

## **Political Stability In Armenia Balances On A Knife Edge**

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By Artem Yerkanian in Yerevan (CRS No. 9, 3-Dec-99)

But the symptoms of "crisis" remain, despite the appointment of a new Chairman to the National Assembly and a new Prime Minister.

Two of Armenia's most authoritative politicians were killed in the shootings: the Speaker of the National Assembly, Karen Demirchian, and the Prime Minister, Vazgen Sarkisian.

When these two men assumed office, the influence of Kocharian was noticeably restricted. But their deaths have not increased the President's authority. On the contrary political observers in Yerevan would argue Kocharian's position is now weaker than before. Future developments in Armenian politics are now less predictable than ever.

On the night of the shooting, a group of senior military officers presented Kocharian with a series of demands. Firstly, to remove from office the Ministers of Internal Affairs and National Security and the General Prosecutor. Secondly, the officers offered a list of people for inclusion in the staff of the new parliament.

Finally, the military demanded Vahan Shirkhanian, a right hand man to Vazgen Sarkisian and Minister for the Coordination of Activities within the Industrial Infrastructures, be appointed as the new Prime Minister.

Kocharian dismissed these demands out of hand but has subsequently been compelled to carry out the bulk of the ultimatum. In the opinion of many observers, Shirkhanian - as representative of the military elite in government - now plays the role of the first violin and even conductor in the new cabinet.

Confronted with a government populated by ministers out with his control, Kocharian has retaliated by attempting to strengthen the powers of presidential office.

Forced to resign as Minister for National Security, Serzh Sarkisian - a man considered dedicated to Kocharian - moved to the role of Presidential Chief of Staff and Secretary to the Council of National Security.

The parliamentary majority - the Unity coalition - was profoundly weakened in the attack on October 27. With the loss of its leaders "Unity" lost the cement that held the coalition together. The coalition members, the Republican Party and the National Party, do not share common policies and values, but were united behind leaders who realised that cooperation presented the only path to power.

The fragility of the parliamentary majority has fuelled calls for the dissolution of parliament amid claims that it no longer reflects the political views of Armenian society. But the new administration in the National Assembly has made clear it has no intention of calling elections early.

On the contrary moves are afoot to amend the constitution to limit presidential powers to dissolve parliament.

Kocharian himself has never spoken against stricter regulation of presidential authority. But recent and planned changes may force a shift in strategy by Kocharian, especially if the parliamentary coalition breaks down and loses the confidence of the people. In such circumstances, some observers argue, Kocharian will be obliged to take radical steps to shore up his image and his position.

The term "crisis" does indeed appear apt for the situation in Armenia - the President is "pressed" by the military, the government is afraid of a collapse within the parliamentary coalition, the legislature is afraid of an early dissolution of the National Assembly and the main political parties are leaderless. To predict the next development in Armenian politics is a thankless task

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**Location:** Armenia

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