

COVID-19 GRANTS PASHINYAN TIME TO PERSUADE MORE VOTERS. DIASPORA SUPPORT TEPID

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Karen Mkrtchyan, Yerevan, 27 March 2020

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The [ongoing debate](#) on the proposed Constitutional Referendum in Armenia has brought forth differences in opinion between the majority of political forces in Armenia and the Diaspora. While almost all major political parties in Armenia, barring former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Congress and Aram Sargsyan's (Vazgen Sargsyan's brother) Republic Party, opted to boycott the Referendum, some in the Diaspora are in favour of Prime Minister Pashinyan.

The debate pertains to two points: the alleged procedural violations by the authorities in calling for a referendum and the issue of its practicality. Critics of the referendum can't find justification for the huge expenses incurred in organizing a referendum to merely amend a single clause when the entire Constitution needs amending. The importance of these two points is indicated by the fact that no political party or faction, whether represented in Parliament or otherwise, volunteered to take up the mantle to lead the "NO" campaign. Eventually, the role was claimed by a non-political group of lawyers representing civil society.

While some Diaspora organizations appreciate the issues raised by Armenia's opposition parties, they believe there is no alternative other than the one proposed by the Government. The vote of these organizations is a 'YES'. The narrative, issued by the Prime Minister of Armenia, depicting the referendum as a necessary continuation of the Revolution, has resonated with them.

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Tashnagsutiun), the largest Armenian organization in the Diaspora, and its supporters are toeing the party line after the ARF Supreme Council of Armenia declared the referendum as "routine unlawfulness". It claimed the Government was "putting the country into reckless risk". With the position of the party made clear, it does not come as a surprise that the supporters of Tashnagsutiun in the Diaspora remain a major group opposing the move. A handful of independent individuals also have voiced their opposition expressing themselves in various forums.

In sharp contrast to the Tashnags, the [Armenian Democratic Liberal Party](#) (Ramgavar Party) endorsed the proposed constitutional amendments and characterized the referendum as a necessary step to eliminate the obstacles to much-needed constitutional and legal reforms.

The Social Democratic Hunchakian Party, while noting that the proposed amendments should have been made earlier, stated the referendum would help bring the Velvet Revolution to its logical conclusion. Fearing that suspicion and doubt may overshadow the results of the referendum (in case of weak voter turnout), [Massis Post](#), one of the organs of the party, urged citizens of Armenia to participate in the process.

It isn't just Diaspora political parties which have reacted to the proposed constitutional changes. [Canada's Move](#), a network of Canadian-Armenians, among them citizens of Armenia, supported the

referendum. Welcoming Armenian Government's decision to resolve the alleged 'crisis' through referendum, *Canada's Move*, in an open letter addressed to Mr. Pashinyan, to Ararat Mirzoyan (Speaker of the National Assembly of Armenia) and Zareh Sinanyan (High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs) called upon them to make changes in the Armenian Constitution, allowing provisions for Armenian citizens around the globe to take part in elections and referenda by casting their ballot at the Armenian Embassy.

Taking a leaf from Mr. Pashinyan's book, the [***Assembly of the Armenians of Europe***](#), called upon citizens of Armenia who live abroad to try to return to Armenia to take part in the referendum by "showing active participation and liberating the last 'bastion' of the former regime" with the hope that the "Constitutional Court will enjoy the trust of the people."

Mr. Pashinyan has failed to get a consolidated support for his constitutional referendum from Armenia's political parties; he can perhaps find solace in some support from the Diaspora. However, until his calls on Armenia citizens living abroad to return to Armenia and take part in the referendum receives positive reaction, his efforts will fail to yield his desired result on voting day. The outcome of the referendum will not depend on Diaspora support but voter turnout.

With the date of the referendum postponed from April 5 until further notice due to COVID-19, Mr. Pashinyan might have bought himself more time to re-launch a campaign to garner the necessary 650,000 votes. However, a great deal will depend on how the virus related long lock-down lasts and in which direction the attitude of the voters swings during these politically challenging times.

There are no comments yet.