

Armenian Cabinet Revamped

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A major cabinet reshuffle in Armenia reflects the growing rifts within the republic's ruling cabal.

Rival factions have fought a fierce struggle for control of Armenia's political strongholds in a ground-breaking cabinet reshuffle orchestrated by Prime Minister Aram Sarkisian.

The government restructuring reduced the number of ministerial portfolios from 24 to 17, axing two former prime ministers, Khrosov Harutiunian and Armen Darbinian. It was staged in a bid to urge all political parties to join forces with the government in tackling Armenia's ongoing economic and social crises.

More important, the reforms entrusted Sarkisian with the task of choosing cabinet members, instead of President Robert Kocharian. In the past, deals between the president and the political parties stopped short of naming names, leaving the head of state considerable room for manoeuvre.

However, politicians who hoped that Kocharian might be forced to relax his grip on key power-bases went away disappointed. The ministries of foreign affairs and justice remained firmly under the president's aegis.

The Ministry of Justice was hotly contended - not least because it will play a vital role in investigating the political assassinations of October 1999, when eight top politicians were shot dead in the parliament building.

Several party leaders believe that the investigation into the killings could implicate members of the president's inner circle who have every interest in tampering with the course of justice.

Consequently, General Manvel Grigorian, leader of the powerful veterans' association, Yerkrpah, demanded that his ally, military prosecutor General Gagik Jhangirian, should head the ministry. Jhangirian is currently leading the team investigating the attack. But Kocharian fended off the Yerkrpah bid and the incumbent justice minister, David Harutiunian, held on to his job.

Meanwhile, Sarkisian's Republican Party allies retained control over ministries covering state revenue, energy, public health and social security.

The Miasnutiun ("Unity") majority bloc will continue to bear overall responsibility for Aram Sarkisian's administration but cabinet seats were also allotted to several minority parties. Notably, those factions which voted against the government's proposed budget for 2000.

However, this attempt to co-opt their support has only been partially successful. The ministers' parties seem determined to demonstrate their independence and to continue voting as they see fit, even if that contradicts the decisions of their own delegated cabinet ministers.

Furthermore, politicians brought in from parties outside the coalition have been allocated the least important of the newly created ministries and stand little chance of changing government policy.

The Republican Party's junior coalition partner, the People's Party, secured two ministerial posts: agriculture and ecology and transport, communication and telecommunications.

For the first time since 1993, a member of the opposition National Democratic Union (NDU) is also now included in the government. David Vardanian has been appointed minister for the management of state property.

In another departure, Leonid Hakobian, a prominent communist, will head up the ministry of territorial management and town planning. Hakobian is the first communist politician to hold cabinet office since Armenia gained its independence in 1991.

Alongside the prime minister, the main player in the newly configured government is, without doubt, Vahan Shirkhanian, who retains effective control over economic policy as minister for industrial infrastructure.

Shirkhanian gained some notoriety when, only hours after the October 27 attack in the Armenian parliament, he presented the president with a list naming a replacement government, with himself as prime minister. Then, during the Republican Party congress in December, Shirkhanian called for Robert Kocharian to resign.

However, Shirkhanian's influence may also be tempered by the difficulties of presiding over a struggling economy. One of the many problems he will have to address is tax collection. In January alone, for example, there was a shortfall of 7 billion drams (about \$15 million) in revenues collected by the treasury, at a time when the country's budget deficit is expected to reach 50 billion drams in 2000.

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