

## The Political System of Armenia: Form and Content

By David Petrosyan, Yerevan

### Abstract

Despite a promising start in the early 1990s, Armenia's political system has devolved toward authoritarianism. The terrorist attack on the Armenian National Assembly on October 27, 1999, resulting in the killing of the speaker and prime minister, ultimately made it possible for President Robert Kocharyan to concentrate power in his hands. He subsequently ignored a Constitutional Court ruling and held a variety of elections that were neither free nor fair. Under Kocharyan and his successor Serzh Sargsyan, Armenia is largely ruled by a clan that gained power during the 1992–94 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Currently, Armenia's three presidents, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Kocharyan, and Sargsyan, define the three poles within the political system.

### Armenian Politics since Independence

Like its post-Soviet neighbors, Armenia has never been a fully democratic country. However, in the course of the past 8–10 years, the democratic achievements of the 1990s, which saw the beginnings of a competitive political system, have gradually eroded and Armenia has evolved towards authoritarianism.

In theory Armenia fully subscribes to the principles of democracy and the majority of Armenia's legislative initiatives are approved by the Venetian Commission of the Council of Europe (CoE). Ironically, Armenia was accepted as a member of the CoE in 2001 – precisely at the time when the de-democratization process started.

One of the principle problems in contemporary Armenian politics has been the inability to establish free and fair elections. In the early 1990s, when an essentially Soviet political system was still in place in Armenia, Armenia elected its first multiparty parliament and president in a relatively democratic way. However, by the mid-1990s this process had begun to deteriorate. The parliamentary elections in 1995, the constitutional referendum in 1995 and the presidential election in 1996 were widely criticized as being conducted in an undemocratic manner. The same counts for the extraordinary presidential elections held in 1998.

The only exception was the 1999 parliamentary election, the results of which were accepted not only by Armenian society, but won high praise from various international monitoring missions, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE. However, the terrorist attack on the Armenian National Assembly on October 27, 1999, which resulted in the killings of parliamentary speaker Karen Demirchyan and Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan, effectively led to a transfer of power from the de facto dual command of

prime minister and parliamentary speaker to President Robert Kocharyan.

### Armenian Politics under President Robert Kocharyan

During his first presidential term (1998–2003), Kocharyan repressed human rights, closed alternative media outlets (in particular electronic media) and consolidated the ruling elite's hold on power. Most important was the government's control of the media. Both the political opposition and broadcasters beyond the control of the government lost access to the airwaves. The only exception was the independently financed regional TV broadcast GALA in Gyumri. Given the total control over the media by the Armenian authorities, the preservation of an independent regional media outlet is highly significant. The GALA broadcast is of reasonably high quality and ensures the provision of balanced information on current events in Armenia.

The 2003 presidential elections not only exacerbated the existing problems but also marked the emergence of new ones. In particular the executive and legislative branches both refused to comply with the decision adopted by the Constitutional Court on April 17, 2003, in a case brought by presidential candidate Stepan Demirchyan, the son of the murdered parliamentary speaker. The court ordered a referendum asking the people if they had confidence in the sitting president, but this decision was never implemented. Opposition demands that the government comply with the decision of the Constitutional Court and hold the referendum led to widespread use of force against opposition activists.

The fraudulent 2003 presidential election was followed by the falsification of the constitutional referendum in 2005, the parliamentary elections in 2007 and finally the presidential election in 2008. The latter ended in bloodshed on March 1, 2008, orchestrated by

the central authorities in Yerevan, as a result of which ten people died, according to official sources. The casualties were mostly civilians. While monitors such as the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the CoE's Parliamentary Assembly have criticized all elections since 1998, they have nevertheless recognized them.

### Armenian Clan Politics

In reality, Armenia's political system is based on a small group of clans and oligarchs, giving the country a corrupted form of government similar to the regimes found in Latin American after the Second World War. The core components of the oligarchic system are based within the defense, interior and national security ministries, through which huge financial sums were channeled largely unchecked during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1992–1994. Although the government claims to support the free market, key posts in the political system are distributed among a clan that has its roots in Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory which in Soviet times belonged to Azerbaijan and whose independence from Azerbaijan is not internationally recognized. While strictly speaking the majority of the members of this clan are not from Nagorno-Karabakh, they are forced to play according to the rules set by the heads of the clan, to which the second and third president of Armenia, Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serzh Sargsyan (since 2008), belonged. Sargsyan is a perfect example of this system since he is a native of Nagorno-Karabakh, who held positions as the Defense, Interior, National Security ministers and served as secretary of the National Security Council before acceding to the presidency.

Although the constitution of 2005 no longer allows the president to dismiss the prime minister at his discretion, the presidential post remains the key position in Armenia. Thus, real political power in Armenia remains concentrated in the hands of three key political figures: the acting president, Sargsyan, and the two former presidents—Kocharyan and Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991–98). In a sense this situation satisfies all three individuals, because it gives each of them the possibility to return to the presidency or remain in office. However, this system does not allow for the rise of new political figures, from either the governing coalition or the opposition. The cleansing of the political arena by Kocharyan and Sargsyan has essentially blocked the emergence of new political players who could rival the three presidents. Thus the paradigm of the domestic political process in Armenia has not changed over the past two years and

all factions, to one degree or another, are close to one of these three political poles.

### The Three Main Players in Armenian Politics

After two years as president, **Serzh Sargsyan** has not managed to consolidate his power. This failure can be attributed to his low level of public support, the lack of influential supporters among his backers, and former President Kocharyan's continuing control over several key political figures. Because he lacks full control of the governing system, Sargsyan cannot limit the influence of the former presidents. Furthermore, Sargsyan must repay too many political debts to his supporters, including some among the criminal community, thereby preventing him from establishing greater personal control over the political system and damaging his public support.

Unlike his predecessor, Sargsyan is the head of the ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which holds the majority in the parliament and, unlike other ruling parties in other countries of the former Soviet space, supports an ideological platform based on ethnic nationalism. However, the Republican Party has in practice become a trade union of bureaucrats from various backgrounds and the current members of the party seem not to care very much about the party's ideological orientation. It is significant to note that none of the founding fathers of the Republican Party remain in power.

**Robert Kocharyan** has maintained his influence in the government through a coalition that includes Deputy Prime Minister Armen Gevorgyan and his allies in powerful positions; the Prosperous Armenia party (*Bargavach Ayastan*) with its leader Gagik Tsarukyan; some factions from the *Dashnaktsutyun* party, i.e. the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which has traditionally been one of the staunchest supporters of Armenian nationalism, as well as some top-level politicians, such as Parliamentary Speaker Hovik Abrahamyan. However, Kocharyan's influence is limited by the possibility that the incumbent president may stop working with him and the risk that Ter-Petrosyan will come to power. Furthermore, Kocharyan faces the problem of limited foreign and domestic public support as a result of the events of March 1, 2008. Overall, Kocharyan's influence in the system has been declining.

Recent rallies and demonstrations organized by the extra-parliamentary opposition, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), and other actions involving **Levon Ter-Petrosyan** illustrate that public support for the first presi-

dent has grown. The rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic situation in Armenia has contributed to the strengthening of his position. In particular, Ter-Petrosyan has had a number of recent successes. First was the declaration by the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) that there are 14 political prisoners in Armenia and the appearance of the experts from the FIDH at rallies organized by the opposition. Additionally, the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) under its CoE mandate urged the Armenian authorities to hold a public enquiry into the events of March 1, 2008. Once the study was complete, the Committee questioned the authenticity of the authorities' investigation of these events. The CoE Monitoring Committee will examine the timetable for the reforms proposed by the authorities through the temporary parliamentary commission to study the events of March 1, 2008. In taking this action, the CoE Monitoring Committee accepted not only the authorities' proposals, but also those of the opposition.

### Main Political Parties

In addition to Armenia's main ruling party, the Republican Party, which was examined above, there are two additional parties in the three-party coalition government.

The **Rule of Law** party is a centrist political party led by Artur Baghdasaryan. Following the 2008 presidential election, Baghdasaryan was required to recognize the victory of Sargsyan and vow that he would not seek the presidency in future elections. The presidential administration also requested the same from the current speaker Abrahamyan.

Furthermore, in March 2008 two key members of the government, Gurgen Sargsyan from the ministry of transport and communications and Mher Shahgeldyan from the Ministry of Emergency Situations, left the Rule of Law party. Their posts were immediately filled by Sargsyan's allies. The new ministers appointed were the former head of the State Real Estate Committee and adviser to the Committee's president Manuk Vardanyan, and the former first deputy chief, Police Major-General Armen Yeritsyan, both of whom then became members of the Rule of Law party within hours. As Vardanyan and Yeritsyan are at best only nominally members of the Rule of Law party, the government, which previously consisted of representatives from three parties, de-facto transformed into a two-party coalition (Republican Party and Prosperous Armenia).

The **Prosperous Armenia** party is a political project founded by former President Kocharyan and led by the oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, who is a key business

partner of Kocharyan. Currently Prosperous Armenia is a de-ideologized organization trying to present itself as a kind of opposition force to the government. However, the party structure could be split at any time by the party president, and most of its supporters could be incorporated into a reformed ruling party. The Armenian authorities have extensive experience in these kinds of "transformations."

The main challenge to the ruling parties over the last ten years came from the **Armenian Revolutionary Federation – Dashnaktsutyun (ARF)**, which is an established political player, used to cooperating with the governing coalition. However, in April 2009 the ARF left the ruling coalition and was sent into "opposition" because of its disagreement over the policies of president Sargsyan on the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. However, the party representatives maintained the chairmanships of two key parliamentary committees (defense and security, and foreign affairs) due to their expertise in this field. The party exerts influence through its own TV station "Country," which broadcasts on the UHF frequency and is not subject to pressure from the authorities. Also, unlike the ANC, it is not restricted by the authorities when organizing public events (rallies, marches, meetings, etc). Members of the ARF also have unlimited access to government-controlled TV in contrast to the leaders of the Armenian National Congress or the Heritage Party (discussed below).

The ARF's political ideology is conservative-nationalistic and may be characterized by the following points:

- The party fully recognizes the legitimacy of the current administration of Serzh Sargsyan and does not demand early national elections.
- It does not recognize the existence of political prisoners in Armenia, claiming that all such individuals were sentenced correctly and that no political considerations were involved.
- It maintains that the events of March 1, 2008, have already been sufficiently investigated by the authorities, and rejects all claims to the contrary.
- Finally, it does not support the policy of the authorities in important political issues, such as the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations within the framework of the October 10, 2009 protocols signed in Zurich.

While Sargsyan's government tolerates the ARF and does not actively repress it, it heavily criticizes the **Heritage** party (*Zharangutyun*). The Heritage party can be considered the "real" parliamentary opposition and is led by Raffi Hovannisyan, a former US citizen who previously served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in

Armenia. The party heavily criticizes the administration for having little legitimacy. Moreover, the party continues to cooperate with the ANC in the fact-finding group to uncover the truth about what happened on March 1, 2008. The fact-finding group was originally established by presidential decree in autumn 2008 but dissolved in the summer of 2009. The opposition published a number of well-documented reports about the bloody events and the public expects the publication of the final report.

Heritage fights for the protection of human rights, the restoration of constitutional order in the country and for an impartial investigation and prosecution of all perpetrators of the bloody events of March 1. The party leaders' attempts to form a "third force" in Armenia or a dialogue between the three parties forming the government (Republican Party of Armenia, Rule of Law and Prosperous Armenia) and those in the opposition (Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Heritage and the ANC) has failed.

The extra-parliamentary **Armenian National Congress** includes 18 political parties supporting left, right and nationalist ideologies, as well as dozens of community organizations. Although it currently represents a minority of the population (10,000–40,000 people), its strength could increase ten-fold at any time. The ANC is headed by the first Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Its waiting game tactic is based on the parties' perception that although the current administration shows low levels of legitimacy, it satisfies the geopolitical interests of the main external players in the region (Brussels, Washington and Moscow). Although Ter-Petrosyan is not the most desirable figure for the foreign powers, he is acceptable to them. The ANC's main objective remains the restoration of the constitutional order in Armenia and the reform of the existing system. The main demands of the Armenian National Congress include:

- The immediate release of all political prisoners.
- The restoration of an independent "fact-finding group" to address the events of March 1, with the participation of international experts. A full investigation into this crime and punishment of the individuals involved.
- The removal of the restrictions on rallies, demonstrations and gatherings imposed after the March events.
- Free competitive TV broadcasting and the return of the independent TV station A1, in accordance with the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights.

- Reform of the Electoral Code (the ANC submitted 7 proposals)
- The holding of early presidential and parliamentary elections.

The ANC has also unveiled a program of socio-economic reforms to overcome the crisis in "100 Steps", which attracted considerable interest in the expert community.

### Conclusion

The main obstacles to real political and economic reform in Armenia are the low levels of legitimacy among the political players, the lack of a real separation of power, the high levels of corruption, the influence of the criminal underworld on Armenian politics and the close relations between the business community and the state bureaucracy.

Armenia needs a government which is elected in a free and fair process and thus able to gain the kind of legitimacy necessary to transform the country's flawed political system. The afore-mentioned "100 Steps" program, which is essentially an anti-oligarchic plan, could form the basis for this reform process.

A particular problem is the ties of Armenia's political elite to the clan structures of Nagorno-Karabakh. Since the elite originating in Nagorno-Karabakh is considered to be illegitimate, they are required to rely on representatives of their clan in order to maintain their hold on power in Armenia proper, thereby reinforcing the clan structures.

The current Western approach towards Armenia is one which follows *Realpolitik*. The promotion of democracy, civil liberties and human rights has been subordinated to a larger geopolitical agenda. The West has ignored the Armenian government's unwillingness to comply with the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights on the closure of the A1+ TV broadcasting service. The international community expects that the weak and illegitimate administration will succumb to the threat of sanctions and make concessions in the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations and the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

So far this optimism has not been justified. President Sargsyan is under pressure from other centers of power within Armenia which do not support the same goals as the West. The West needs to push for political and democratic reform in Armenia in order to regain the trust of the Armenian people. With its current policies, the West is in fact supporting the preservation of artificial reforms.

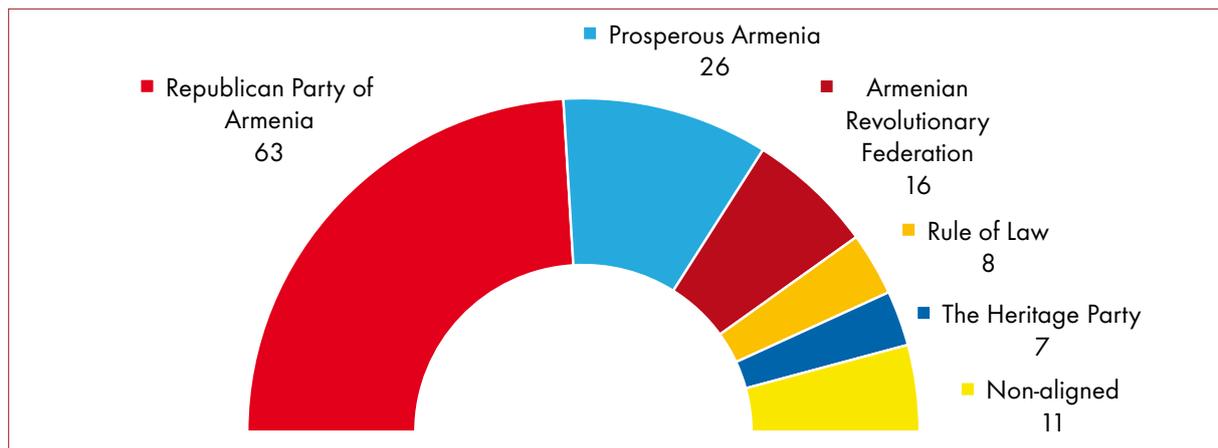
*See overleaf for information about the author.*

*About the Author:*

David Petrosyan is a specialist in the field of applied biotechnology. He has been working as a journalist since 1991 and has published over a thousand articles, reports, analyses and reviews on Armenia and the Caucasus region. Petrosyan is also the co-author of two books: *Armenia, Europe, Asia: Corridors and Crossroads* (2001) and *Journalists on the War in Nagorno-Karabakh* (2002). In 2001 he won the first prize in the category “Political Analysis and Commentary” in a national competition for his publication “Armenians and Chechens: The Past and the Present”. Since 1991 Petrosyan has been working as a political editor for the independent information centre Noah’s Ark (*Noyan Tapan*, at <http://www.nt.am>).

**Diagram**

**Distribution of the 131 Mandates in the National Assembly of Armenia  
As of May 1, 2010**



<p>■ 1. Republican Party of Armenia</p> <p>■ 2. Prosperous Armenia</p> <p>■ 3. Armenian Revolutionary Federation</p> <p>■ 4. Rule of Law</p> <p>■ 5. The Heritage Party</p> <p>■ 6. Non-aligned</p>	<p>63 mandates</p> <p>26 mandates</p> <p>16 mandates</p> <p>8 mandates</p> <p>7 mandates</p> <p>11 mandates</p>	<p>including:</p> <p>including:</p> <p>including:</p> <p>including:</p> <p>including:</p> <p>including:</p>	<p>Non-party members</p> <p>Party for Democracy and Labor</p> <p>Party Mighty Homeland</p> <p>Non-party</p> <p>Social Democratic Hunchakyan Party*</p> <p>Non-party members</p> <p>Non-party members</p> <p>Non-party members</p> <p>Non-party members</p> <p>Non-party members</p> <p>National Unity</p> <p>Prosperous Armenia</p>	<p>9</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>3</p> <p>1</p> <p>3</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>9</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p>
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\* The MP from the Social Democratic Hunchakyan Party represents a non-canonical party. The canonical Social Democratic Party remains in the ranks of the non-parliamentary opposition and is a member of the Armenian National Congress.