

Armenia Gears up for New Poll

Author: [Susanna Petrosian](#)

President Kocharian is afraid of losing control of the national assembly in next month's parliamentary elections.

With passions still running high following Armenia's turbulent presidential elections last month, the country is entering what promises to be an equally fractious campaign for a new parliament.

As the race got underway for the May 25 ballot for the national assembly, President Robert Kocharian made it clear he does not want to lose control of the parliament, which currently broadly supports his government.

In the mean time, international organisations, which strongly criticised the presidential poll, are gearing up to deploy large numbers of observers for the coming vote - putting Kocharian under new pressure and giving heart to the opposition.

The president began the campaign by talking tough. "I intend to implement my [election] programme in full, and that requires continued stability in the country and cooperation between the parliament and the president," the Kocharian told a group of students.

"That means we have to have a parliament with which it will be possible to work, which will not oppose the president. That means it is very desirable for me, and I think for the country, to have a parliament where political forces supporting the president have a substantial majority."

Hovik Abrahamian, minister of regional management and a member of the pro-government Republican Party, agreed that "Robert Kocharian would be in trouble if his backers are not sufficiently represented in the national assembly".

Parliament is far less powerful than the president but can still, for example, initiate impeachment proceedings against him or limit his rule by means of a vote of no confidence in the government.

One hundred and thirty one seats are being contested in the parliamentary vote, 75 of them elected from party lists, and 56 in single-seat constituencies. Twenty-one parties and 405 individual candidates have registered for the ballot. A party needs to receive at least five per cent of votes to be represented in the chamber.

"The key players will be the same as during the presidential race," political analyst Stepan Grigorian told IWPR.

Three pro-presidential parties stand a good chance of clearing the five per cent barrier. They are the Republican Party of Armenia, currently the largest group in the assembly and headed by prime minister Andranik Margarian, the old Armenian nationalist party Dashnaktsutjun and Orinats Yerkir.

The Republican Party and Dashnaktsutjun have promised not to challenge each other in the local constituency vote, and even to back each other's candidates, but divisions are emerging between these two parties. A source in the government told IWPR, "These parties are engaged in a fierce political

struggle. Each one seeks to secure a maximum number of its members in the parliament to be able to form the government."

The other supposedly loyal party, Orinats Yerkir, also started its parliamentary campaign by lashing out at the government. "It seems that our citizens are working hard day and night only to make it easier for some government officials to steal, drive luxury cars and build themselves huge houses," said Orinats Yerkir leader Arthur Bagdasarian.

Many believe Bagdasarian was hinting at the Republican Party and its party list, which is headed by prime minister Margarian and defence minister and close Kocharian ally Serzh Sarkisian and contains eight more cabinet ministers.

Grigorian speculates that the quarrels between the pro-presidential parties may actually suit Kocharian. "It looks like the authorities may be pushing for a diverse, mosaic-like, pliant parliament," he said.

The most powerful opposition group is the Ardarutiun bloc headed by Stepan Demirchian, leader of the People's Party, who lost the second round of the presidential election to Kocharian in March in a much-disputed ballot.

His bloc consists of nine groups including Hanrapetutiun headed by former prime minister Aram Sarkisian, and the National Democratic Union chaired by another ex-premier, Vazgen Manukian.

According to analysts, the bloc's competitive edge stems from its success in uniting the disparate opposition. "The opposition has joined forces to run against the ruling regime," said Shavarsh Kocharian, national assembly deputy and one of the bloc's leaders. "Our chances look good."

Gayane Markosian, a veteran political activist, agrees that the opposition's chances of success strongly depend on its ability to stay united. "The reason the opposition has failed so often in recent years was its failure to unite," she said.

Besides Ardarutiun, the opposition is represented by the National Accord party led by Artashes Geghamian, who came third in the first round of the presidential election.

Although Geghamian's party has often been accused of being a government fifth column in the opposition camp, National Accord has started the race with trenchant rhetoric against the president and the government.

One new feature of this campaign is the candidacy of businessmen on pro-presidential party lists and constituencies. "Active involvement of the business community in this parliamentary race is what makes it different," said Markosian.

Markosian believes many of the businessmen candidates are dependant on government favours. "The government is keeping them on a short leash. They have to be involved to ensure the government stays in power," she told IWPR.

Voters, however, are sceptical about the whole election, particularly after the experience of the presidential ballot.

"This poll will be rigged. I'm not voting," Armen Badalian, a kiosk salesman, told IWPR. "It does not matter whether I vote or not."

"The government will rig this election. It has no other choice if it wants to stay in power," said Ruben Karapetian, an engineer.

"During the presidential elections in March, falsification was very brazen and obvious," said opposition deputy Shavarsh Kocharian. "It has left a mark on society. We have a long way to go before we rid ourselves of electoral trickery. This time, the opposition is determined to minimise the government's falsifications."

Grigorian, however, thinks that international pressure may make this poll fairer than the presidential one. "The OSCE and the Council of Europe are planning to deploy more observers this time compared to the presidential poll," he said. "Plus there are people in the government who realise falsification won't get them anywhere in the long run, and may, in fact, result in catastrophic consequences for the nation."

Susanna Petrosian is a journalist with the Noyan Tapan news agency

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