

Constitutional reform will be Armenia's dividing line

Wednesday, March 18 2015

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) party on March 17 pledged its support for the government's proposed constitutional reforms. President Serzh Sargsyan has proposed moving from a presidential to a parliamentary system of government. His embrace of constitutional reform at this stage stems from a new degree of self-confidence, following his political neutralisation of the Prosperous Armenia (BH) party. The opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK) will oppose the reforms. The ARF and HAK moves are rooted in political weakness and desperation: it seems that ARF wants to return to the governing coalition, and HAK to regain lost credibility, especially after the defeat of its political partner, BH, whose leader, Gagik Tsarukian, has resigned.

What next

BH is now too weak, especially after several key defections, to sustain its power or influence, but this does not necessarily spell the end of challenges to the government. With the economy fragile, it may be far too soon to count out a real power behind the scenes -- ex-President Robert Kocharyan, BH's patron, who may yet try to create a new political party of his own. Yet Kocharyan may be too tainted by the violence after the 2008 presidential election to engineer a political return; the main outcome of these events lies in the strengthening of one-party rule in Armenia.

Analysis

On February 5, the leadership of the BH party, the country's second-largest, met to discuss plans openly to challenge the Armenian president. In a bid to consolidate the party's role as the driving force of the Armenian opposition, Tsarukian announced fresh anti-government protests with opposition allies, culminating in a national rally in Yerevan. He based his strategy on the "worsening" socioeconomic situation (see ARMENIA/GEORGIA: Trade will push Yerevan into Eurasia - July 15, 2014), which might require regime change.

He stopped short of calling for Sargsyan's resignation and said he would not press for snap presidential and parliamentary elections, if Sargsyan agreed to abandon his plans for sweeping constitutional reform. The opposition claims that Sargsyan wants to remain in power in another capacity, after completing his second and final presidential term in 2018.

The government's response was cautious; ruling Republican Party (HHK) parliamentary leader Vahram Baghdasarian said the government was doing its best to address opposition demands, but ruled out snap elections under any circumstances.

Attack on BH activist

The political drama intensified significantly, when a prominent BH member was kidnapped and beaten unconscious in Yerevan on February 7. Artak Khachatrian was found dumped onto a street near his home about five hours after being attacked while walking in the city centre with a friend, Narek Abrahamian.

According to Abrahamian, three masked men forced Khachatrian into a car and drove away. On February 9, BH rallied hundreds of supporters and threatened to boycott parliament. Its leadership condemned the attack on Khachatrian as politically motivated, saying the authorities were trying to intimidate political groups challenging the president, and holding the country's supreme leadership primarily to blame for an atmosphere of banditry and lawlessness.

Impact

- The hobbling of Armenia's second-largest political party will reinforce the grip on power of the ruling party and the president.
- However, this could prove merely a tactical victory for Sargsyan against the political aspirations of his predecessor in office, Kocharyan.
- The threat to move against Tsarukian's business interests will mark a dangerous trend in the selective application of state power.

Tipping-point

On February 10-11, the political crisis reached tipping-point, when BH tried to detach Russia from backing Sargsyan. Tsarukian visited Moscow for a meeting with lawmakers from President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, at which he argued that Sargsyan was no longer a "reliable partner" for Moscow (see ARMENIA: Prioritising Russia will affect EU relations - June 12, 2014).

This bid to undermine Sargsyan in Moscow failed, but it triggered a vehement and vocal attack on February 12 by the president, marking the start of a very personal round of 'vendetta politics' targeting the opposition party leader.

At a meeting of senior HHK members televised live by the national broadcaster, Sargsyan made a vehement and vindictive speech marked by derogatory descriptions of Tsarukian, referring to him by his popular nickname 'Dodi (stupid) Gago', describing him as "evil", illiterate and lacking the intelligence to govern Armenia, in effect ordering his exclusion from the political process.

The next day, Tsarukian initially appeared defiant, and urged supporters to take to the streets and topple Sargsyan with a sustained campaign within the law, including civil disobedience, calling for complete regime change by means of an early presidential election.

Political revenge

Tsarukian has only attended four of the 145 sittings of parliament during 2013-14, allowing Sargsyan to demand that he be stripped of his parliamentary mandate. He also ordered Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan to launch an audit of Tsarukian's business interests. This quickly forced Tsarukian to back down, and on February 17, he signalled his readiness for a peaceful political settlement with the government after behind-the-scenes talks with Sargsyan.

BH called off a rally planned for February 20, and 19 members and activists whom police had rounded up in the wake of Tsarukian's call for non-stop protests were released. On February 18, Tsarukian called for working calmly together without insults, finding solutions and implementing them to end the situation facing Armenia. After the resignation of its tycoon founder and leader (see ARMENIA: Major party stays out of ruling coalition - June 22, 2012), and the departure of leading members, BH's future is now unclear.

Democratic deficiency

However, the February events reveal a deeper deficiency in Armenian democracy. The underlying problem is not just that crises and confrontations in Armenian politics remain driven and dominated by personalities rather than policies. Rather, the inherent problem stems in general from the closed political system, and more specifically the lack of real political parties.

Prospects for reform

The president has hailed the proposals for constitutional reform as offering "new opportunities for democratic developments in Armenia", but the real test is yet to come, depending on how changes to the constitutional system are implemented in practice.

Also, although a more confident Sargsyan seems now intent on moving forward with the reform package, the referendum needed to adopt the changes (whose date has yet to be set) may not be so straightforward. In fact, it may offer the electorate a tempting chance to express their discontent, making it into more of a vote of no-confidence in the Sargsyan administration.

Tsarukian's bid to subvert
Russia's support prompts
immediate response from
Sargsyan

Government's next move to
threaten Tsarukian's wealth
brings BH leader to heel

Armenia suffers from a closed
political system