



RSC ARMENIA POST-ELECTION BRIEFING NOTES

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The Regional Studies Center (RSC) convened a series of special online briefings offering both pre-election and post-election assessments of the early parliamentary election in Armenia held on 20 June 2021. The following are the summary notes from the special briefings, which featured analytical presentations by RSC Director Richard Giragosian. As an independent “think tank” based in Armenia, the Regional Studies Center (RSC) offers a regular series of Monthly Briefings, with analytical assessments of significant political, economic and military/security trends in Armenia and the South Caucasus region for a target audience consisting of the diplomatic community and international organizations.

Armenia’s Post-War Political Crisis

In the wake of the unexpected and unprecedented loss in the war for Nagorno Karabakh in late 2020, a lingering domestic political crisis in Armenia only further escalated well into 2021. This pronounced political crisis, coming in a post-war period of unchartered political territory, was driven by three main drivers:

A Prolonged “State of War.” Armenian society has been unable to overcome the shock from the unexpected military defeat in the war for Karabakh that ended in November 2020. While this was exacerbated by the Armenian government’s failure to prepare public opinion for the scale and severity of the military defeat in the 44-day war, it was also due to the prolonged “state of war” as a result of Azerbaijan’s failure to release a sizable number of Armenian military prisoners of war and civilian hostages.

Post-War Uncertainty & Insecurity. A second factor contributing to the escalation of the post-war crisis has been the uncertainty and insecurity in the new post-war reality. With a delay in the resumption of diplomatic negotiations, this uncertainty stems from the vague and incomplete terms of the Russian-imposed agreement that ended the war on 9 November. Although that agreement resulted in an important cessation of hostilities that allowed for the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force to Nagorno Karabakh, it fell far short of either a peace deal or a negotiated resolution to the Karabakh conflict itself.

Moreover, the agreement deferred the status of Nagorno Karabakh to a later stage of diplomatic negotiations and left several additionally important issues unanswered, such as military demobilization and border demarcation. At the same time, this uncertainty was compounded by insecurity, which stemmed from blatant border incursions by Azerbaijani military units along the southern and eastern border areas of Armenia.

Lack of Accountability & State Paralysis. And the third driver of this political crisis is rooted in the general perception of a lack of accountability for the military losses and political decisions through the war. From a broader perspective, this lack of accountability is related to the fact that the Karabakh conflict predates Armenian independence, which places the Pashinyan government in politically uncharted territory, as the only Armenian leadership to have “lost” Karabakh. But more specifically, the response of the government to the unexpected loss in the war has been both inadequate and insufficient. More broadly, the Armenian government’s demonstrable failure to adjust and adapt to the new post-war reality, as evident in the absence of a new diplomatic strategy and a failure to alter or adjust the country’s military posture or defense reform, only contributes to a continuing “state of denial.” And despite achieving hard-fought democratic gains since coming to power, the government’s inadequate response to the demands of the post-war crisis has only fostered a perception of state paralysis.

Moving to Early Elections. Against that backdrop, the domestic crisis has further been marked by pronounced political polarization that has fostered a serious stalemate between a largely unpopular and discredited opposition and a government with no credible alternative or viable replacement. It was a reluctant recognition of this crisis that led Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to accept the necessity for early elections, based on the prudent recognition that snap elections are the only feasible way to diffuse the domestic deadlock.

The Broader Significance of Armenia’s Snap Election

The significance of this early election also consisted of two additional factors. First, the need for a fresh mandate was the only legal and constitutional avenue to resolve the deepening political stalemate and offered the incumbent Pashinyan government an attractive opportunity to seek a rare, renewed degree of legitimacy. And a second related factor was the importance of holding a second “free and fair” election, standing out as an impressive “back-to-back” repeat of the free and fair election of December 2018. And these objectives were met, with a ballot that was endorsed and certified by the international observers comprising the joint mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) as “competitive and generally well-managed.”¹ The observers also noted, however, that the election was characterized by intense polarization, marred by increasingly inflammatory language, and undermined by the fact that “women were sidelined throughout the campaign.”²

Nevertheless, with the return of former President Robert Kocharian as the frontrunner of the opposition’s attempt to unseat Prime Minister Pashinyan, the election was very much defined by a contest of personalities rather than any real competition of policies. For the Armenian electorate, it was also a choice between an appeal to the authoritarian “strong man” leadership of the past, as embodied by Kocharian and the opposition, versus continued confidence in the democratic reforms of the Pashinyan government. Yet, despite expectations for an especially close and competitive contest, most observers were surprised by the depth and degree of victory for the incumbent government, however. An additional surprise was seen in both the over-confidence of the opposition and the over-stated vulnerability of the government. But such surprise was justified, as this was an early election not only conducted in a delicate and difficult period of post-war uncertainty and instability, but also as a contest in uncharted political territory.

¹ “International Observers: Armenia's Elections Were Competitive and Generally Well-Managed,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 21 June 2021.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-elections-international-observers-osce/31318900.html>

² Ibid.

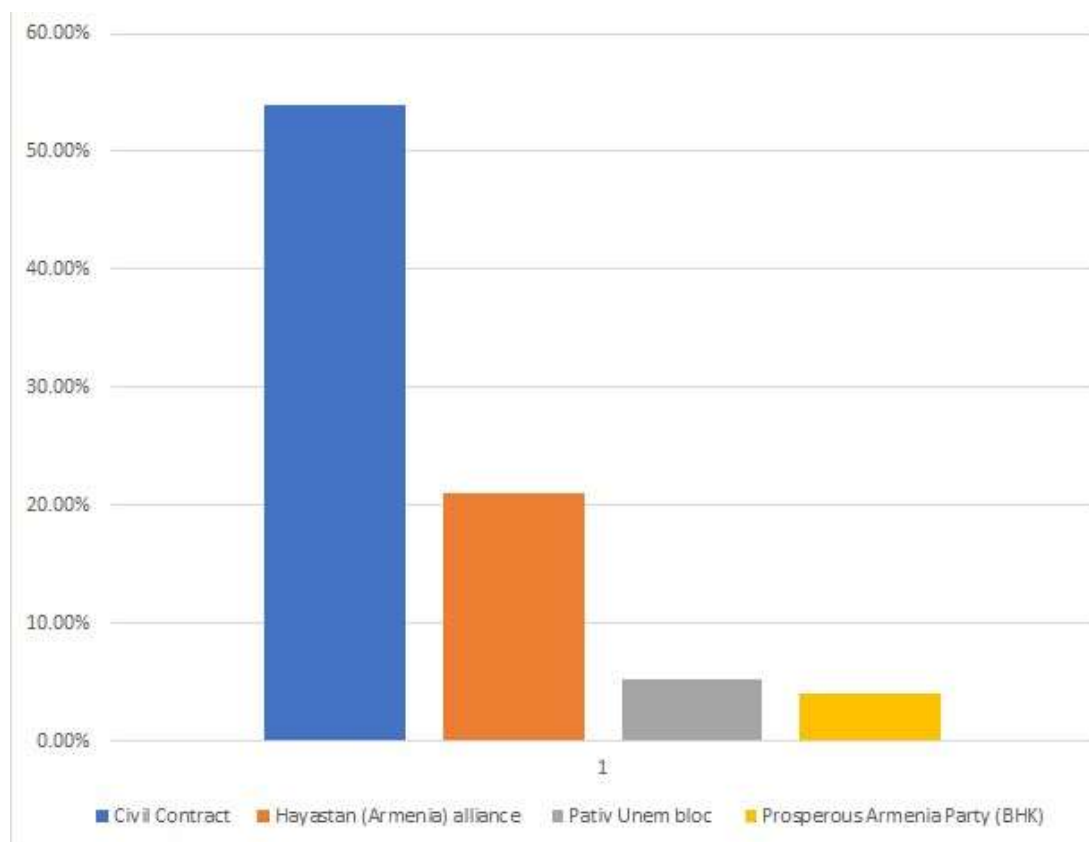
The Election Results

In the wake of Armenia’s recent early parliamentary election, incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is set to form a new government. Armed with a fresh mandate of nearly 54 percent of the vote in the snap election of 20 June, Pashinyan’s “Civil Contract” party will enter the new Armenian parliament with a decisive majority of 71 seats in the 107-seat parliament.³

Despite some expectations of a closer and more competitive contest, the opposition failed to pose a significant challenge to the incumbent government. Most notably, the opposition bloc led by former President Robert Kocharian was the only other party or bloc to surpass the minimum threshold to earn seats in the new parliament. But even this “Armenia Alliance” bloc came in a distant second, garnering only 21.09 percent of the vote, yet receiving 29 seats as result of the Armenian constitution’s reward for the second-place finisher.

The “I Have Honor” (or “*Patev Unem*”) bloc of former President Serzh Sargsyan failed to pass the threshold, receiving only 5.22 percent of votes, although it too benefitted from the constitutional requirement of having a parliament consist of at least three parties and with a minimum one-third opposition representation. Under those conditions, this third opposition bloc was awarded 7 seats. Another major opposition party, the “Prosperous Armenia” party, which was the second largest party in the outgoing parliament, was unable to gain enough votes to enter the new parliament, thereby raising serious questions over both its future and its fate.

Armenian Parliamentary Election Results



³ For more on the election outcome, see: Giragosian, Richard, “Assessing Armenia’s post-war election,” *New Europe*, 23 June 2021. <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/assessing-armenias-post-war-election/>

Maximizing the Electoral Math

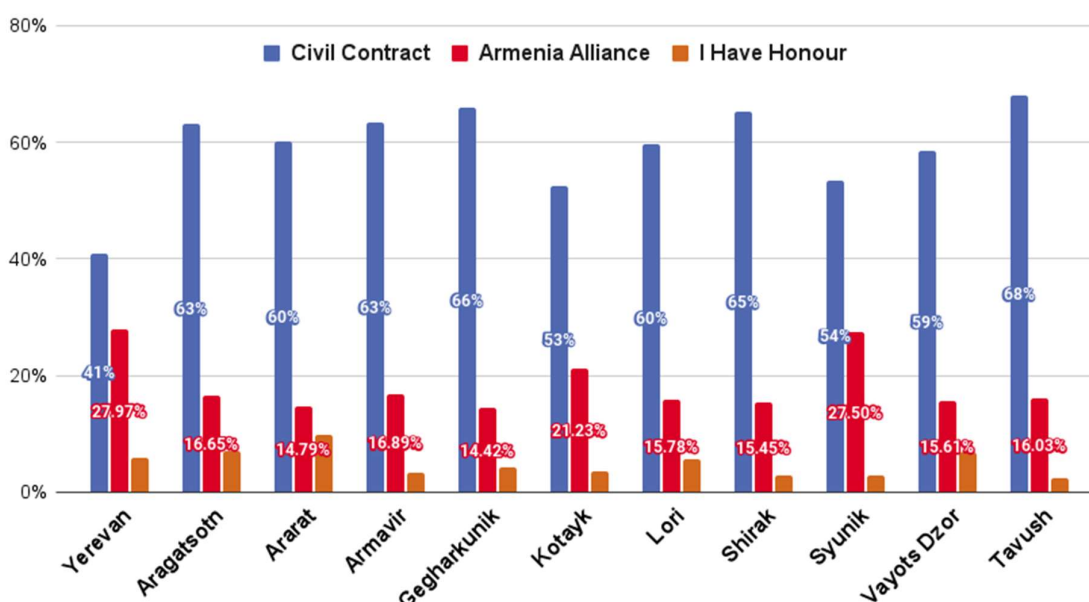
The election win for Pashinyan was impressive for several reasons and was largely due to three distinct reasons. First, the victory was driven by the electoral math, as Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party held a core base of support of between 25-30 percent of committed and consistent voters. This core support was further bolstered by the party’s successful appeal to the significant bloc of some 30 percent of independent and non-committed voters. It is important to note, however, that the crucial support from these undecided voters were not based on support for Pashinyan and his party alone and derived more from fear of the opposition and the divisively polarizing figure of former President Kocharian. Nevertheless, it was this impressive combination of support from a core constituency with added turnout from the large “swing vote” from undecided voters helped to drive the Pashinyan party to garner nearly 54 percent of the vote total. And the inflated expectations and inferior performance of Kocharian and his opposition bloc, despite garnering more than 21 percent of the vote, only revealed the opposition’s lack of appeal.

Maintaining the Electoral Map

In addition to the electoral math underlying this election victory, a second significant factor in explaining the Pashinyan win was the electoral map (see chart below), marked by an impressive scale and depth of support among the rural areas of the country. And as important as the swing votes from undecided voters were for the outcome, the momentum of votes from the regions swept the incumbent government past the post. This support was largely due to the fact that after years of neglect, the Pashinyan government was the first to invest in the rural areas and regions.

More specifically, Pashinyan’s Civil Contract Party was able to sweep all 10 regions plus the capital Yerevan. The breakdown was particularly impressive, as Pashinyan’s party secured over 60 percent of the votes in 8 of the 10 regions of Armenia, while garnering over 50 percent in the remaining two and still receiving over 40 percent in Yerevan, assumed to be more of an opposition stronghold. For his part, former President Kocharian was only able to gain more than 20 percent in 2 of the 10 regions, and an underwhelming 27.9 percent in Yerevan.

2021 Armenia Parliamentary Elections regional breakdown; preliminary results



Source: OC Media

An Extraordinary Election in Many Ways

This early election was extraordinary for several reasons well beyond its timing. First, this contest represented a desperate attempt at a political comeback by the “old guard” of Armenian politics. Since the ascendance of Pashinyan to power as the leader of a rare victory of non-violent “people power” in the country’s “Velvet Revolution” of 2018, a large and disparate segment of former officials and ousted political leaders coalesced around their opposition to an embattled Pashinyan government.

But in a combination of political arrogance and personal argument, the opposition camp was dangerously divided into four competing parties and factions, with three former Armenian presidents competing against each other as much as challenging the government. In fact, this personality-driven fragmentation of the opposition only diluted and divided the anti-government electorate. And with former presidents Levon Ter Petrosian, Serzh Sargsyan and Kocharian failing to unite or even cooperate, the opposition only magnified its own weak appeal and discredited standing. Yet overall, the election was an example of renewed legitimacy, the election was further able to demonstrate that political stability and democratic resiliency was able to overcome post-war insecurity in Armenia. In this context, the reelection of Pashinyan and his party was more than simply a fresh mandate for the incumbent, but also a vindication and victory of Armenia’s institutional democracy.

Armenia’s Post-Election Challenges

Beyond that election win and besides the achievement of a free and fair contest, the euphoria of victory for the incoming government will evaporate quickly, however. And for both Pashinyan and his party, the post-election challenges that lie ahead are no less daunting and, in some ways, even more difficult.

A Polarized Parliament. The immediate challenge awaiting the new Pashinyan government is political. In this context, the new incoming parliament will still reflect the deep political polarization of the campaign. Politics will be marked by confrontation and conundrum, with the parliament as the arena for conflict pitting the opposition against the government. Although the opposition garnered significantly fewer votes and, therefore, less seats than they expected or promised, as opposition front runner, the electoral bloc of former President Robert Kocharian is far from defeated. Buoyed by just over 21 percent of the vote, this opposition “Armenia Alliance” bloc holds 29 seats in the new 107-seat parliament.

In addition, another opposition party, the “I Have Honor” bloc affiliated with former President Serzh Sargsyan, will also enter the new parliament, with 7 seats, albeit due to a constitutional concession. Interestingly, with a meager 5.2 percent of the vote, this second opposition bloc failed to surpass the threshold of minimum votes necessary to gain representation in the parliament but benefited from the constitutional requirement of having at least three parties in parliament.

And with an added degree of either irony or drama, both parliamentary opposition parties will be dominated by two former two-term presidents. By virtue of both Serzh Sargsyan, the victim of Pashinyan’s “Velvet Revolution” of 2018, and Robert Kocharian, the elusive target of Pashinyan’s wrath, the opposition is endowed with two decades of experience. But the outlook for the opposition is not as assured as asserted. For one, the two former presidents are hobbled by their own tense relationship, confirmed by their failure to unite against the government for the election. In fact, this factor only helped to re-elect the Pashinyan government, as the broader anti-government electorate was seriously split, thereby dividing opposition votes between four different

and competing opposition parties and blocs. And by running separate and even dueling campaigns, the mutual animosity of the opposition leaders was seen to be as deep and as divisive as their hatred of Pashinyan. This also suggests an incapacity to coordinate legislative strategy against the government that would further undermine their parliamentary potential to obstruct or oppose Pashinyan in the months to come.

And even if they could bridge their personal divide, their combined total of 36 seats is still less than needed for exercising any real power in parliament. Ironically, one decision where both men agree is to not serve as deputies. But this will only further weaken their position in the coming partisan warfare within parliament. While Sargsyan opted to serve as leader but not as candidate for his opposition bloc, former President Kocharian has expressed disdain for his mandate, revealing that a seat in parliament would be beneath his stature as former president.

An Obstructionist Opposition Strategy. Against that backdrop, the more possible scenario involves a new parliament marked more by hostile confrontation than any legislative compromise. Rather, reflecting a more destructive anti-establishment posture, the opposition will revert to its original political strategy of resignation over election. More specifically, that initial strategy, pursued by the opposition right up until Pashinyan decided to resign and trigger an early election, was focused on one pressing priority: the resignation of Pashinyan and his government.

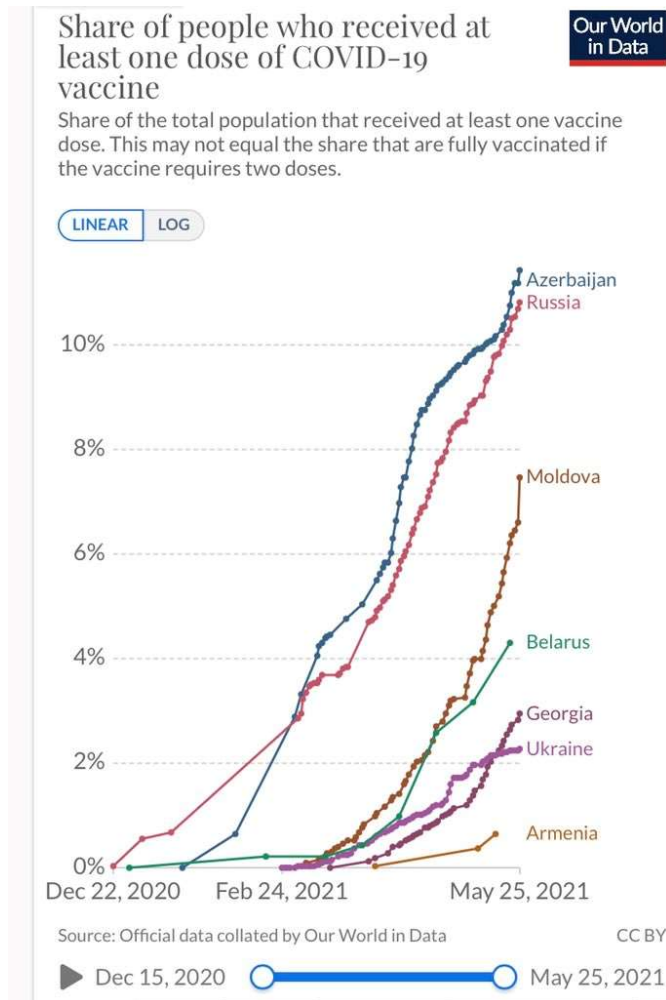
Therefore, by reverting to that original objective, the opposition is expected to obstruct policies, disrupt votes and derail legislative procedures within parliament, while seeking to sabotage the government at every turn. But with the incoming Pashinyan party holding just one vote short of an outright two-thirds super majority, such opposition moves are more likely to damage the public policy process and impede governance than to inflict any lasting injury on the government.

Three Pressing Priorities

But beyond the immediate political challenge, the next Pashinyan government will also have to manage a set of looming policy priorities. In a broader sense, the outcome of the election and the fresh mandate for the government brought only a temporary respite. Unprecedented challenges, ranging from pronounced post-war insecurity to the lingering impact of COVID-19, demand immediate political attention and urgent policy initiatives. And more narrowly, as important as this recent early election was, it was not enough to address the deeper deficiencies in governance in Armenia, such as a lack of institutional checks and balances and a reform program imperiled.

In terms of public policy, the three main imperatives are clear. First, post-war insecurity demands a new Armenian diplomatic strategy, based on the inclusion of a more innovative and flexible adoption and adaptation of diplomatic tactics in pursuit of defined national interests and in defense of “end state” objectives. The second imperative stems from post-war uncertainty and is rooted in the need for a new direction in defense reform, incorporating “after action” assessments and military “lessons learned” based on a critical review of the unexpected severity of the losses in the 2020 war for Nagorno Karabakh. And each of these two imperatives require a coherent strategic vision that has been lacking to date.

While there has been dangerously little real progress in either area, the third imperative is equally significant. While this policy imperative actually pre-dates the Karabakh war, it involves a different kind of war: the public health war against the Coronavirus pandemic. And in this regard, the government must confront the impact of the health crisis and the distressingly low level of vaccination in the country (see chart below), but also plan for the essential economic recovery from the pandemic.



The Risk of “Self-Inflicted Wounds”

At the same time, there is a further danger facing Armenia, which stems neither from the political opposition nor from the pressing policy challenges. This risk originates from the government itself, demonstrated by the risk of “self-inflicted wounds.” Moreover, given a record of impulsive and often reckless leadership, it is Prime Minister Pashinyan himself who poses the most serious risk to his standing. This is a risk derived from the temptation for Pashinyan to pursue vendetta politics, engaging in political retribution and personal revenge that may undermine his own legitimate government and unravel the hard-fought democratic gains in governance since 2018.

And as important as this free and fair election was, it is not enough to resolve the deeper deficiencies and shortcomings impeding the system of governance in Armenia. For one, political polarization is only likely to linger, with the parliament as the new arena for confrontation between the small opposition and the government. Thus, despite the notable affirmation of Armenia’s democratic resilience, this recent election is only the first step in a much more daunting and difficult path to sustainable post-war stability and durable institutional democracy, along which no amount of wishful thinking or misplaced exceptionalism can effectively manage or mitigate.

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