

Kocharian Confident of Second Term

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Armenian head of state bullish about re-election prospects as rivals fail to come up with serious presidential contender.

The Armenian opposition has nominated more than a dozen candidates for next February's presidential race, making Robert Kocharian's re-election a near certainty.

Fifteen hopefuls had thrown their hat into the ring by December 6, the initial deadline for candidates to register. Each, however, have yet to collect 35,000 supporting signatures and the heavy package of documents needed to qualify for official registration, scheduled to begin January 1. Some of them are likely to fall short.

Analysts say the opposition's failure to unite around a single candidate means President Kocharian, who appears to have strong political and public backing, is almost assured of victory.

President Kocharian is well ahead of his rivals thanks to the solid backing of some of the nation's most influential political parties: the Republican Party, Armenia's oldest nationalist party Dashnaktsutiun, the veteran diaspora-based Ramkavar-Azatakan and Orinats Erkir.

Kocharian is also heavily relying on the support of government departments, which Golos Armenii newspaper estimates can deliver him as much as 25 per cent of the vote. Significantly, his campaign is being run by his oldest political and personal friend, Defence Minister Serzh Sarkisian. "If a soldier wants to vote for the same candidate as the minister, this means our army is doing well," Sarkisian said recently. In effect, this means army servicemen will vote for Kocharian en masse.

The incumbent can also count on popular support, especially from Armenians tired of political turbulence. "Stability is what matters - Kocharian has the experience and a good team, while a newcomer would have to learn, find the right people, and that is bad for the country," said local resident Simon Gevorkian, reflecting the view of many.

The only two candidates likely to measure up to Kocharian both have connections to the last phase of Soviet Armenia in the 1980s, when the republic was vastly more prosperous than it is today. Artashes Geghamian of the National Unity party was the last communist mayor of Yerevan and Stepan Demirchian is the son of Karen Demirchian, who led Armenia in the 1970s and 80s and had been made speaker of parliament shortly before he was assassinated on October 27, 1999.

Opinion polls - which are still very unreliable in Armenia - give both men variously between 15 and 35 per cent of the vote, which could be enough to force Kocharian to fight a second round of the ballot.

Stepan Demirchian, a former factory boss, took over the leadership of the People's Party of Armenia from his father and unexpectedly found himself in the forefront of Armenian politics.

Geghamian by contrast has worked hard for this election. Formerly a supporter of Kocharian, he has become one of the president's most persistent critics.

He benefits from the fact that he has not held any government jobs since the fall of the Soviet Union, leaving his image untarnished by the last few years. But he also has a reputation for being impulsive and intolerant of criticism, which could hurt him in pre-election debates.

Three other veteran candidates are Vazgen Manukian, the leader of the National Democratic Union, Paruir Hairikian, the leader of the Union for National Self-Determination, and Aram Sarkisian, the leader of the Democratic Party.

Hairikian, Armenia's best-known dissident in Soviet times, has run in every presidential election, seeing his support fall from one election to the next.

Manukian was the first prime minister of independent Armenia and a strong contender in the 1996 presidential election. He and many others still believe he won a majority but was cheated of victory.

Since then, however, his political career has gone downhill. He won only ten per cent of the vote in 1998 and his party secured barely half that in the last parliamentary elections.

Another ex-prime minister in the running is Aram Sarkisian (not to be confused with the identically named leader of the Democratic Party). Like Stepan Demirchian, he was catapulted into politics by the assembly shootings tragedy on October 27, 1999.

His brother, Armenian strongman Vazgen Sarkisian, was prime minister and one of the eight victims of the shootings. Aram Sarkisian was made premier, but dismissed by Kocharian six months later. After that, he became one of Kocharian's fiercest opponents.

Like Demirchian, Aram Sarkisian's bid for the presidency stems from the 1999 tragedy and looks like a personal settling of accounts with Kocharian. "This is a battle, and I will fight to the end," he said.

Vladimir Darbinian, head of Armenia's Communist Party, can expect to garner a respectable number of votes but has no hope of victory. Even fewer voters can be expected to support five other candidates: Aram Karapetian, head of a Moscow-based think-tank and four leaders of small parties, Arshak Sadoyan, Petros Makeyan, Garnik Markarian and Aram Harutunian.

It is much harder to assess the chances of Raffi Hovannisian, the only candidate from the Armenian diaspora. American-born Hovannisian, who has been resident in Armenia for eleven years, was the country's first foreign minister in 1991. He is now head of the Armenian Centre for National and International Studies.

Hovannisian only recently went into politics and is well respected as an articulate and honest person. He may face registration problems, as he may not formally meet the requirement to have been an Armenian citizen for ten years.

The opposition now faces seeing its vote split many ways, despite intensive discussions throughout the autumn to unite against Kocharian.

"The alliance of 16 opposition parties has not become a political force which could realistically stand up to President Kocharian," bemoaned Vazgen Manukian. "All the statements that they are prepared to bring about a change of regime were just rhetoric in the end."

Kocharian is so confident that he believes he would easily triumph even if the opposition buried their differences and united around a single candidate. "If they do come up with a common candidate, my chances of winning in the first round will increase," he recently boasted.

Some opinion polls suggest Kocharian may pick up the 50 per cent he needs to win outright in the first ballot on February 19.

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