

Armenian parliament rejects pro-Western opposition leader's bid to be prime minister

By Clara Weiss
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After mass protests that forced Armenia's prime minister Serzh Sargsyan to resign last Monday, the leader of the liberal opposition bloc, Nikol Pashinyan, failed to secure a majority vote in the parliament in his bid to be elected prime minister on May 1.

While the mass protests that led to the Sargsyan's resignation were motivated not least of all by social grievances in a country where almost every fifth person is unemployed and every third lives beneath the official poverty line, the liberal opposition has been quick to assert political control over the movement to advance its own agenda.

The vote took place under extraordinarily tense conditions with media reports indicating that the entire country came to a stand-still as the parliament was heatedly debating Pashinyan's candidacy. Thousands watched the nine-hour parliamentary debate live from the Republican Square in the country's capital Yerevan.

In a call last week with the former acting prime minister Karen Karapetyan, who replaced Sargsyan as acting prime minister last Monday, Russian president Vladimir Putin stated that his government was insisting on a "peaceful transition" in keeping with the results of the 2017 parliamentary elections. This implied the Kremlin's ongoing support for the ruling Republican Party, which secured an overwhelming majority of votes in the last parliamentary elections. The opposition bloc Pashinyan represents won, by contrast, only some 8 percent of the votes.

Over the past week, Pashinyan called for numerous demonstrations to pressure the government into accepting him as prime minister, drawing the support of tens of thousands of people. He warned the parliament of a "political tsunami" if they did not back him.

In a frenzy of meetings last week, Pashinyan met with foreign delegations for secret negotiations. The first meeting was with the EU ambassadors to Armenia. Shortly thereafter, he also met with Russian delegations and representatives of the American government. Details about the discussions have not been made public.

On Sunday, Pashinyan called upon his supporters to block the streets leading to the city center of Yerevan, the country's capital. The ruling Republican Party, which maintains close ties

to the Kremlin, announced on Saturday that it would not run its own candidate.

Pashinyan also managed to secure the support of the "Prosperous Armenia" party which is headed by the influential oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan and holds the second-largest number of seats in the Armenian National Assembly.

Nevertheless, he fell short of the necessary absolute majority in parliament, with the bulk of the Republican Party delegates and several opposition delegates declining to vote for him. Instead of the required 53 votes, he only received 45 (out of 105). Pashinyan declared that the vote amounted to a "declaration of war on the people." He called for "peaceful, nonviolent disobedience" to continue and asked for his supporters to block all roads, including access to the international airport in the capital.

The parliament is set to have another debate and vote next week, on May 8.

Along with the deep class divisions in the country which helped trigger the protests, the main roots of the political crisis lie in the advanced preparations for imperialist war in the region. While fraudulently claiming to speak for the people, Pashinyan, in fact, represents a section of the Armenian oligarchy which, in the face of the US-led confrontations with Russia and Iran, is seeking a rapprochement with the EU and American imperialism.

Pashinyan and his team have been anxious to stress that they had no "anti-Russian agenda." These statements, however, are belied not only by the fact that Pashinyan met first of all with EU ambassadors, but also by his previous statements. Pashinyan repeatedly criticized Sargsyan's government for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014, advocating instead an Association Agreement with the European Union which was signed, belatedly, in February 2017.

Last fall, Pashinyan reaffirmed his opposition to the EAEU, stating in a parliamentary debate that the main goal of his faction was to safeguard Armenian sovereignty, something he said would be impossible within the framework of the EAEU. "By joining the EAEU and in the context of the processes that accompanied it, the sovereignty of Armenia was seriously damaged, and these processes will continue, and will become

uncontrollable for us starting at some point, if they haven't become so already," he declared.

While universally described as a "charismatic leader" in the Western press, what is most striking about Pashinyan's political biography is his utter opportunism, and his decade-long, integration into the ruling establishment in Armenia which he now hypocritically decries as "corrupt."

Pashinyan worked as a journalist for almost three decades. In 1995, he was thrown out of Yerevan State University two weeks before his final exams because he had criticized the policies of the government of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the former leader of the Armenian nationalist movement of the late 1980s and first president of the Republic of Armenia after 1991. Ter-Petrosyan oversaw capitalist restoration, with the most devastating consequences for the working class.

In the years that followed, Pashinyan continued to work for opposition papers. In 2008, he became a member of the election campaign staff of Ter-Petrosyan, whom he had criticized in the 1990s, and who was now running as an oppositional candidate against Sargsyan. Pashinyan played a leading role in organizing the anti-government protests of 2008, which were suppressed brutally, with 10 protesters shot dead by the police.

Pashinyan fell-out with Ter-Petrosyan over the latter's collaboration with the oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan and his party, which formed part of the government coalition until 2012. Pashinyan, however, now works with Tsarukyan himself.

Pashinyan's deep ties to the Armenian political establishment and pro-EU positions are no doubt the reason that the Western press, although taken by surprise by the mass demonstrations in April, was quick to endorse him and the protest movement.

The major European powers, along with the US, are trying to encourage a shift in Armenia's foreign policy orientation to ramp-up pressure on Russia and Iran, both of which have historically been closely aligned with the small nation. The coming weeks and months may well bring to light more information about the involvement of Washington and Brussels in the recent political upheavals.

Armenia is a country of major geostrategic significance in the Caucasus, bordering Azerbaijan, a close ally of the US, as well as Turkey, a member of NATO, Georgia, and Iran, a central target of US imperialist aggression.

Russia maintains two military bases in the country and is by far Armenia's biggest trading partner. Armenia has relied on Russian economic and military support in its decade-long conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over the mountain enclave Nagorno-Karabakh.

Moreover, up to two million Armenians work and live in Russia which, poor as it is, still offers more employment opportunities than the economically decrepit Caucasian republic. The Armenian and Russian oligarchies also maintain close ties, and in part overlap, with numerous Armenian-born figures among Russia's richest individuals. This includes

Samvel Karapetyan, the brother of the acting prime minister Karen Karapetyan, who owns the real estate concern Tashir Group and has an estimated net worth of \$4.6 billion.

However, while in no position to rival Russia's economic ties with Armenia, the United States also has significant economic leverage. According to a report by the Russian online newspaper *Gazeta.Ru*, the US is Armenia's main creditor, holding the lion's share of the country's foreign debts, which amount to about 60 percent of GDP.

Perhaps even more importantly, because its dependence upon the Kremlin, the Armenian elite has felt the growing imperialist pressure on Russia in both Eastern Europe, especially since the coup in Ukraine in 2014, and in the Middle East.

Iran, home to a large Armenian diaspora and the only one of the country's neighbors that it maintains close political and economic relations with (especially in energy), is the target of a decade-long imperialist campaign by the US and Israel. Fears in the region of an imminent Israel-Iran war, or an attack by Washington, are running high.

Under these conditions, the Armenian oligarchy is torn by vicious infighting over whether or not to loosen its longstanding and economically crucial ties with Russia in favor of greater subordination to US and European imperialism.

Amid mass poverty and a growing danger of war in the region, Armenian workers and young people, sections of whom participated in the mass protests, must advance their own solution to the political crisis, independent of all sections of the oligarchy, and in opposition to imperialism and the profit system.

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