

Karabakh Opposition Gains Small Presence in Parliament

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Domestic politics go largely ignored as international community says it doesn't recognise the state so can't recognise its elections.

Nagorny Karabakh's recent parliamentary election made international headlines because of the controversy surrounding the region's status, but it also resulted in a shift in domestic politics. For the first time in recent years, the legislature contains a small opposition faction.

Five of the seven parties that contested the 33 National Assembly seats on May 3 got through, and two of them count as the opposition, although they have just four seats between them.

The Free Motherland party of Prime Minister Arayik Harutyunyan took 15 seats with 47 per cent of the vote. The Democratic Party of Artsakh, led by parliamentary speaker Ashot Gulyan, and the Dashnaksutyun party got six and seven respectively. The numbers are roughly similar to what they got in 2010.

The opposition National Revival and Movement-88 parties did not figure in the 2010 election. This time they got one seat and three, respectively, and agreed to work together in coalition.

National Revival's seat will be filled by Haik Khanumyan, who told IWPR this was no matter for celebration.

"We're talking about unlawful interference by members of the National Security Service, and various forms of pressure exerted on our party colleagues. The entire administrative might of the security services was directed towards isolating the party's members and destroying its leadership.

Karabakh used to be part of Soviet Azerbaijan, but it has been controlled by an Armenian administration since the war of the early 1990s. Although a ceasefire has been in place since 1994, no peace deal has been signed and OSCE-led negotiations on resolving the dispute have made little headway. Karabakh's claim to independence has not been recognised internationally – not even by Armenia, which is otherwise supportive – and Azerbaijan continues to claim sovereignty.

The May 3 election produced a predictably angry response from Azerbaijan's foreign ministry, which said the vote was illegal and a deliberate ploy to undermine the talks process.

The European Union and the United States both made it clear that since they did not recognise Karabakh or its institutions, they could not accept the conduct or outcome of elections there.

Karabakh's president Bako Sahakyan was unabashed. He spoke of "resolve, determination and principle" as core values that had existed for many years.

"These qualities have helped us overcome many difficulties and achieve success," he said.

The OSCE's Minsk Group – the mediating team led by Russia, France and the US – also issued a statement on the election which managed to cause offence on both sides.

They said they could not accept the ballot results and that they could "no way prejudge the final status of Nagorny Karabakh or the outcome of the ongoing negotiations to bring a lasting and peaceful settlement".

"In the context of a comprehensive settlement of the conflict, we recognise the role of the people of Nagorny Karabakh in deciding their future," the statement said.

Azerbaijan foreign ministry spokesman Hikmet Hajiyev took offence at the phrase "people of Nagorny Karabakh", calling it "inaccurate and unacceptable". He said the population there consisted of Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. The conflict forced all the Azerbaijanis out of Karabakh, and Armenia and Azerbaijan also experienced mass outflows of their respective Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities.

In the Armenian capital Yerevan, Sergei Minasyan, director of the Caucasus Institute also took issue with the Minsk Group statement, arguing that acknowledging "the role of the people of Nagorny Karabakh in deciding their future" implicitly meant recognising the election. Since the Minsk Group had a mandate to engage with elected figures in Karabakh, he said, it followed that it could not ignore the ballots that put them in office.

Masis Mailyan, head of the Public Council for Foreign Policy and Security, a think tank in Karabakh, said the parliamentary election was "more about the democratic arrangements of domestic [political] life" there. But he said there was an external angle, too. The Karabakh Armenians have long sought a place at the

negotiating table – blocked by Azerbaijan – and Mailyan said having legitimate elected leaders was the best way for Karabakh to make its claim to representation.

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