

Armenian Election Campaign Revs Up

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Kocharian bid for second term picks up steam amid US concerns over electoral fraud.

Armenian president Robert Kocharian this week predicted he would win a resounding victory in next month's leadership contest, as the United States warned it would not recognise the ballot if there were any irregularities.

The second week of campaigning saw the incumbent leader stepping up his re-election bid, holding well-organised rallies in different parts of the country, attended by party leaders supporting Kocharian and local officials.

Kocharian, who is running for a second term, had earlier travelled to Moscow and secured the backing of President Vladimir Putin for the February 19 vote.

"We are grateful to Robert Kocharian for his valuable cooperation in bolstering our bilateral relations," Putin said after meeting his Armenian counterpart. "Thanks to the leadership of Kocharian, our two countries have reached the present high level of collaboration."

But while Moscow has made its choice, Washington is stating that its first priority is to see a free and fair election next month.

On January 22, US Ambassador to Armenia John Ordway, meeting Aram Sarkisian, head of the Democratic Party, and one of 11 candidates contesting the ballot, said, "Even if a 5 per cent irregularity is registered during the elections, no matter how many votes the candidates poll, the elections cannot be regarded as lawful and the elected president as legitimate."

Two days later, Ordway repeated his message, saying, "Any material irregularities in the election process would discredit the campaign itself and its results."

This shows that the US is setting unusually high standards for the poll. The last two presidential elections in Armenia, in 1998 and 1996, were tarnished by substantial evidence of vote-rigging.

There are already signs that, as in those elections, media coverage is heavily favouring the official candidate.

While television is covering Kocharian's campaign in minute detail, his opponents are complaining they are not getting enough airtime or their words are being distorted.

Leading opposition candidate, former mayor of Yerevan Artashes Gegamian has forbidden his campaigners to talk to the news programme Ailur aired on Armenia's influential state television channel H1.

The channel has responded by pointing out to international observers that by boycotting Ailur, Gegamian infringes citizens' right to receive information about all the candidates.

So far, Kocharian has been careful to suggest he will not rely for re-election solely on "administrative resources" - the Soviet term for using the official bureaucracy to secure votes. On the first day of his campaign, he urged his team "not to relax" and target the very substantial percentage of the electorate who have not yet decided who to vote for on February 19.

"We have no right not to fight for that part of the electorate," said Kocharian. "A fight is on and if we are involved, we must commit all our resources to attain not merely success, but a serious success."

Last autumn, the president said he hoped to be elected in the first round of the vote. A few days ago, he said he thought this scenario was still very likely. By "serious success" the president apparently means he will win victory by such a margin that any talk of irregularities during the ballot will be rendered meaningless.

Yerevan newspapers consistently say that Kocharian has two main opponents: Artashes Gegamian and Stepan Demirchian, son of former Soviet-era leader Karen Demirchian, who mounted a serious challenge to Kocharian in 1998 and was assassinated a year later.

Two other names also consistently make the list of serious contenders: Vazgen Manukian, the second-placed candidate in 1996 in a much-disputed election, and Aram Sarkisian - no relation to the Democratic Party leader of the same name - who's the brother of former prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian, also murdered in 1999.

The opposition is still discussing nominating a single candidate - but both Gegamian and Demirchian long ago made it clear that neither intends to step down in favour of the other.

Gegamian received a boost last week with the endorsement of Armenia's best-known former dissident, Paruir Hairikian. Hairikian, who has stood in all Armenia's post-communist elections and was until recently chairman of the presidential human rights commission, withdrew from the 2003 race earlier this month.

Gegamian's unexpected alliance with Hairikian, who is generally considered a representative of the "constructively minded" or "loyal" opposition, which does not aggressively oppose the authorities, has rekindled rumours that he is collaborating with the government.

Sources close to the former ruling party, the Armenian National Movement, reminded IWPR that last autumn they had warned that Gegamian was a "time bomb" planted by the authorities within the ranks of the opposition.

Proponents of this theory claim that Gegamian's mission is to draw off votes from other opposition candidates. Gegamian himself vehemently denies these allegations and is still predicting that he will beat Kocharian in the first round of voting.

The campaigns of Stepan Demirchian and Aram Sarkisian lean heavily on references to their more famous relatives, both murdered in the parliament shootings of October 1999.

The Yerevan newspaper Aiots Ashkhar wrote that the two men's campaign videos betray their political inexperience. In them, both Demirchian and Sarkisian are shown by the graves of their father and brother respectively. The pro-government media argues that this shows that neither man has anything to offer but the reflected charisma of their famous kin.

A row has been raging since Oleg Yunoshev, a Moscow-based lawyer who has been working with the Sarkisian family, claimed that the murder of television boss Tigran Nagdalian last month was linked to the October 1999 killings.

Yunoshev alleged that the television footage of the attack on parliament that Nagdalian submitted to the trial judges had been edited to conceal numerous vital details that could help identify the real perpetrators of the massacre

Yunoshev was asked to substantiate his claims by the General Prosecutor's Office. When he was unable to do so, Robert Kocharian publicly admonished Aram Sarkisian. "You shouldn't tread over dead bodies in an election campaign," he said.

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