THE LATEST SITUATION IN ARMENIA PRIOR TO THE ELECTIONS

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The elections in Armenia, long anticipated by various segments of society for different reasons, are scheduled to take place on June 7. In the period leading up to the elections, the balance of power within Armenia has shifted, while Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has identified his objectives regarding political power by embracing the normalization and peace process and the Real Armenia concept. While these measures have manifested themselves in the fields of law, religion, politics, and economics, it has been noted that the opposition in Armenia has failed to produce a concrete antithesis to these reforms.

As has been repeatedly stated, the ongoing tension between the Church leadership and the Armenian government has also had repercussions in the Armenian Diaspora. The excessively political stance of the Church leadership, which is detached from its spiritual foundations, has led to a visible division within the Diaspora. Even among those who strongly criticize the Pashinyan government, it has been acknowledged that the Churchs stance will harm Armenia in both the short and long terms. Considering the negative repercussions of radical approaches, it can be said that this rift will not remain limited to the Diaspora alone and may also be observed among Armenian citizens during the elections.

According to polling results, it is claimed that the vote share of the party of Samvel Karapetyan (who is currently under arrest) is estimated to be around 6%,[1] a significant portion of which is known to come from pro-Russian supporters. Karapetyans dual citizenship has become a subject of controversy in relation to the elections. Karapetyan, who is at the center of concerns regarding the risk of foreign interference in the elections, also came into the spotlight recently when President of Russia Vladimir Putin warned Pashinyan not to obstruct potential votes.[2] The risk of interference, which has been repeatedly emphasized in relation to the June 7 elections, together with high-level statements from Russia and various diplomatic moves (such as the recall of the Ambassador to Yerevan[3], the import embargo[4], and the latest Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit declaration[5], etc.), has resulted in Russia being placed at the center of Western media attention.

The fact that Pashinyan, who has long pursued a balancing policy between EAEU and the European Union (EU), was almost threatened at the latest EAEU summit is also significant

in terms of the elections. Alongside the peace and normalization processes, Armenias developing relations with the EU have the potential to contribute to economic prosperity. As an indication of this, reports appeared in the media stating that the agricultural products that Russia refused to import under its embargo would be purchased by the EU. [6] It should be noted that Russia ranks first among the countries from which Armenia imports goods and second among the countries to which it exports. As such, the purchase of these products as a response to the embargo, as well as statements promising support for Armenia during this process, should not be interpreted as meaning that the EU can become an alternative source to Russia in terms of Armenias economy.

Pashinyans balancing policy is closely connected to Russias economic influence, which remains irreplaceable, at least in the short term. Responding to discussions about Armenias possible expulsion from the EAEU, Pashinyan has emphasized that no such procedure could be implemented under the current regulations and that Armenias own will would be decisive in this matter.[7] Maintaining a similarly firm stance regarding the EU accession process, Pashinyan has sought to preserve high-level relations with Russia while simultaneously moving closer to the West. Arguing that any referendum would be unreasonable before the final outcome of the EU membership process becomes clear, Pashinyan also blamed the Armenian opposition for the ongoing negative attitude within the EAEU. By accusing the opposition of putting Armenia in a difficult position, Pashinyan further demonstrated through this statement that he has no plan other than maintaining Armenias current membership status within the EAEU.

Following the visit of the US Secretary of State to Yerevan, US President Donald Trumps public declaration of support for Pashinyan[8], together with the EUs political and financial support for the elections, has provided Russia and pro-Russian groups within Armenia with grounds to emphasize claims of Western interference. The elections, which have attracted both overt and covert interest from numerous international actors, are also significant for the future of the region. Armenias steadily improving relations with its neighbors have demonstrated that both Western and Russian intervention in the region are unnecessary and dangerous. The electorates stance on this issue will become clearer after the elections.

In conclusion, it remains a matter of interest how calls for intervention that exceed the limits of democratic principles, made by the opposition in Armenia and radical segments of the Armenian Diaspora despite recent developments, will affect Armenias electorate. The elections, which are expected to have significant implications for the region, will also reveal how the Armenian people envision their countrys future position.

**Image: Anadolu Agency*

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