

Kocharian Allies Under Attack

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Armenian President Robert Kocharian fights for his political survival as leading government heavyweights launch a concerted attack on his inner circle.

Top Armenian politicians are claiming that two of the president's closest allies have deliberately sabotaged an investigation into last year's sensational political killings.

The majority bloc, Miasnutiun ("Unity"), has called for the dismissal of Serge Sarkisian, chief of the presidential staff, and Tigran Naghdalian, executive director of Armenian National Television.

Bloc leader Andranik Markarian said both men had conspired to disrupt the ongoing probe into the assassination of eight Armenian politicians in October 1999.

The outcry is supported by Prime Minister Aram Sarkisian, whose brother, Vazgen, (then-prime minister himself) was among those shot dead when five assassins burst into Yerevan's parliament building. Miasnutiun believes that the failed coup was masterminded by members of President Robert Kocharian's inner circle.

Kocharian, meanwhile, is marshalling his own forces and stepping up his control over the army's general staff, which is dominated by Miasnutiun supporters.

The latest scandal blew up in early March when Armenian National Television screened a controversial press-conference held by defence lawyers representing two men arrested in connection with the shooting. The lawyers dismissed charges against their clients on the grounds that the investigation was being manipulated "by known forces" for political goals.

On the following day, the Miasnutiun bloc - which unites the Republican Party (including the Yerkrpah veterans' association) and the People's Party of Armenia - claimed the TV broadcast had set out to pervert the course of justice.

Party leaders immediately pointed accusatory fingers at the TV executive director Naghdalian, a vehement Kocharian ally, and Serge Sarkisian, who is believed to have orchestrated the TV coverage. They demanded the dismissal of both officials - a move which would deal a fatal blow to Kocharian's presidency.

Chief Military Prosecutor Gagik Jhangirian echoed their outrage: "How can one state body [the prosecutor's office] perform its duties properly when another state body [the television station] is seeking to discredit it."

Many observers see the demands as a blatant attack on freedom of speech. The Cooperation and Democracy NGO issued a press statement accusing Miasnutiun of breaking election promises and "attempting to introduce censorship to Armenia".

President Kocharian promptly appeared on Armenian National TV, hitting out at the majority bloc. "If the three minutes [of the television broadcast] can seriously hinder the investigation and prompt such an absurd announcement, then the situation in this country is disturbing indeed."

On the same day, Kocharian issued a decree establishing the president as supreme commander of the Armenian armed forces, with the right to hire and fire top army officers. Analyst Gagik Avakian comments, "In this way, the president has effectively strengthened his control over the army, which is the main source of support for Miasnutiun."

Kocharian also met with army generals from Nagorny Karabakh, his own homeland, and reportedly offered command of the prestigious First Corps to former Karabakh defence minister Samvel Babayan. The First Corps, which controls Yerevan and its suburbs, was then commanded by General Manvel Grigorian, head of Yerkrpah and a leading figure in Miasnutiun.

Babayan refused the president's offer, reportedly saying, "A corps is too much for me, he'd better offer me a battalion." But Grigorian was relieved of his command on March 14 and appointed deputy defence minister.

The daily newspaper Haykakan Zhamanak ("Armenian Time") commented that Kocharian had deprived Miasnutiun of an important trump card and made it difficult for the army to influence developments on the political stage.

Prime Minister Sarkisian was incensed by the changes, which were ordered without his prior knowledge. On March 15, he voiced his resentment to a meeting of the Miasnutiun bloc attended by the parliamentary speaker, both vice-speakers and several ministers.

Meanwhile, TV head Naghdalian has tendered his resignation to the Armenian National Television board of trustees. However, as the board consists largely of Kocharian supporters, it is unlikely his resignation will be accepted.

Other political forces view the infighting with growing concern. David Shahnazarian, chairman of the 21st Century party, said, "If the parliamentary majority is so sure that the president is implicated in the October 27 attack, it should call for his impeachment and remove Kocharian from his post in a legal manner. As they seem unwilling to do this, one can assume they do not have sufficient proof of the president's guilt."

Former parliamentary vice-speaker Ara Sahakian warned that the situation could spin out of control with potentially disastrous consequences for Armenia's political future. "It's a catastrophe which could lead to us losing our independence," he said.

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