Weekly analysis

POLITICAL TURBULENCE IN ARMENIA: THE TRIUMPH OF "STREET DEMOCRACY"

In 2018, Armenia entered the final phase of the political transition initiated in 2015 after Armenian voters approved the shift from the presidential to the parliamentary system of government with the changes to take effect during the 2017-2018 electoral cycle. By winning the April 2017 parliamentary election with 49.17% of the votes and gaining 58 seats in the 105-seat National Assembly, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) secured its positions in the country's new political system laying the foundation for its dominance. In order to complete the unprecedented transformation, there was a need to hold indirect presidential and prime ministerial elections, since both positions no longer require a national direct vote. In March 2018, the National Assembly successfully chose Armen Sarkissian, a former prime minister and former Armenia's ambassador to Great Britain, to serve a seven-year term as the country's new president, the role of whom under the terms of the revised Armenian constitution is based more on the ceremonial duties. The only issue then left to be addressed was the prime ministerial election.

On April 17, 2018, Serzh Sargsyan, 63-year-old politician who had served for more than a decade as the country's president, was elected as the prime minister at the special session of Armenia's National Assembly. Sargsyan was nominated by the RPA and its coalition partner, the Dashnaktsutyun Party. A total of 77 Armenian parliamentarians voted in favor of Sargsyan, while 17 lawmakers voted against. However, Sargsyan's decision to take on the post of the prime minister provoked considerable discontent among the opposition parties and a large part of the population since he broke his 2014 promise not to become a prime minister after his presidential term expired. Sargsyan's new appointment was widely perceived as an attempt to extend his grip on power. Accusing Sargsyan of changing the system to ensure his own retention of power, opposition supporters led by Nikol Pashinyan, the Head of the Civil Contract Party of Armenia and leader of the parliamentary Yelq Alliance, gathered in the center of Yerevan for a large-scale demonstration four days prior to the election date – on April 13, 2018.

On the day of the election, Pashinyan called protesters to make a "non-violent velvet revolution" aimed at preventing any possibility of cementing Sargsyan's hold on power. In order to obstruct the first cabinet meeting of the Sargsyan-led government, the opposition movement tried to block the major government building compound. This led to clashes with police, which resulted in some 120 demonstrators being detained. After a day of scuffles between protesters and police, new President of Armenia Armen Sarkissian called for dialogue and peaceful settlement. However, his appeal did not succeed in convincing demonstrators to stop the anti-government protests.

The confrontation intensified on April 22 after police detained Pashinyan and two other Yelk Alliance parliamentarians, shortly after the opposition leader rejected demands to back down during a short televised meeting with the new prime minister. Nearly 200 protesters were also detained. On the next, 11th day of mass protests, April 23, hundreds of uniformed soldiers joined anti-government demonstrators, despite the Defense Ministry's warning of punishment for participating in the protests. Due to a renewed wave of thousands of demonstrators, the situation could have spiraled out of control. However, on the same day, Sargsyan resigned from the position of Armenia's prime minister preferring to step down peacefully rather than to use force with unpredictable consequences for the country's future. Sargsyan's resignation statement came hours after Pashinyan was released. In his final address as the head of the country, Sargsyan acknowledged that he had been wrong to become the prime minister and satisfied the street movement's demand to resign.

Following the resignation, the government appointed Sargsyan's ally Karen Karapetian as the acting prime minister. In accordance with Armenia's constitution, the National Assembly gathered to elect a new prime minister on May 1, 2018. After a compromise agreement over a potential nominee was reached, Pashinyan became the only candidate for the country's most powerful post. However, since Pashinyan lacked a large power base within the parliament, including the ruling RPA, which controls a majority of seats, he received 45 votes, while 56 deputies from the RPA voted against. This necessitated the holding of the second round of the election.

It was everyone's expectation that Pashinyan, who headed the nationwide protest movement that forced longstanding leader Sarksyan to resign, would continue to assert his right to be elected as a new prime minister. After the National Assembly voted against the leader of the mass protest movement, Pashinyan called for peaceful protests to take place nationwide asking his supporters to continue acts of civil disobedience. As a result, on May 2, 2018, thousands of Armenians responded to the call for a nationwide general strike, blocking key roads and government buildings across the country. For instance, in the capital Yerevan demonstrators closed entrances to several ministry buildings, stopped traffic on the route to the main airport, and disrupted the rail and metro services. Protests also took place in the second largest city of the country, Gyumri, while in the city of Vanadzor demonstrators blockaded the mayor's office and other public buildings.

Since Armenia's constitution stipulates that in case a prime minister is not elected by a majority of votes after the second round of an election the National Assembly should be dissolved, which was disadvantageous for parliamentarians from the ruling party, the RPA wisely decided to support Pashinyan's bid to become a prime minister. As a result, the next day after the National Assembly's extraordinary session the RPA announced its decision to vote for Pashinyan during the second round of the election. Therefore, on May 8, 2018, leader of parliamentary Yelq Alliance Pashinyan was elected as the country's new prime minister. In a vote at the National Assembly, 59 parliamentarians backed Pashinyan's candidacy with 42 voting against, while to be elected the 42-year-old politician needed at least 53 votes.

However, there is no guarantee that the RPA will further support Pashinyan's political and economic initiatives. In fact, the ruling party endorsed Pashinyan for the prime ministerial post only to preserve the national unity of Armenia, but it has concerns about his ability to run the country. Therefore, after taking the office, the new leader of Armenia announced that his priority would be to hold an early parliamentary election, which would make it possible to rebalance the power in the National Assembly now dominated by the allies of his predecessor. However, before appointing a new election date, there is a need to form a new viable and effective government and prepare an action plan, which would cover both domestic and international policies. It is already known that the new leadership does not intend to review the format of the Armenian-Russian relations, stating that Moscow will remain Yerevan's strategic partner and ally within the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Along with this, the Pashinyan-led government will definitely focus on deepening relations with the European Union further opening Armenia to foreign businesses and capital.

In conclusion, the newly formed government has to face serious challenges in order to meet expectations held by the Armenian citizens, who publicly demand to reduce disparities, and eradicate poverty, high unemployment, and widespread corruption. Despite the fact that Pashinyan has formed a new government out of a diverse crew of political allies, he will have to work with the National Assembly controlled by his political opponents. Therefore, it could take time to initiate highly expected political and social transformations. Nevertheless, unlike the previous "color revolutions" in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, Armenia's peaceful velvet revolution is, without exaggeration, a unique case of a nonviolent change of government in the former Soviet countries. The Armenian example clearly shows that no political leadership is able to tackle a crisis of legitimacy without the willingness to launch far-reaching political reforms.

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Politics, Foreign Affairs and Security

- During the special session of the National Assembly of Armenia, which was the second round of the parliamentary vote, opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan was elected as the country's new prime minister. Unlike in the first round, 59 members of the parliament voted for his candidacy with 42 voting against. Pashinyan was the only candidate in both rounds.

- After President of the United States Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) inked in 2015 between Iran and P5+1 group President of Iran Hassan Rouhani stated that the country would remain committed to the multinational nuclear deal despite the U.S. decision to cancel the agreement.

- During the session of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council held in Sochi, the leaders of the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) discussed further efforts to create a single market of goods and services, develop production ties and cooperation, as well as put in place a policy of financial policy rapprochement. Moreover, a key issue on the summit agenda was the voting over Moldova's status as an observer in the EEU, which concluded positively for Chisinau.

- During his official visit to Tashkent, the Commander of the U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Leonard Votel, met with President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to discuss the topical issues of countering modern challenges and threats to ensure stability in the region, as well as a peaceful settlement of the situation in Afghanistan.

- During his official visit to Ashgabat, Minister of Transport and Roads of Kyrgyzstan Zhamshitbek Kalilov met with Minister of Road Transport of Turkmenistan Jumageldy Garaev to discuss further development of bilateral relations in the field of transportation and transit of goods. In addition, the sides discussed mutual cooperation in the field of civil aviation.

- During his official visit to Tehran, President of Sri Lanka Maithripala Sirisena met with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani to discuss deepening relations and issues of mutual interest. As a result of the visit, the parties signed a number of agreements on cooperation in various spheres, including health, medical sciences, medicine and medical equipment, as well as culture and security.

- During his official visit to Samarkand, Minister of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan Kalmukhanbet Kassymov met with Minister of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan Pulat Bobozhonov to discuss the creation of the coordination group aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of bilateral cooperation on various issues of operational activity. The parties also discussed strengthening cooperation between the internal affairs bodies in the fight against cross-border crime.

Economy, Finance and Energy

- According to the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, the country's foreign trade turnover equaled $11.3 billion in January-April 2018. During the reporting period, Uzbekistan's exports totaled $5 billion, while the country's imports amounted to $6.3 billion. Among the CIS countries, Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are major foreign trade partners of Uzbekistan, which account for 28.0% of the country's total foreign trade turnover.

- According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in January-April 2018, the country's trade turnover grew by 22.2% reaching $3.78 billion. During the reporting period, Georgia's exports increased by 22% to $961.4 million, while the value of imports increased to $2.82 billion by 22.3% compared to the same period in 2017.

- President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a resolution approving the composition of the intergovernmental Turkmen-Kazakh commission on economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation. The document was signed in order to further develop the partnership between Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, expand bilateral trade, economic, scientific, technical and cultural ties.

- According to a draft law on the budget of the Finance Ministry of Russia, it is expected that for the first time since 2011 the country's budget for 2018 would run a surplus of 440.6 billion rubles ($7.15 billion), or 0.45% of the country's GDP.

- According to the National Bank of Belarus, the country's exports of goods and services totaled $9.8 billion in the first quarter of 2018, which is a 25.7% increase compared to the same period of 2017. It was noted that the country's foreign trade in goods and services totaled $19.2 billion increasing by 25.5% compared to January-March 2017.

Society and Culture

- According to Minister of Economy of Turkey Nihat Zeybekci, Russian tourists will be able to use their national currency, ruble, in Turkey. It was noted that the talks on the use of rubles in Turkey are underway between the two countries. It was also stated that in March 2018 97,438 tourists from Russia visited Turkey, which is 38,784 people more than in March 2017.

- The Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) with the assistance of the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) organized a meeting in Ashgabat on the development of cooperation with international partners. The meeting participants exchanged views on the concept of the UN Aral Sea Program. At the same time, the parties discussed the preparation of a new Action Program to assist the countries of the Aral Sea basin (ASBP-4), which includes a set of measures and projects aimed at improving the environment and promoting socio-economic development of the region.

- According to Head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Parties Yuri Yevtushenko, more than 65,000 Syrians have returned to their homes in Eastern Ghouta from refugee camps.

- During his official visit to Minsk, Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan Katsunobu Kato met with Healthcare Minister of Belarus Valery Malashko to sign a memorandum of cooperation aimed at expanding collaboration between the Belarusian healthcare specialists and their Japanese partners.

- According to the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, the country launched Gaofen-5, a hyperspectral imaging satellite, as part of the country's high-resolution Earth observation project. The Gaofen-5 satellite was launched off the back of a Long March 4C rocket from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center in northern Shanxi Province. The satellite can be used for comprehensive environmental monitoring.

- Hundreds of people gathered in front of the Georgian parliament building in Tbilisi to protest a violent overnight drug raid by police, demanding resignations of the interior minister and the prime minister. Demonstrators perceive drug raids as a demonstration of force that openly violates human rights.