

Armenia's election aftermath: Few street protests, but the new government is set for a bumpy ride

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Armenia's ruling Republican Party maintained its position as the largest party in parliament following elections on 2 April. But as [Richard Giragosian](#) writes, there was a notable breakthrough by a new opposition force, the 'Way Out Alliance', which gained the third highest vote share. And despite little in the way of street protests following the election, the outlook for the next government remains challenging as the country seeks to reform its political system.



Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan, leader of the Republican Party, with Vladimir Putin.
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After a disappointing campaign, which was short of new policy ideas but long on political promises, voters in Armenia elected a new parliament on 2 April. As with past ballots in Armenia, the election was once again tainted by a pattern of [voting violations and irregularities](#), ranging from vote buying to voter intimidation.

According to international election observers, despite the introduction of important electoral reforms and the deployment of more sophisticated voting techniques and observation technology, coercion and interference continued to strengthen the advantage of the incumbent party and hinder a more level playing field for all candidates and parties. Despite these shortcomings and deficiencies, the election results were generally accepted, and did not trigger any street demonstrations or protests. The absence of any post-election crisis was especially surprising, however, due to two factors.

First, despite expectations of public protests challenging the results, the passive acceptance of the outcome demonstrated a sense of resignation rather than one of revolt. Moreover, such passive public resignation was surprising, given the record of past elections, which have almost always triggered demonstrations over dubious ballots.

And despite a serious erosion of public confidence in the state and its institutions, the government was clearly

relieved by the lack of any direct challenge to its re-election. Nevertheless, this neither suggests any return of public trust nor does it diminish the simmering level of disconnect in the country. Rather, the election of a new opposition force and the failure of some more unpopular parties to enter parliament tended to diffuse the potential outrage and incredulity that have marked previous elections in Armenia.

A second significant factor that explains the lack of protests stems from the recognition that this election and its aftermath have been driven and defined by a new conflict. This new political conflict is no longer a confrontation between the government party and the opposition, but is one of competition between and within the ruling political elite. In this context, the rivalry between the ruling Republican Party and the oligarch-led Tsarukyan Alliance was authentic – and as each party is both a product and a pillar of the political system, the clash between them is defined by a battle for the political spoils of patronage and positions. By its very nature, this internal conflict is waged behind closed doors and not expressed in open street demonstrations.

Crafting a coalition

Against that backdrop of a conflict within the ruling elite, the main challenge of the post-election period comes from the jockeying for ministerial positions, with intense bargaining and bartering expected over the terms of a new pro-government coalition. Endowed with its strong electoral showing, giving it some 55 seats in the next parliament, the dominant Republican Party now holds the initiative, and has the upper hand to set the terms of negotiations over forming a new coalition.

Table: Results of the 2017 Armenian election

<i>Party</i>	<i>Vote (%)</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Role</i>
Republican Party of Armenia	49.2	55	Ruling party
Tsarukyan Alliance	27.4	30	Challenger
Way Out Alliance	7.8	9	Opposition
Armenian Revolutionary Federation	6.6	7	Pro-government

Note: Seats are apportioned using proportional representation with a minimum number of 101 seats in parliament. Vote share rounded to one decimal place and indicated role reflects the views of the author.

There are two possible options available for the Republicans. The first option is to forge a narrow coalition with the fourth-place finisher, the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation (also known as ‘Dashnak’), whose seven seats would easily offer a working 62-seat majority. Although this may be tactically attractive, and tempting given the ruling party would avoid having to work with their rivals from the Tsarukyan Alliance, this would only magnify concerns over one-party rule by the Republicans.

The second scenario is, therefore, more likely, whereby the 30-seat Tsarukyan Alliance is pressured and persuaded to enter into a new “national unity” coalition. Under both options, the Republican Party would still retain the primary position. And even based on the second option, the inherent vulnerability of Gagik Tsarukyan, the oligarch leader of the alliance whose own sources of wealth could always be justifiably used by the state as grounds for a tax audit or criminal investigation, grants the Republicans important leverage. For that reason, it is also highly unlikely that the Tsarukyan Alliance would continue to pose as an opposition force, especially as the political risks for its leader would be too high to forego the obvious benefits of returning to government.

Another important consideration for the government is the need for political unity in the face of the looming transition to a full parliamentary system. For any incumbent government, the appeal to co-opt a larger rival while competing

with a smaller opposition far outweighs the dividends of ruling alone. The crafting of a new, broader coalition would also help the ruling party to better influence the inevitable emergence of the parliamentary politics of legislative compromise and political consensus that the new system will undoubtedly foster.

What next?

The outlook for an orderly political transformation to a parliamentary system by 2018 is neither assured nor automatic. The new parliament will face a set of urgent challenges and pressing problems, ranging from the deepening economic downturn afflicting the country to the deep-seated burden of entrenched corruption.

Moreover, as the election campaign featured little focus on such critical issues, there was little investment in developing policy responses and no formulation of policy alternatives capable of meeting these challenges. And these weaknesses are only further exacerbated by the lack of adequate preparation for the unprecedented move to a complicated parliamentary form of government. Thus, despite the passing of a pivotal parliamentary election and the absence of any post-election unrest or instability, it is now clear that the burden of governance is only about to become much more difficult and daunting.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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