian, the leader of the National Unity Party, who is considered one of Kocharian's most serious rivals for next year, spoke out categorically against the idea. When a political scientist close to the ANM declared that if Ter-Petrosian took part in the elections, Gegamian would withdraw his candidacy, the latter called the idea "the product of a sick imagination" and said he would not collaborate with the ANM, "whose criminal policies are being continued by Robert Kocharian".

Gegamian said that Ter-Petrosian was a "mature politician and won't pursue this adventure".

Ruben Mirzakhanyan, leader of the Ramkavar-Azatakan party, which has already declared its support for the serving head of state, believes that Ter-Petrosian's possible participation in the elections will only increase Kocharian's chances of being re-elected.

One of the former president's inner circle is doubtful that, when the moment of decision comes, Ter-Petrosian will take the plunge.

"Levon is a very stubborn and self-sufficient person," one of his colleagues in the Matenadaran, who wished to remain anonymous, told IWPR. "He has always been convinced of the absolute correctness of his actions. When he said in 1997 that he would take the decision to stand again for the post of president only if 'we the whole people ask him to do so' he was not joking, as many thought at the time. He was simply convinced that that was how it would be.

"When he was, to all intents and purposes, overthrown in 1998 and not a single person came out on the street in his support, it was a personal tragedy for Levon, and I don't think that four years is enough time for him to forget that."

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