

Nothing Straightforward About Armenian Referendum

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Opponents of proposed reforms say they will make Armenia less, not more democratic.

In just over a month, voters in Armenia will get a chance to decide on a new constitution that in theory should make for a more democratic system with more powers vested in parliament.

Opposition parties are against the changes, which they see as an underhand way of perpetuating the Republican Party's hold on power.

On October 8, three days after parliament passed a package of amendments, President Serzh Sargsyan called a constitutional referendum for December 6.

The document was supported by 104 of the 131 members of the chamber, a majority that the Republicans claimed was a ringing endorsement.

"I'd like to point out that none of the opposition party groups in parliament voted against it en masse, and two of the five opposition groups announced they supported the amendments," the Republicans' parliamentary secretary, Gagik Melikyan, said afterwards.

In reality, most opposition politicians boycotted the vote or abstained the vote, and seven legislators voted no.

"This is not a political consensus, but rather an unconstitutional vote prompted by threats, pressure and bribery. It has nothing whatever to do with the will of the Armenian people," legislators were told by Levon Zurabyan, parliamentary leader of the Armenian National Congress (ANC).

Zurabyan accused the authorities of laying the ground by driving a wedge between the three main opposition parties, the ANC, Prosperous Armenia and the Heritage Party earlier this year. (See **[Armenian Opposition Force Backs Down](#)** for the background to this.)

As so often happens in Armenia, the opposition was unable to present a united front on the issue. Most sitting members of Prosperous Armenia and Dashnaksutyun supported the Republicans in the October 5 ballot. One of the ANC's seven legislators and two of Heritage's four also voted for the amendments.

The ANC and Heritage say they might work together, but they have set up separate campaign headquarters to press for a no vote in the referendum.

On paper, the revised constitution looks like everything the opposition could possibly ask for. After all, the current constitution, dating from 1995, has entrenched a system where the president wields a lot of power and makes most of the important decisions. This was only slightly mitigated by amendments passed in 2005 that at least gave parliament the right to approve new prime ministers, rather than having them simply appointed by the head of state.

The latest proposed changes would further strengthen the role of parliament and relegate the president to a largely ceremonial role with no power of veto and no right to wade in on political matters. (See also **[Armenia's Contested Political Reforms](#)**.)

Presidents would no longer be elected by the people, but would instead be chosen by parliament. They would only serve a single term of seven years. Under the current system, President Sargsyan is elected for five years and is into his second term, after which he must step down in 2018.

Parliament would shrink from 131 to 101 seats, all elected by proportional representation. At the moment, 41 are decided in first-past-the-post constituencies and the rest by proportional representation.

The constitutional amendments also contain an unusual arrangement designed to ensure what is described as a "stable majority". In practice, if no one party is able to form a majority government after an election, a second round of voting takes place, a run-off between the two parties or coalitions that scored the most votes the first time.

"This new provision represents progress for Armenia and opens the way for it to become more democratic," Melikyan said, pointing out that the president had repeatedly stated that he would not seek to engineer a third term, or to claim the post of prime minister or parliamentary speaker.

The opposition fear that this system would mean that the ruling party and its leader – currently the Republicans and Sargsyan, even after he steps down as president – would always end up winning

parliamentary elections. At the moment, the Republican Party has an absolute majority with 70 seats.

Hrayr Manukyan is a member of a new movement called Don't Hold It (the referendum), and is sceptical that those behind the constitutional changes are acting in good faith.

"It's hard to believe the Republicans, who have been in power for 16 years and have fixed presidential and parliament on three occasions over that period," he told IWPR. "Now people from the party are saying all they care about is democracy. So Serzh Sargsyan doesn't become prime minister, president or speaker – he will be party leader, and he'll run the country in exactly the same way that Communist Party first secretaries did in the Soviet Union. That's precisely what this second-round ballot provision is about."

The voices speaking out against constitutional reform have now been joined by Robert Kocharyan, who preceded his then ally Sargsyan as Armenian president and cleared the way for an easy succession in 2008.

"The draft constitution contains significant risks that could nudge the country to a de facto one-party system, and hence to the monopolisation of politics and to stagnation," he said.

Kocharyan also drew an analogy to the Soviet period, when the constitution was "full of fine words", but the Communist Party ruled unchallenged.

Ruben Mehrabyan, a researcher at the Armenian Centre for International and Political Studies, predicts that the referendum will produce a yes vote because the opposition's voice does not carry enough force. But he doubts the new system will guarantee the political stability it is supposed to be designed for.

"Of course these amendments are a step backwards from democracy," Mehrabyan told IWPR. "The question is, though, whether these changes will allow those in power to create conditions that are stable and that they can predict. That's doubtful in these extremely unstable times."

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