

Political Heavyweight Bolsters Armenian Opposition

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Even in anti-government mode, Prosperous Armenia party may poach elite insiders who see it as the better bet for the future.

One of Armenia's richest businessmen has thrown in his lot with the opposition, in what politics-watchers see as a major blow to the government.

Gagik Tsarukyan was previously seen as a supporter of President Serzh Sargsyan, and the Prosperous Armenia party he leads was part of a governing coalition until 2012. It is the second-biggest party in parliament.

Tsarukyan has now joined with the Armenian National Congress (ANC) and the Heritage party to forge an opposition troika that has issued an ultimatum for the government to deliver on a series of demands.

More than 10,000 opposition supporters attended an October 24 rally in Yerevan's Liberty Square to demand change.

"If the government continues to reject the just demands of the people's movement, we three political forces and hundreds of thousands of people will go out onto the streets and squares and force a change of government and early elections," Tsarukyan told the crowds.

A week later, Tsarukyan told the news website Zham.am that he was committed to his anti-government stance.

"I have no way back," he said. "I'll carry on until the situation in Armenia changes."

Tsarukyan is regarded as one of Armenia's wealthiest and most influential men, with a fortune estimated at around one billion US dollars.

Prosperous Armenia came second in the last parliamentary election in 2012, and holds 36 of the 131 seats in the National Assembly. Members also hold power in several regions of Armenia, including Gyumri, the second largest city.

During the 2008 presidential election, Tsarukyan's Prosperous Armenia backed Sargsyan's election bid.

ANC leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan came second in the presidential race and accused the government of rigging the vote. Opposition protests broke out after the results were announced, and ten people were killed in the clashes that followed.

It is thus quite a turnaround for Prosperous Armenia to have joined forces with the ANC. The third force in the alliance is the Heritage Party, led by Raffi Hovhannisyan, who ran unsuccessfully against Sargsyan in the 2013 presidential election.

The three parties are opposed to constitutional changes initiated by Sargsyan and his Republican Party which would shift the balance of power from future presidents to parliament. After a year of consultations, a special committee convened by the president presented its package of amendments. Sargsyan must now decide whether to hold a referendum on the reform package, a decision he is likely to make in February or March next year.

The government has already dismissed the opposition troika's demands.

"Regime change will only happen within the constitution, as a result of the next national election," Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan told reporters on 27 October.

Stepan Danielyan, director of the NGO Cooperation for Democracy in Armenia, argues that Sargsyan, who completes his second term in 2018 and cannot run for a third, wants to use the reforms to retain a hold on power. If he became speaker of parliament, for instance, he would retain significant control over the government given that the role of the next president would be reduced.

According to Danielyan, it is all or nothing. If Sargsyan gives up on his reform plan, "pro-government business groupings will begin gravitating toward Prosperous Armenia, since it is obvious that the next president will come from that party. So what's important is whether Sargsyan is able to secure the constitutional changes", he said.

Prosperous Armenia's decision to join forces with opposition parties gives them a lot more clout than they

in the 2008 and 2013 elections. And Danielyan argues that it does not leave Tsarukyan and his party in the wilderness – instead, they will retain their gravitational pull for elite figures looking to the future.

“The chances of a change of power have grown,” Danielyan said. “Prosperous Armenia has a lot of wealthy people in it, and in Armenia, finance cannot exist separately from power. Businessmen from the Republican party who are close to Sargsyan may switch sides to Prosperous Armenia if the scales tip towards Gagik Tsarukyan.”

Danielyan added that many in the business elite were already unhappy with Sargsyan’s foreign and economic policies, and were “looking for ways out”.

In recent months, two major figures in the ruling elite have resigned abruptly –former National Security Council Secretary Artur Baghdasaryan and deputy prime minister Armen Gevorgyan.

Ruben Mehrabyan, an analyst with the Armenian Centre for Political and International Studies, said that swift change was unlikely, as Tsarukyan was taking a more conservative line than his fellow troika members Ter-Petrosyan and Hovhannisyan.

“In contrast to the two other opposition leaders, Tsarukyan is not demanding early presidential and parliamentary elections,” he said. Nevertheless, he added, the unexpected was always possible – especially since Moscow is a major influence in Armenia – and in that case, a change of government could occur in 2017 or 2018.

Despite his new opposition stance, Tsarukyan recently met President Sargsyan. Rumours of the meeting were confirmed by the Republican Party’s deputy head Razmik Zohrabyan on November 11. In remarks quoted by the ArmlInfo news agency, Zohrabyan hinted that the authorities were prepared to look at some of the opposition troika’s demands, and highlighted the difference between Tsarukyan’s moderate line and the calls for revolution coming from the ANC.

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