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THE ARMENIAN PRIME MINISTER'S RESIGNATION AND SNAP ELECTIONS: A BATTLE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW REGIMES

On October 16th, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan officially announced his resignation, preparing the country for extraordinary snap elections set for December 2018. According to the Armenian constitution, the parliament, or National Assembly, can vote twice to nominate a candidate for prime minister within two weeks. In case it fails to elect a new prime minister, parliament is to be dissolved and pre-term elections must be held no earlier than thirty days and no later than forty-five days.²

In his appeal to the Armenian citizens, Prime Minister Pashinyan referred to the ongoing political process as "entering a new era".³ Given the country's new political reality following the ascendance of the new Pashinyan government in May 2018, the elections are inescapable and were only a matter of time. In early June during a visit to the NATO Summit in Brussels for example, the Armenian premier cited early 2019 as a possible term for snap elections. However, after a political crisis caused by the former ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), the second largest Prosperous Party of Armenia (PPA) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), on 2 October, after the overwhelming victory of the Pashinyan political bloc in the recent Yerevan municipal elections, early election could no longer be delayed.

¹ <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1370>

² *Civilnet*, "Armenia's Prime Minister Pashinyan resigns, then what?", October 16, 2018, available at <<https://www.civilnet.am/news/2018/10/15/Armenia%E2%80%99s-Prime-Minister-Pashinyan-resigns-then-what/346650>>.

³ *News.am*, "Armenian PM announces resignation", Nikol Pashinyan's official announcement (in Armenian language), October 16, 2018, available at <<https://news.am/eng/news/476064.html>>.

The Yerevan municipal elections were an important litmus test for measuring the nationwide support for Pashinyan five months after his rise to power, and the results were well beyond the expectations – with a sweeping victory of 81% once again re-confirming Nikol Pashinyan's status as “the only political *force* in Armenian politics.”⁴ An unexpected development was the decision of the former ruling Republican Party not to participate in this election⁵, which signaled the party's weak assessment of its chances⁶ (the unpopular former mayor from the Republican party was forced to resign under strong public pressure and faces a corruption-related criminal investigation).

As the reaction to the municipal elections, on 2 October, the Republican Party, supported by the Prosperous Party and the ARF, hastily pushed through a vote for a bill designed to obstruct the process by seriously complicating the process of dissolving parliament and selecting a new prime minister. In response, Pashinyan called on his supporters to protest the move and after less than three hours, several thousand people gathered outside the Armenian parliament. In his rally speech, Pashinyan criticized the Republican Party and its allies: “Those forces that participated in the drafting of that bill and were going to vote for it are exposing themselves as counter-revolutionary forces... All those who will vote for or back this bill will be declaring a political war against the people.”⁷ The same evening Pashinyan announced plans for his resignation as a means of holding snap elections. The rationale behind that controversial bill was to hinder the process as much as possible, hoping that the mistakes made by the reformist government will decrease Pashinyan's rating. Such collective action by the old political elite was underpinned by the fear of isolation and, as the Director of Yerevan-based Regional Studies Center (RSC) Richard Giragosian has mentioned, “was a move of weakness and defensive desperation.”⁸

The Director of Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute Aleksandr Iskandaryan cites the incomplete transition of power in April-May of this year as a crucial reason for snap elections.⁹ Even if Nikol Pashinyan could successfully assume executive power, legislative power was still – legally – in

⁴ Nerses Kopalyan, “Yerevan Municipal Elections Were Not About Yerevan”, in *EVN Report*, September 25, 2018, available at <<https://www.evnreport.com/opinion/yerevan-municipal-elections-were-not-about-yerevan>>.

⁵ *Armenpress*, “Republican Party will not nominate candidate for Yerevan Mayor at upcoming elections – Vice Speaker Sharmazanov”, August 28, 2018, available at <<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/945161.html>>.

⁶ Aleksandr Iskandaryan, Caucasus Institute, Commentary, (in Russian language), October 3, 2018.

⁷ Tatevik Lazarian, “‘Counterrevolutionary’ Bill Sparks Protests In Armenia”, in *Freedom Radio*, Armenian Service (Azatutyun Radiokayan), October 2, 2018, available at <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29521765.html?fbclid=IwAR3iap2a3bNaHTcRCUAP1eZ3cY170zOvljIR_9FjJQfRcS7MtsrM8aqfikl>.

⁸ Richard Giragosian, “Commentary & Analysis on Political Developments in Armenia”, October 3, 2018.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the hands of the former ruling Republican Party, which was the largest party in parliament.¹⁰ Pashinyan has said on several occasions that the parliament where the Republicans still constitute the majority does not reflect the new political reality and does not express the people's will. In such a situation, snap elections become the only constitutionally available mechanism for Pashinyan to accomplish the full transition of both the executive and legislative branches of power.

The political developments since April through today continue to emphasize one important fact: for the majority of Armenian citizens, their support for Pashinyan means preventing any return to the previous authoritarian and corrupted regime; it means to be "guardians of the April Revolution", which they believe has to be protected at any cost. Pashinyan already said in his official announcement that Republican Party of Armenia (ARP), the Prosperous Party of Armenia and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), who together hold a 2/3 majority in the parliament, have publically announced that they will not nominate candidates for prime minister.¹¹

As the stakes are high, and for the most Armenians "a strong Pashinyan equals a stronger Armenian democracy",¹² the December elections are expected to result in a victory for Pashinyan's "Civil Contract" alliance, expected to obtain a majority in the next National Assembly. Another unexpected scenario is that the deputies of the defeated forces might deviate from the initial agreement.¹³ In case they do so and submit a new candidacy for the post of the prime minister, Pashinyan will once again mobilize his supporters by taking thousands of citizens to the streets in order to complete the "Velvet Revolution".¹⁴

In the case of real democratization in Armenia, the already discredited former political elite headed by the Republican Party should agree to work together with the new authorities, at the same time positioning itself as a constructive oppositional force. The current political system in Armenia is still in the process of transformation, and only with mature political dialogue can Armenia solve the problem of overcoming "street democracy", and institutionalize democratic procedures at all levels of government.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nerses Kopalyan, "Yerevan Municipal Elections Were Not About Yerevan", in EVN Report, September 25, 2018, available at <https://www.evnreport.com/opinion/yerevan-municipal-elections-were-not-about-yerevan>

¹³ Richard Giragosian, "The risks for Pashinyan might be more serious as there is no assurance that the deputies of the defeated forces will follow the planned program", in Tert.am (in Armenian language), October 3, 2018, available at https://www.tert.am/am/news/2018/10/03/Richard-kirakosyan/2809477?fbclid=IwAR3W6kb_FIO5qi6um6ghJaH9LgXxqdXWoFCBB0a8a-GTX7rz9ebGxMXACxs.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A Georgian political expert Ghia Nodia has mentioned the problem of overcoming "street democracy" and progress towards an institutionalized form of democratic governance as a remaining common

challenge for both Georgia and Armenia. Caucasus Analytical Digest, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution:
Challenges to Regional Foreign Policy", No. 104, 23 July 2018.