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Armenia

Last update:	27 June 2018
Population:	2,930.450 million (2017)
Prime minister:	Nikol Pashinian
President:	Armen Sarkissian
Governemental type:	Parliamentary republic
Ruling coalition:	Yelk Alliance
Last election:	8 May 2018 (prime minister elections, by parliament)
Next election:	Late 2018
Sister parties:	Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutsyun

In 2013, Armenia failed in its attempt to sign an EU Association Agreement. Instead the country became a full member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, under what is believed to be Russian pressure. Nevertheless, Armenia continues to seek deeper cooperation with the EU, and in 2017 signed an agreement in lieu of an Association Agreement, which will be less far reaching. The country remains strongly dependent on Russia in terms of energy supply and security, which is the main obstacle for further integration with the West. Russia's military presence is very important because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan which has been ongoing for some extent since the last 1980s with not much outlook to settle a peace agreement.

Internally, Armenia's political climate has been uprooted by the mass protests dubbed Velvet Revolution that took place in April/May 2018, which resulted in deposing a president and government led by the Republican party for some 15 years. The mass protests were triggered by the announcement that then President Serzh Sargsyan would be seeking the post of PM after all, despite his earlier pledges not to. Sargsyan had overseen a constitutional amendment, accepted through a referendum in 2015, which transferred Armenia into a parliamentary republic in April 2018, at the same time as the election of the new prime minister. Most of the president's power will be carried over to the new prime minister and his cabinet. The opposition had been critical, believing that this is simply an attempt by Serzh Sarkisian to remain in power in a different capacity after the end of his second and final presidential term. They were proven right with his sudden turnaround, triggering mass protests led by opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan. After weeks of protests Sargsyan was forced to resign, and Pashinyan was elected PM. His new government has named early parliamentary elections as a top priority. In the meantime it has announced reforms and began a crackdown on corruption.

Political Situation

The Republican Party of Armenia dominated Armenian politics for decades. Chairman of the party, Serzh Sargsyan, became president in 2008. Under his rule, the grip of the party and its strongman over the country was solidified. Even though elections were generally viewed as fair and free, they weren't competitive and there were many allegations of vote buying. The ruling party government with a majority in parliament, marginalizing the opposition. During the 2017 parliamentary elections, many parties in parliament lost all their seats. The Republican Party won an absolute majority and entered a coalition with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D), as it had in 2012.

In this climate, protests sparked by civic initiatives became very common in Armenia's capital Yerevan and Gyumri and Vanadzor, the second and third largest cities. These initiatives mainly have been organised by a post-Soviet generation of young civic activists without any political party affiliation, and address a range of issues including the environment, cultural preservation, consumer rights, prices of basic commodities, labour and employment issues, as well as human rights.

Although civic initiatives in Armenia address very specific and sometimes narrowly focused issues (e.g. saving a waterfall, public park. preventing a public transport price hike etc.). their emergence is informed by and articulates much broader concerns about

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corruption, the absence of rule of law, lack of democracy, rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of formal political elites to address the concerns of ordinary Armenian citizens. The introduction and spread of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, as well as live-streaming technology has allowed civic activists to access information more easily and to organise and mobilise much more effectively and rapidly. Most of the initiatives of recent years – with the biggest ones up until 2018 under the hashtags #NoToPlunder or #ElectricYerevan - have been at least partly successful.

Velvet revolution

In early April 2018 outgoing President Sargsyan was nominated by his ruling Republican Party as candidate for the post of Prime Minister. With an absolute majority in parliament, there was no doubt he would then be elected. This move was highly controversial. Sargsyan just ended his second and final presidential term in April 2018. During his term, he and the Republican party launched an initiative that would change the constitution and transfer crucial powers from the President to the PM. The opposition from the very start feared this was simply a ploy for Sargsyan to remain in power as PM, but when the constitutional changes were accepted during a referendum, Sargsyan had explicitly pledged not to seek the post of PM. When he did after all, in late March 2018, the move underlined the corruption and nepotism that had only solidified under Sargsyan's rule.

In reaction to the nomination, opposition called for protests. Most notable was Nikol Pashinyan, MP and one of the leaders of Yelk, an opposition alliance of three parties (including Pashinyan's own Civil Contract party), with 9 seats in parliament. In the following days large crowds gathered in central Yerevan, blocking its streets and intersections. This culminated in a march on parliament when Sargsyan was officially elected as PM in a parliament session, while the crowds faced off with a police cordon outside.

Apart from a couple of small clashes and some hard-handed arrests there were practically no cases of mass beatings or crackdowns. Within days the protests had not only spread to the outskirts of Yerevan but also to other cities and towns across the country. Attempted talk between Pashinyan and Sargsyan on April 22nd ended with the latter walking out after 3 minutes, angered by the presence of journalists and Pashinyan's insistence on his resignation. After the talks Pashinyan and most leaders of the protest were arrested. Instead of demotivating the protesters, this caused a massive outpouring of unprecedented numbers of people into the streets, with students taking over the lead as the politicians were jailed.

Under this massive public pressure Sargsyan resigned his post while Pashinyan was released alongside other protest leaders hours earlier on 23rd April. The ruling Republican Party was not yet ready to give in, however. Calling for new PM elections within several days the party held on to its power. Pashinyan called for continues protests. Talks between the government and protest leader broke down on April 25. Pashinyan, enjoying the support of all parliamentary opposition parties and even former coalition partner of the Republican Party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, announced his candidacy for PM. The vote on May 1st was inconclusive. The Republican Party didn't bring forward their own candidate, while refusing to support Pashinyan. A new vote was set for May 8th. Finally, under continuing protests and increasing public pressure on its MPs, the Republican Party agreed to provide the needed votes in parliament for Pashinyan to become PM. The party said it would do so not out of support for Pashinyan, but in order to avoid a political crisis. Pashinyan won the vote on May 8th with 59 votes against 42. As Prime Minister, Pashinyan, promised to hold snap election as soon as possible, and hoped to do so by late 2018.

Human Rights

Reports show that human rights violations remain an important issue in Armenia. The former authorities interfered in a number of peaceful protests that took place throughout the years. In several instances, police dispersed protesters using force. Local human rights defenders continued to raise concern over high numbers of reported beatings and ill-treatment in police custody.

The US State Department has noted "systemic corruption" as one of the most frequent and serious forms of human rights violation in Armenia, saying the former authorities were not doing enough to tackle it. Local anti-graft watchdogs like the Anti-Corruption Center (ACC), which operates as the Armenian branch of Transparency International, was highly sceptical about former government's assurances of intention to tackle corruption. Armenia ranked 107th out of 174 countries and territories evaluated in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

The post-revolutionary government of PM Nikol Pashinyan has made human rights and a fight against corruption its key points, next to eradicating monopolies and separating business from politics.

Violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are serious problems as well. A few incidents were recorded when women's rights activists were threatened and assaulted, as well as threats made to Women's Resource Centre

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following its calls for gender equality legislation. The anti-discrimination draft bill, prohibiting all forms of discrimination, was abandoned after the former government initiated the process to join the Eurasian Economic Union. While PM Pashinyan has singled out the role of women in the Velvet Revolution, and expressed hope it was only the beginning of women's active participation in politics, his cabinet includes only 2 female ministers of 20 total. He has apologized for this when confronted.

According to a Reporters Without Borders' report regarding freedom of the media, there is a significant degree of pluralism and relatively little state censorship, as a law prohibits censorship in media. But still, there are laws through which defamation and libel can be punished by prison terms. Journalists have faced pressure, violence and charges under such laws. While it is too early to say whether and how the new government will affect change in this regard, it should be noted that PM Pashinyan, himself a former journalist, has so far been notably public and accessible to the media.

Armenia - EU relations

In the wake of a positive conclusion to four years of negotiations between Armenia and the EU on an Association Agreement, it seemed that Armenia could start to look forward to deeper cooperation with the EU, which would hopefully bring strong economic and political benefits. However, only months before the planned signing of the Association Agreement, President Serzh Sarkisian, after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, suddenly decided to make Armenia a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) instead, thereby precluding the AA. On 2 January 2015, Armenia became a full member of EEU. The move is widely believed to be the result of strong Russian pressure in the areas of economy, energy and security. Since then, negotiations on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement were concluded on 26 February 2017, which reaches less far than the originally planned agreement but substitutes it in certain areas. It replaces the former EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

Armenia and the EU are committed to further cooperation aimed at the continuous improvement of areas including democratic institutions and judiciary, promotion of human rights and rule of law, good governance, fight against corruption, strengthening of the civil society, and others.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory called Nagorno-Karabakh. An Armenian populated enclave within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, has been de facto independent from Azerbaijan since the war in the early 1990s, that ended with a truce signed in 1994. The now 'frozen conflict' has been ongoing for over two decades without a peace agreement. There are still frequent shootings across the frontline, with dozens of deaths each year. Each side blames the other for military casualties. The latest escalation was the so-called "April war", in April 2016, when an attack by Azerbaijani forces resulted in some small territory loss for the Armenian side.

Azerbaijan lost swathes of territory during the conflict, and more than 600,000 ethnic Azeris from Karabakh and nearby regions were forced to flee. More than 300,000 ethnic Armenians who used to live in Azerbaijan were also displaced by the conflict. Internationally, Nagorno-Karabakh is considered part of Azerbaijan, but its Armenian inhabitants call themselves citizens of the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic. Although self-governed, it depends financially and militarily on Armenia.

Peace negotiations mediated by the Minsk Group, under the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), have seen little progress.

Frustrated by the lack of a diplomatic solution, Azerbaijan's leadership has threatened to retake the territory militarily. Armenia believes that the conflict settlement should be based on the Nagorno-Karabakh people's right to self-determination and uninterrupted land communication with Armenia, under jurisdiction of the Armenian side. Armenia also seeks international guarantees for the security of Nagorno-Karabakh. Not stabilizing the regional conflict, both countries have different supporters who are entangled in the dispute. Turkey has promised to stand with Azerbaijan while Russia pledged to defend Armenia. Furthermore, the conflict affects oil and gas exports from the region, since Azerbaijan produces much of the resources which are being exported to Europe and Central Asia.

Elections

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Electoral System Armenia will change to a parliamentary representative republic in April 2018 after constitutional changes were adopted in 2015 following a controversial referendum with a voter turnout of only 51 percent, barely enough to make the vote valid. The president will remain the head of state and the head of government, but will hold mainly ceremonial powers. The executive power is exercised by the government, with the prime minister having the most influential position. The legislative power is exerted by both the government and the parliament. The parliament - National Assembly - consists of 101 MPs that are directly elected every five years through a two-tier proportional system which includes national and district candidates. Regulations are based on the constitution and the Electoral Code, amended in 2005. It also rules on details like the proportion of female and male MPs in the National Assembly and the voting eligibility for Armenians living abroad. The country has a multi-party-system, with a government usually consisting of a coalition, even if just a symbolic one: the ruling party usually manages to garner a majority on its own. The threshold to enter the parliament is 5% for single parties and 7% for blocs.

The constitutional referendum of 2015, which will turn Armenia into a parliamentary republic, has been critically viewed by the opposition. Outgoing president Serzh Sarkisian introduced the change and it is widely believed that he did so to remain in power in a different capacity after his final presidential term ends in 2018.

Parliamentary Elections

On 2 April 2017, Armenia held parliamentary elections, which brought a large victory for the ruling party, giving the Republican Party (Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun, HHK) of president Serzh Sarkisian an absolute majority in parliament. The HHK successfully entered a coalition with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D), which gained 6,6% of the vote, repeating the situation in 2012, when the two parties also formed a coalition. Main opposition alliance led by millionaire Gagik Tsarukyan won 27.3% of the votes, and the new opposition Yelk (Way Out) Alliance about 7%.

This leaves several parties and alliances, such as the Free Democrats Party, Armenian Renaissance Party, Communist Party of Armenia, Armenian National Congress-People's Party of Armenia Alliance and the Ohanyan-Raffi-Oskanian Alliance without any seats in the parliament. These were the last elections before Armenia changes from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system. This parliament will be the first parliament to have more power than the president.

Campaign The campaign was very heated, which is the result of the changed electoral system, making the parliament more powerful. Another development, the competition between candidates of the same party, is the result of the 2016 Electoral Code, allowing up to 15 candidates from each party in each of Armenia's voting districts, instead of only one candidate. Due to this extra competition, more incidents of violence were reported: Supporters of a candidate of the HHK allegedly beat up the campaign manager of another HHK candidate from the same district. In addition to the question whether parties were oriented towards the West or more pro-Russian, the common theme throughout all the campaigns were the economic problems that Armenians face in their day-to-day lives.

Aftermath About 60 percent of Armenians voted in the parliamentary elections. While some opposition leaders immediately claimed fraud, the aftermath of the elections was remarkably calm. This had to do with the new Electoral Code, which was amended to prevent fraudulent practices during the elections under a historic deal reached between the opposition and the ruling party. It allowed the installation of 1500 webcams in the polling stations, as well as the introduction of electronic voter authentication devices with finger-print recognition software. The technical equipment was paid for by the European Union and the United States. There were some technical problems, including the devices being unable to even recognize the fingerprint of president Sarkisian. Also, online live streams of the webcams at the polling stations was unavailable during the morning. Yet, it seems to be one of the most credible elections in years in Armenia.

Results Elections 2017

Party	Percentage	Seats
Republican Party of Armenia (HHK)	49.17%	58
Tsarukyan Alliance	27.35%	31
Yelk Alliance	7.78%	9
Armenian Revolutionary Federation-	6.58%	7

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Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D)		
Armenian Renaissance	3.72%	0
Ohanyan-Raffi-Oskanian Alliance	2.07%	0
Free Democrats Party	0.94%	0
Armenian Communist Party	0.75%	0
Armenian National Congress-People's Party of Armenia Alliance	1.66%	0

Presidential Elections

On 2 March the National Assembly elected the country's next president Armen Sarkissian (no relation to Serzh Sarkisian). Sarkissian was nominated for the post by the outgoing President Serzh Sarkisian and the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) in January 2018. He was also endorsed by the HHK's junior coalition partner, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), and businessman Gagik Tsarukian's alliance, which is officially in opposition to the government.

To win the election he needed three quarters of the parliamentarians to vote for him. Of those 79 seats, the ruling HHK and Dashnaktsutyun together have 65. 100 parliamentarians participated in the voting, 90 of them voting for and 10 against Sarkissian. Therefore, the faction led by businessman Gagik Tsarukian sided with the ruling parties, as already expected due to its missing support for the opposition Yelk alliance in going to court against the election. Important to notice are the three MPs of the HHK, Dashnaktsutyun and/or Tsarukian Bloc who voted against Sarkissian, noticeable because only 7 Yelk members participated in the vote. The election was held through secret ballot, so that the MPs remain unknown.

The opposition Yelk alliance, the fourth political group represented in parliament, has rejected Sarkissian's candidacy. In a joint statement with several nongovernmental organizations it doubted his eligibility because, according to the constitution, one can only be elected if he or she has been an Armenian citizen for the past six years leading up to the election. Sarkissian, a former ambassador to the United Kingdom, has said he renounced his British citizenship in 2011 to re-adopt his Armenian passport, but the opposition found that a British local magazine published a record from the UK registry of companies referring to Sarkissian as a British national in 2014. The opposition has demanded proof of his claims from British authorities but since now he has failed to give it. As of March 2018, the issue has not been solved. Sarkissian's presidential term will begin on 9 April.

Social Democratic Parties

Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D)

Party Leader: the party is led by a Supreme Council

Number of seats: 7 (elections 2017)

<http://www.arfd.info/>

The Armenian Revolution Federation was established in 1890 in Tbilisi. During the First Armenian Republic established in 1918 the party was in power, but it was banned following the Sovietisation of 1920. The party, however, continued to function in the diaspora. The party was reintroduced in Armenia after 1988, but was banned in 1994 by then President Levon Ter-Petrosyan on allegations of terrorism. The president took this and other allegations (following the constitution) to the Supreme Court. The Court concurred only with one of the president's accusations, that the ARF broke the Law on Parties by having non-Armenian citizens in its leadership. In 1998 then-president Robert Kocharian re-allowed the party and asked it to support him in his campaign for the presidential elections. The support was, however, more pragmatic than ideological. The ARF aims for "the creation of a free,

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independent and united Armenia” and is prominent in Nagorno-Karabakh, the break-away region of Azerbaijan de facto independently governed by local Armenians. The “Dashnaks” hope to once reunite the entire Armenian diaspora on the united Armenian lands. The party therefore is popular among the diaspora Armenians and receives much financial support from them. The main objectives of the party are the establishment of a minimum wage of 50,000 Drams, the establishment of an anti-corruption entity, and a minimum retirement benefit.

The party describes itself as essentially national, socialist, democratic and revolutionary. It is based on social justice, democracy and national self-determination for the Armenian people. The ARF is internationally recognised as a social democratic party, and became a full member of the Socialist International (SI) in 2003. Currently, the party is seeking to intensify the relationship with the Party of European Socialists (PES) and has officially the status of an observer.

The ARF has an extensive network of local organisations, also beyond the Armenian borders, and is structurally well-functioning.

Other Parties

Republican Party (Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaksutyun) (HHK)

Party Leader: Serzh Sarkisian

Number of seats: 58 (elections 2017)

<http://www.hhk.am/en/>

The conservative Republican Party (HHK) was founded in 1990, and sees itself as the follower of the ideas of the Armenian national hero Gareghin Nzhdeh. According to his teachings, the trust in the nation's power, will, capacities, and future depends on the recognition of the nation. The party therefore stresses the importance of the nation over other religious, social or partisan entities.

The party has its roots in the National Independence Party founded in the 1970s in Soviet Armenia, pursuing Armenia's independence as its goal. The main founder, Ashot Navasardian, as well as former and now deceased leader Andranik Margaryan, were political prisoners in Soviet times. Current leader Serzh Sarkisian hails from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Political stability is the biggest interest for the HHK. Other important issues are the growth of the country's GDP, of its employment rate and its retirement payments. The party is conservative in its values, but rather neo-liberal in its economic policies. In 1998, the comparably small HHK was joined by the political branch of the Yerkrepah Union, an organisation of Karabakh war veterans, and became one of the more influential parties of Armenia.

The HHK has been in governance since 1998, when it was part of the Unity bloc, a coalition with the People's Party. This bloc was dissolved in 2001 as a result of different opinions about new president Kocharian. After the 2003 elections, the HHK became the biggest party in parliament when many non-partisan MPs aligned with it. These parliamentarians generally are from the wealthy local elites and have the same interests as HHK: stability in their powerful position. The party has been in power ever since. The 2017 parliamentary elections were again won, leading to the formation of a coalition with the social-democratic Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D).

Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK)

Party Leader: Naira Zohrabyan

Number of seats: 31 (elections 2017)

<http://www.bhk.am/en>

The Prosperous Armenia Party was formed in January 2006 by millionaire businessman Gagik Tsarukyan, who used to be a close associate of the president. BHK is a liberal conservative party, and the core party of the Tsarukyan Bloc in the National Assembly, which includes smaller, lesser-known parties. The party started out as rather pro-presidential and traditionally supported the

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governmental side. After the 2007 elections, Prosperous Armenia formed a coalition with the HHK. During the 2012 elections, the party managed to win 37 seats. The BHK nevertheless chose not to join the governing coalition, but for some times avoided calling itself an opposition party. However, it gradually became more and more critical of especially the economic policies of the government. This climaxed in a short but tense standoff between Tsarukyan and president Sarkisian in March 2015, after which Tsarukyan stepped down and announced that he would quit active politics. Tsarukyan's successor, BHK MP Naira Zohrabyan, started rebranding BHK into a 'real' opposition party. However, in the most important issues, the party has so far sided with the government. In February 2017, shortly before the parliamentary elections, BHK declared that Tsarukyan would return as party leader.

Yelk (Way Out) Alliance (Yelk)

Party Leader: Edmon Marukyan, Nikol Pashinian, Aram Sarkisian

Number of seats: 9 (elections 2017)

Armenia's Yelk (Way Out) Alliance was created by Human Rights activist Edmon Marukyan as a way out from the socio-political crisis, after he was elected as a non-partisan candidate in the National Assembly during the elections of 2012. He and his party Bright Armenia formed an alliance with the leaders of the opposition Hanrapetutyun (Republic) Party and the Civil Contract party in December of 2016 and announced to run for the parliamentary elections in January of 2017. The leaders of the three parties are also the main leaders of Yelk: Edmon Marukyan, Nikol Pashinian and Aram Sarkisian.

Yelk declared at its founding that it will strive for a "European model of the democratic, rule-of-law and social state" and is thus clearly pro-European. This is a change of one of the alliance members, Civil Contract, which used to advocate a more neutral foreign policy. Yelk presents itself in other ways as a 'way out' to the normal politics: It has a strong focus on socio-economic problems, and announced it will seek a way out of the crisis. It also says it wants to offer people an alternative and give them the opportunity for radical changes.

In the parliamentary elections of 2 April 2017, the first national elections in which it participated, Yelk ended up in third place, gaining 7.8% of the votes and 9 seats in parliament. During the campaign for the parliamentary election, it was Civil Contract leader Nikol Pashinian who sought the spotlight the most.

Heritage (Zharangutiun)

Party Leader: Raffi K. Hovannisian

Number of seats: none (elections 2017)

<http://www.heritage.am/en/>

The Heritage party was founded in 2002 and nationally registered in 2005. It first competed in the national elections of 2007, in which they entered parliament with six seats.

Their foreign policy can be characterised as balanced, but also as pro-Western. The Heritage party underlines the good relationship with Russia, China and India, but sees European integration and cooperation as the key to progress. European integration is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool for improved well-being, prosperity and security. With Turkey, Heritage advocates an open and honest dialogue. Domestic policy goals are legal reforms, the development of civil society and the economic policy of Armenia. Heritage states that sustaining the competitiveness of the market helps the Armenian economy grow. Furthermore, the party believes that reducing poverty and building good social services are very important for the future of Armenia. By taking these measures, Heritage has the objective to reduce emigration from Armenia and stop the "brain drain" from the country.

Following President Sarkisian's 2013 last-minute decision to abandon the negotiated Association Agreement with the EU and opt instead for membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Union – widely believed to have been made under strong Russian pressure – Heritage strongly opposed this decision. Since the parliamentary elections in 2017, Heritage does not hold any seats in the National Assembly anymore.

Free Democrats

Party Leader: Khachatur Kokobelyan

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Number of seats: none (elections 2017)

The Free Democrats Party was led by Alexander Arzumanyan, starting as a faction that broke away from the opposition bloc Armenian National Congress (Hay Azgayin Kongress – HAK) in 2010. Alexander Arzumanyan used to be the first ambassador to the United States and to the United Nations, before serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs until 1998. He started this pro-European party which has relatively young members and members of parliament. Its current leader Khachatur Kokobelyan challenged the current move of the government towards Russia and membership of the Euroasian Economic Union. They are known as the most progressive party in Armenia, even presenting the first female presidential candidate in 2013, Anush Sedrakian.

In the last parliamentary elections of 2 April 2017, they were unable to gain seats in parliament on their own, receiving only 0.94% of the votes.

Armenian National Congress (Hay Azgayin Kongres) (HAK)

Party Leader: Levon Ter-Petrosyan

Number of seats: none (elections 2017)

<http://www.anc.am/>

After the 2012 parliamentary elections, Armenian National Congress gained 7 seats in the National Assembly. HAK is a coalition of 13 opposition parties in the Republic of Armenia, led by former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan and formed in 2008. The core party in the coalition is the Pan-Armenian National Movement. During the protests on 1 March 2008, the HAK played a major role in organising demonstrations and pushing for the government of President Serzh Sarkisian, who defeated Ter-Petrosyan in the 2008 election according to official results, to accept the demands of protesters. Those protests ended in clashes with the police, resulting in 10 deaths. HAK's main goals are to attain complete freedom of speech, access to media and assembly, to assure an independent investigation of the crimes of March 2008, initiate democratic reforms and hold a pre-term presidential and parliamentary elections.

Biographies

Serzh Sarkisian

Outgoing President

Born in 1954 in Nagorno-Karabakh, Serzh Sarkisian started his career as a metal turner, until he became head of the communist party's youth department. As tensions rose over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Sarkisian became chairman of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Self-Defence Forces Committee and was subsequently elected to the Supreme Council of Armenia in 1990. He organised several battles in the Nagorno-Karabakh War and is considered to be one of the founders of Nagorno-Karabakh's and Armenia's armed forces. Sarkisian started his national political career in Armenia in 1993, when he became the Armenian Defence Minister. In 2007 he became Prime Minister, but one year later he won the presidential elections, being widely considered to have been picked by his predecessor Robert Kocharian to succeed him. He had the backing of the ruling Republican Party in a strong victory in the first round. The elections were marred by violent protests that resulted in 10 deaths after clashes between police and protesters. Sarkisian became the third President of Armenia.

During his presidency he has pledged to comply with the Council of Europe's demands for an end to the government's crackdown on the opposition. In 2011 however, protests against Sarkisian started again. A striking moment for his presidency were the protocols with Turkey in 2009, aimed to normalise the relations between the two countries, and open the border between them which had been closed since 1994. The process, initiated by Sarkisian, was hailed as a unique chance from the beginning, but ended without any results, when Turkish authorities tied the normalisation process to a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the interest of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Sarkisian has made an appeal to the UN to help bring peace to Nagorno-Karabakh while warning for increasing war rhetoric from the Azerbaijani side.

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Under Sarkisian's rule, Armenia entered the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and tried to intensify cooperation with the EU. His second term will be his last as president, although it is widely believed that he will, against his promise, aspire the post as the new and empowered prime minister in April 2018.

Armen Sarkissian

President

Armen Sarkissian, born in 1953, will soon be the fourth president of Armenia, succeeding Serzh Sarkisian. After studying physics and mathematics in the United Kingdom, he worked at the Cambridge University and taught at Yerevan State University.

In 1991, he was appointed Armenia's very first ambassador to the UK. For a short time between 1996 and 1997 he served as the country's prime minister, then was appointed ambassador again for a second term, until 1999. After that he worked as an advisor and intermediary for British companies until he served as ambassador for his third term in 2013. He founded several international organizations and centres, as for example the Eurasia House International and the Eurasia Centre at the Judge Business School of the Cambridge University. He holds high positions at universities and institutes across the globe, including the East West Institute and the Harvard university.

For the presidential elections in March 2018, then president Serzh Sarkisian offered him to be candidate for the ruling HHK. Accepting the candidacy, he won the elections with 90 of 105 MP-votes for and 10 against him. His election remains controversial because of a dispute over his citizenship. Opposition groups claim he is not eligible to run for office because he might not have had Armenian citizenship for the past six years leading up to the election, which according to the constitution is a crucial criteria.

Levon Ter-Petrossian

Leader of Armenian National Congress

Lea Levon Ter-Petrossian (born in 1946) was the first president of Armenia (from 1991 to 1998) and the current leader of the Armenian National Congress (HAK). He was born in Aleppo, Syria, after which his family emigrated to Soviet Armenia. Ter-Petrossian holds degrees from the Yerevan State University and the Lenin State University.

In 1990, Ter-Petrossian became Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Armenia, after holding several high profile posts in the Armenian SSR. His popular election as first president of the newly independent Republic of Armenia followed a year later. In 1996, Ter-Petrossian was re-elected, though there were multiple allegations of electoral fraud, both reported by the opposition and international observers. He was forced to step down in February 1998 after advocating compromised settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which many Armenians regarded as undermining their security.

In September 2007, Ter-Petrossian made his first public speech in nearly ten years at an event in Yerevan marking the 16th anniversary of Armenia's declaration of independence. A month later, he announced his candidacy for the 2008 presidential elections, accusing the government of massive corruption. During the elections, which were held on 19 February 2008, Ter-Petrossian came in second with 21.5 percent of the votes. He and his supporters accused the government of rigging the election and claimed victory.

On 1 August 2008, Ter-Petrossian founded the HAK which included more than a dozen of political parties and NGOs.

The HAK leader did not run in the presidential elections of 2013. The party claimed that the participation in the election would be "legitimization of the illegal regime". His support went to Raffi Hovannisian, the main opposition candidate.

Gagik Tsarukyan

Leader of Tsarukyan Alliance

Gagik Tsarukyan was born in 1956 and is known for his wealth as a self-made man and former Olympic wrestler. His business concern Multi Group includes large companies in the alcohol, dairy and gas branch. He entered politics in the early 2000s, with his party Prosperous Armenia. He has very close ties to former President Robert Kocharyan, both as business partners and in politics. Some critics claim it was also Kocharyan who pushed Tsarukyan towards politics, saying that without his influence Prosperous Armenia would have never existed. In 2007, at entering national politics, Prosperous Armenia won 18 seats in the parliament.

During the years that followed, his party developed more and more as an opposition party, which eventually led to a clash between

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him and the president Serzh Sarkisian. The president accused him of parliamentary absenteeism and started to investigate his businesses and those of his allies. After this clash, Tsarukyan officially stepped down as political leader, leaving Prosperous Armenia to his right-hand Naira Zohrabyan and pulling back from political life, focussing entirely on his business empire.

A few months before the elections in April 2017, Tsarukyan returned to the political arena as leader of the Tsarukyan Alliance, which includes his own former party Prosperous Armenia and several smaller parties. It won 31 seats, and is the second strongest party after the ruling Republican Party (HHK). In the light of the controversial presidential election in March 2018, his alliance chose not to support the only other opposition party in parliament, the Yelk Alliance, in going to court against the candidate of HHK and the possible election of current president Serzh Sarkisian as next prime minister.

He remains in the position of a strong self-proclaimed opposition leader, although his actions have until now largely been supportive of the ruling parties. His business empire requires him to keep good contacts with the government elites, as it was seriously threatened during the 2012 clash.

Nikol Pashinian

Prime Minister

Nikol Pashinian, born in 1975, is one of the current three leaders of the opposition Yelk Alliance in Armenia's parliament. Being one of the loudest opposition voices, he has been holding a seat in the National Assembly since 2012.

Originally a journalist, he was the editor of The Armenian Times, which criticized Serzh Sarkisian's government. He started his political career within the movement of former president Levon Ter-Petrossian Armenian National Congress. Supporting him in the elections of 2008, which had a violent aftermath and charges against several politicians involved, led him to go into hiding. Later he returned himself in and was released like many other political prisoners in 2011.

After the elections of 2012 he became a member of the National Assembly. He remains a strong opponent of president Serzh Sarkisian's policy, criticising the 2015 referendum and the election of Sarkisian's handpicked successor.

Source

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