

Armenia's Next Government

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Incumbent Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won the most votes in Sunday's parliamentary elections by far though it's unclear at the time of writing whether he has enough to form a government, but in any case, there are top five priorities that the next administration should focus on in order to improve the situation for everyday Armenians.

Pashinyan Pounds The Opposition

The latest [snap parliamentary elections](#) in Armenia last Sunday saw incumbent Prime Minister Pashinyan's Civil Contract party come out far and ahead of its rivals with almost 54% of the vote, though it's unclear at the time of writing whether he passed that crucial threshold in order to form a government. Some tallies have him just 0.08% short of that constitutional benchmark while an election official [said](#) the day afterward on Monday that he had actually just passed it. The second-place finisher, former President Robert Kocharyan's Armenian Alliance, only obtained around 21% of the vote though they've publicly alleged that fraud might have been committed. These accusations might delay the final results and create some political turbulence in the short term, but they probably won't result in Pashinyan's lead being reduced by much, if at all.

The Karabakh Context

The elections were basically a referendum on Pashinyan, the Western-friendly Color Revolutionary who rose to power in 2018 on the back of large-scale protests that he helped organize. He campaigned on fighting corruption and improving the lives of everyday Armenians, both of which he failed to do. Even worse, he embroiled his country in another war over Azerbaijan's universally recognized western region of Nagorno-Karabakh late last year which resulted in Armenia's dismal defeat. Its servicemen were saved from certain slaughter solely through the decisive diplomatic intervention of their Russian allies who helped mediate a ceasefire agreement in early November. Their loss of control over this territory that they've always contentiously claimed as their historic own was psychologically traumatic for every Armenian.

Negative Narratives

The aftermath of that conflict ironically saw large-scale protests organized against Pashinyan who himself had come to power through such means. His security services were able to successfully quell the unrest, but he ultimately felt pressured to call for snap elections in order to see whether he still has his people's support to continue governing. His opponents were more nationalistically inclined and some even accused him of being personally responsible for their country's recent defeat. The emerging narrative ahead of the elections was that he's actually a threat to not only Armenia's national security, but perhaps even its very existence. As the latest results showed, however, the majority of voters didn't agree with this interpretation of events even if they're still extremely saddened by their loss of control over what had previously been a fifth of Azerbaijani territory.

The Zangezur Corridor

Extrapolating upon this, it can be said that they voted for continuity and stability, intending to give Pashinyan the mandate to continue his domestic reforms and move ahead with their country's obligations under [last November's Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement](#). These importantly include unblocking all economic and transport links in the region, especially between Western Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic. Azerbaijan regards that particular clause as mandating the establishment of what it calls the Zangezur Corridor while Armenia contests that description. Pashinyan had hitherto procrastinated on his country's obligation to open up that corridor, perhaps as some speculated in order to appeal to some nationalists ahead of Sunday's snap parliamentary elections who suspected that it would compromise Armenia's sovereignty.

Border Issues

Recent border issues between the rival nations also figured prominently in the run-up to the vote, with Armenia and Azerbaijani accusing one another of violating their mutual frontier which had yet to be formally delineated as a result of the [Karabakh Conflict](#) which exploded in the years prior to their independence. Some observers also speculated that these disputes were provoked by Armenia itself in order for Pashinyan to appear tough and thus court some nationalist voters away from the opposition. Others, however, blamed Azerbaijan for putting pressure on Pashinyan during the most politically sensitive time of his career. Whatever one's interpretation of events may be, it's clear that Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan - and particularly as they manifested themselves through Pashinyan's policies - were the most important electoral issue.

Bungled "Balancing"

It should also be mentioned that Armenia recently sought to "balance" Russia's influence in the country by more actively reaching out to France in the aftermath of last year's conflict. Pashinyan had originally campaigned on lessening Armenia's dependence on its historical Russian strategic partner though he'd hitherto been unable to make much progress on this front owing to how closely integrated these two countries have become over the past few decades since their independence from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it seemed to some that he was finally trying to make good on this prior promise by taking advantage of the anger that some of his compatriots felt towards Russia's refusal to militarily support the continuation of their illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territory, ergo Pashinyan's latest outreaches which ultimately didn't lead to anything tangible.

Armenia's Top Five Priorities

With Pashinyan likely remaining at the helm of the next government, either led entirely by his own party or in partnership with another one in order to pass the 54% constitutional threshold for leading the country, it's clear that there are five priorities that Armenia should focus on in the immediate future. The country is caught in a very difficult situation largely of its own making. It'll therefore require effective leadership, visionary thinking, patience, and perhaps even a little bit of sacrifice from its people in order to comprehensively improve the situation for everyone with time. There's no better moment than the present to get started on the hard work that's surely ahead, especially considering the mandate that Pashinyan once again received from his people. That being the case, these should be the top five priorities for Armenia's next government:

1. Fully Implement The Terms Of Last November's Russian-Mediated Ceasefire Agreement

There is no realistic alternative to fully implementing the terms of last November's Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement if Armenia desires to save its struggling economy. Whether one chooses to call it the Zangezur Corridor or whatever else, this route must be opened as soon as possible so that the country can begin benefiting from its geo-economic destiny as one of the South Caucasus' chief transit hubs. The concerns of some nationalists that Armenia's sovereignty might be compromised by doing so are groundless since the ceasefire agreement stipulates that Russia's Border Guard Services will be responsible for control over transport communication. Moreover, Armenia's mutual defense alliance with Russia through the CSTO means that Moscow will protect its partner from any speculative acts of aggression by either Azerbaijan or Turkey.

2. Refocus On Russia

It's understandable why Armenia would seek to balance between Great Powers in the New Cold War, but the country is too small and geopolitically contained to ever be able to do so effectively. In addition, it's also too closely integrated with Russia to ever realistically "decouple" from its ally without experiencing tremendous self-inflicted economic damage that could realistically provoke a genuinely grassroots Color Revolution against whichever government would dare to attempt this. While some Armenians might still be bitter that Russia didn't militarily support the continuation of their illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territory despite having no such obligation to do so, they must nevertheless accept that their fate is forever tied with Russia's. Refocusing on relations with the Eurasian Great Power is therefore the only realistic grand strategy for Armenia.

3. Continue Waging The Anti-Corruption Campaign

Armenia's economy has been strangled by corruption, which is more responsible for its people's deteriorating living standards than anything else. It must therefore be completely wiped out if the country is ever to prosper once again. The failure to do so will only leave Armenia economically handicapped and forever unable to fully benefit from its geo-economic destiny as one of the South Caucasus' chief transit hubs. That being the case, Armenia also mustn't use its anti-corruption campaign as a cover for cracking down on the opposition. There will likely be cases where opposition members are involved in corruption, but these must be publicly proven beyond any reasonable doubt lest the people begin to suspect Pashinyan of ulterior motives for cleaning up the country.

4. Curtail & Counteract Pernicious Ultra-Nationalist Influences (Including From Abroad)

Some members of Armenian society have fallen under the influence of ultra-nationalist narratives in the aftermath of their country's traumatizing loss in last year's conflict, but the latest elections show that they still remain in the minority. These individuals could pose latent domestic and international security threats if they become radicalized and decide to attack their own government or Azerbaijan's. While some degree of ultra-nationalist sentiment always existed just under the surface of Armenian society, members of the diaspora and some of their allies abroad are clearly manipulating these feelings for ideological reasons. Their efforts must be curtailed and counteracted with creative narratives which address these people's somewhat understandably nationalist reaction to last year's war but also seek to gradually deradicalize them.

5. Promote A New National Narrative

The final priority of Armenia's next government should be to promote a new national narrative that respects the historical one but also concentrates more on a positive outlook for the future than dwelling so much on the past's many traumas. Armenia has to move ahead in spite of its history, and it finally has the chance to do so with the unblocking of regional economic and transport corridors. Instead of being landlocked, the country can become land-linked just like Laos (which first popularized this concept). The comparatively freer movement of goods and people throughout the region will inevitably bring benefits to Armenia, which can then be invested into improving the living standards for all of its people if these are properly managed by the new government. At all costs, Armenia must look towards the future and take tangible steps to inspire optimism in its people.

Concluding Thoughts

Armenia's disastrous loss in last year's Karabakh Conflict was a turning point in its post-independence history. For as traumatic as it was for every Armenian, they need to accept that the outcome is irreversible. Dwelling on speculative scenarios of what could have been done better won't help everyone move past what happened like they urgently need to do. Now's the time for the country's next government to take Armenia into the future, which can only happen through the five suggested steps articulated in this analysis. The strategic situation has forever changed, and the sooner that Armenia acknowledges this, the better that it'll be. The country must learn to live within this new reality in order to not only survive but most importantly thrive, which is more credible of a possibility than ever if it finally embraces its geo-economic destiny with its Russian ally's help.

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