

Rebooting the Political Hard Drive

The Karabakh leader becomes Armenia's new prime minister

By Hratch Tchilingirian

On March 20 President Levon Ter-Petrosian named the leader of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno Karabakh, Robert Kocharian, 43, as Armenia's new prime minister. He replaces Armen Sarkissian, who resigned on March 6 owing to serious illness.

No explanations were given as to the motives of the controversial appointment. But it has serious implications not only for Armenia's internal politics, but also for the Transcaucasus region, in view of the nine-year conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh. Officially, Armenia claims to stand aloof from this conflict.

Robert Kocharian—having consulted the National Security Council and the National Assembly of the self-proclaimed republic—informed the people of Karabakh in a televised address of his decision to accept Ter-Petrosian's request to form a government. At a news conference earlier, Kocharian told journalists that it was the second time he had had to make such a difficult decision. The first time was when he decided to lead the Karabakh Defence Committee when the territory was at war with Azerbaijan. Kocharian affirmed that progress in Karabakh would not be possible without successful economic and social development in Armenia.

Kocharian also stressed that, while in Armenia, he would not abandon the defence of Karabakh. As to the effects his appointment might

have on the settlement of the conflict, he would try to shift the negotiations to bilateral talks between Azerbaijan and Karabakh Armenians. "I consider my appointment as Armenia's prime minister as the continuation of the settlement of the Karabakh problem," Kocharian asserted.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister of Karabakh, Leonard Petrossian, temporarily assumed the presidency of the unrecognised republic. According to Nagorno Karabakh's law on presidential elections, new polls must be conducted three months after the president leaves office.

Western diplomats in Baku, bewildered by Ter-Petrosian's choice, expressed concern that the move could threaten stability in the region. Azerbaijan reacted cautiously to Kocharian's appointment. Foreign Minister Hasan Hassanov said, "I am going to reserve comments until I can determine [Ter-Petrosian's] motive." Earlier, Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov stated that he believed that Armenia "wanted to reinforce its annexation of the Azerbaijani territory." The leader of the opposition National Independence Party, Ittibar Mamedov, was more critical: "This shows again that the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh republic is a puppet regime . . . that this region has been annexed by Armenia," he told Azerbaijan's Turan news agency.

Armenian officials in Yerevan insisted that Kocharian's appointment would not harm the negotiations, "provided Azerbaijan does not try to exploit the move for its own benefit."

Besides justifying Kocharian's appointment, President Ter-Petrosian has other domestic and international issues to sort out. At home, his immediate problem is to deal with the "cadre crisis" temporarily obviated by Kocharian's appointment. In addition to the position of premier,

Ter-Petrosian will need to find replacements for Armenia's ambassadors to the UN, Canada and the UK, who returned to Yerevan to assume ministerial posts late last year. Economic recovery remains sluggish and the cleavage between the "haves" and "have-nots" is growing. The opposition continues to plan for a come-back in the spring. Prime Minister Sarkissian had been able to address the anxieties of Armenian society and inspire popular support for their resolution. But they remain a liability for the current administration, unless Kocharian implements the bold reform process that Sarkissian started.

The key elements of Sarkissian's programme, approved by the country's National Assembly, focus on administrative reform, the fight against corruption, liberalisation and privatisation of the media, economic development, the attraction of foreign investment and the strengthening of democratic structures. The underlying theme in Sarkissian's programme was the symbiotic relationship between economic development, democracy and civil society.

One of Sarkissian's first acts was to eliminate the Ministry of Information in the Armenian government, which had controlled all information and media activities in the country. In its place, a commission consisting of government representatives and heads of Armenia's major independent media organisations was created to draw up a plan and a process for full freedom and privatisation of media, including the state-controlled television. Already, in January of this year, the Media Association of Armenia presented the government with a proposal on how to pursue privatisation of media premises.

Kocharian's capabilities will be tested against Sarkissian's strong credentials in foreign policy and economic development. During his

four-month tenure, Sarkissian was able to restore public confidence in the government, especially after his establishment of dialogue between the Ter-Petrosian administration and the opposition following the presidential election-related clashes of September 1996.

The conflict in and for Karabakh remains a central preoccupation for the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments—perhaps, at this juncture, it is more pointed than ever. As recent experience has shown, especially after the Lisbon summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in December, Armenia's internal difficulties have damaged its international standing. Sarkissian re-established Armenia's credibility in the international arena, for example, by successful visits to the US, the UK and the Russian Federation. Lacking Sarkissian's international stature and given his key role in Karabakh, it might take Prime Minister Kocharian a long time to establish his dominance in Armenia's external affairs.

It remains to be seen whether the economic focus of development strategy under the Sarkissian administration will change into a politically-centered strategy under Kocharian; and whether Kocharian, like Sarkissian, will be able to offer optimism for Armenia's long-term economic, political, and social prospects.

With Sarkissian's resignation, Armenia's political hard drive crashed; the task of rebooting it rests with Kocharian.

Hratch Tchilingirian is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics.