

After the Defeat: What does the Future Hold for Nikol Pashinyan?

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Introduction

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan faces a domestic political crisis; rising political opposition and a plot hatched by the military command currently pose serious threats to his rule. The latest increase in tensions in Armenia have raised questions about a possible military coup. An official statement of the military high command demanded that the Prime Minister resign, which led to a confrontation between the elected government and armed forces, leading to further instability in the country. Currently, Yerevan is a powder keg and centre of political crisis in the South Caucasus.

This info pack explains Pashinyan's rise to power and gives a brief background of his political initiatives in the early days of his rule. The Karabakh War of 2020 has become a turning point for the region, as well as the prime minister's career, resulting in increasing tensions between the opposition and Pashinyan. Finally, the info pack will focus on developments after the war, namely the anti-government protests, Pashinyan's struggles to unite his supporters, and the rise of the voice of the armed forces.



Supporters of Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan gather at the Republic Square during a demonstration in Yerevan, Armenia on March 01, 2021. (Prime Ministry of Armenia - Anadolu Agency)

Background and rise to power

Armenia became an independent state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The country suffered domestic instability upon independence as it became involved in armed conflict with its neighbour, Azerbaijan. Armenian separatist forces in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan revolted and demanded separation from Baku. With the help of the Armenian armed forces sent from Yerevan, the separatists occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts. As a result of the war in the 1990s, the region pushed out ethnic Azerbaijanis, thousands of people lost their lives, and almost a million IDPs started to live under poor conditions in Azerbaijan.

The war and occupation not only reshaped bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also brought a new reality to modern Armenian politics. During the conflict, ex-Soviet Russian forces were actively involved, fighting on the Armenian side and even participating in the Khojaly Massacre, where hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians were brutally murdered. Furthermore, Russian troops did not leave Armenia, instead reinforcing their air and ground bases. The Russians also started to control the Armenian-Turkish border, which was closed after the Armenian occupation in Karabakh. The aggressive politics of Armenia put the country under blockade, which further forced the country to link its future goals to Russia.

Interestingly, Armenia's leaders were not born in the country until Nikol Pashinyan. The first President of the country, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was born in Syria. The following two leaders, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, were born in Khankendi (Stepanakert), the main city in the Karabakh region. Based on this history, for almost two decades Yerevan was considered under the control of the so-called 'Karabakh Clan'. This clan was comprised of corrupted elites from the occupied zones of Azerbaijan who also had a direct role in war crimes committed against civilians during the 1990s.

Tensions in Armenian society peaked in early 2018. As the Armenian political system changed from the presidential system to a parliamentary one, then-President Serzh Sargsyan was elected as the prime minister, sparking controversy. The opposition organised mass protests against Sargsyan and his inner circle, demanding his resignation. Meanwhile, Pashinyan, dressed in a baseball cap and t-shirt, led the protests and boosted his public image. Pashinyan, a former journalist with a liberal and pro-Western image, initially succeeded in forcing Sargsyan out of of-

fice and uniting the opposition, eventually becoming the prime minister. These events, known as Armenia's Velvet Revolution, marked the end of the rule of the 'Karabakh clan'. Pashinyan's extensive [promises](#) of reform, however, brought a huge and immediate responsibility to his government.

Pashinyan's initial popularity was mainly based on promises to rebuild the economy and drive out corruption. He immediately took a stance against the former clans in the state apparatus and started to initiate the prosecution of Armenia's former leaders. His popularity and the success of the Velvet Revolution was extended by the victory of the 'My Step Alliance' in the snap parliamentary elections of December 2018. Through these results, Pashinyan not only showed off his strength but also gained legitimacy to push forward his policies. Nonetheless, he was still being criticised by the military command for being soft on "national security", namely on the matter of Nagorno-Karabakh. He did not aggressively respond to the 2018 clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the border of Nakhichevan and this reluctance created further pressure from the armed forces.

Nevertheless, the hopes for more liberal and less aggressive Armenian foreign policy faded away only after a year, when Pashinyan travelled to Karabakh and made a speech that was arguably bolder than even his predecessors. His statement indicated the annexation of the occupied Karabakh to Armenia, which created deep mistrust and disappointment in Baku. Pashinyan also attended the inauguration ceremony of the so-called president of the *de-facto* Nagorno-Karabakh Republic during the Covid-19 pandemic, which further inflamed tensions. The Tovuz clashes in June of 2020, followed by joint Russian-Armenian military exercises showed that Pashinyan and his cabinet were not interested in solving the conflict peacefully. The defence minister of Pashinyan even demanded that the new aim of Armenia should be the acquisition of new lands by conducting new wars. Therefore, the Pashinyan government proved that they are not so different from their predecessors regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. The 44-day war that started on September 27 was the consequence of the deliberate escalation of tensions and Armenian provocations, which now threatens the seat of Pashinyan in Yerevan.



An Azerbaijani woman cleans up damage following her return to her home following a deal reached to end fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Terter, Azerbaijan on November 10, 2020. (Arif Hüdaverdi Yaman - Anadolu Agency)

Paving the way to defeat

Analysts [have argued](#) that the main problem in Yerevan was extreme self-confidence from both the military and political command. Since Armenia's military successes in the 1990s with regards to Nagorno-Karabakh, the balance of power has shifted and Azerbaijan has invested heavily in modernising its armed forces. The President of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, also repeated his will to solve the conflict with military might if all peaceful solutions failed. The four-day skirmish in April 2016, which resulted in the recapture of some strategic heights in Nagorno-Karabakh by the Azerbaijani army, clearly showed the military potential of Azerbaijan in a full-scale war and the problems of the Armenian army in terms of outdated military equipment and tactics. After the April clashes, some leaders among Armenian separatists in Karabakh stated that Armenia was not capable of competing economically or militarily with Azerbaijan. However, their warnings were dismissed and Armenia paid a heavy price.

Pashinyan also failed to address serious economic, military, and social challenges in the country. Under his rule, Armenia failed to arrange peaceful withdrawal from occupied lands as hoped by his pro-peace progressive supporters, which resulted in the continuation of the country's political and economic isolation. Furthermore, the country could not escape from the Russian orbit despite the efforts of the Pashinyan government. After the Velvet Revolution, the new prime minister confirmed the continuation of the country's pro-Russian path. However, the arrest of the former Armenian President Kocharyan, pressure over the [‘Karabakh Clan’](#), and the replacement of pro-Russian

bureaucrats with Pashinyan cadres prompted serious concerns in Moscow.

Pashinyan and his Cabinet built a new maximalist agenda in foreign policy, including a demand for the annexation of Karabakh. The Defence Minister pushed for war over new territories and Armenians parliamentarians even stated their will to go all the way to Baku if a new war started.

The result of the war was disastrous for Armenia. In just 44 days, Armenia lost more than 5,000 servicemen, billions of dollars worth of military equipment, and the lands that it captured three decades ago. The defeat created shock and panic in Armenia. The Armenian public, which was misled by government officials, did not want to believe that the Azerbaijani army had succeeded in the field. Therefore, after the signing of the November 10 armistice that put an end to the clashes, protesters [rallied](#) in the streets of the capital and other cities, demanding the resignation and trial of the government. During the night of the agreement, angry masses [stormed](#) the Parliament, occupied the private chambers of Pashinyan and attempted to lynch the President of the National Assembly of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan. The government also reacted harshly to the protests and used force to arrest protestors. While the numbers of people in the streets decreased, Armenian politics continued to destabilise.

Developments after the war

The defeat of Armenia brought the question of responsibility to the forefront of national politics. The government hinted at problems in the army command while the Armenian military command claimed that the reason for defeat was Pashinyan's incompetent leadership.

Many also [believed](#) that the defeat of Armenia was a product of Moscow's silence during the conflict. Russia is Armenia's most important ally and the two countries have long cooperated economically and militarily. Russian ground and air forces are stationed in Armenia and effectively control the country's borders. However, the pro-Western stance of Pashinyan's revolution and concerns over possible change in Armenia's political course forced the Kremlin to increase its focus on Yerevan. It is in this context that some experts argue that Russia did not directly intervene in the clashes even as Armenia's military was being out-matched in order to send a strong message to Yerevan and show them what a lack of Russian support would entail. The Kremlin also succeeded in stopping the war in a critical moment where the Azerbaijani army was only a few days away from wiping out all of the Armenian command in Karabakh. By doing that, the Russians also guaranteed their presence in the conflict zone as mediators and peace-keepers between the two states.

However, Pashinyan's reaction to the post-war developments did not please the opposition. Firstly, he did not resign and tried to consolidate his supporters. Secondly, he chose to scapegoat the loss on Russian military technology and questioned the quality of Russian missiles. According to the prime minister's statement, Russian ballistic Iskander missiles failed to hit Azerbaijani targets as planned. The statement paved the way for a confrontation between the military command and the government, since the Deputy Chief of General Staff Tiran Khachatryan openly criticised the government's allegations of Russian armament.

The criticism was not well-received by the government. Pashinyan's dismissal of Khachatryan started a new and more serious wave of protest that has intensified since February 25th. About 40 high-ranking servicemen, led by the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces, Onik Gasparyan, demanded the resignation of Pashinyan and his cabinet. The [statement](#) by the military command further escalated tensions in Yerevan and was seen as a coup attempt by Pashinyan. The prime minister immediately ordered the resignation of Gasparyan, however, President Armen Sargsyan refused to sign the document and returned it after consult-

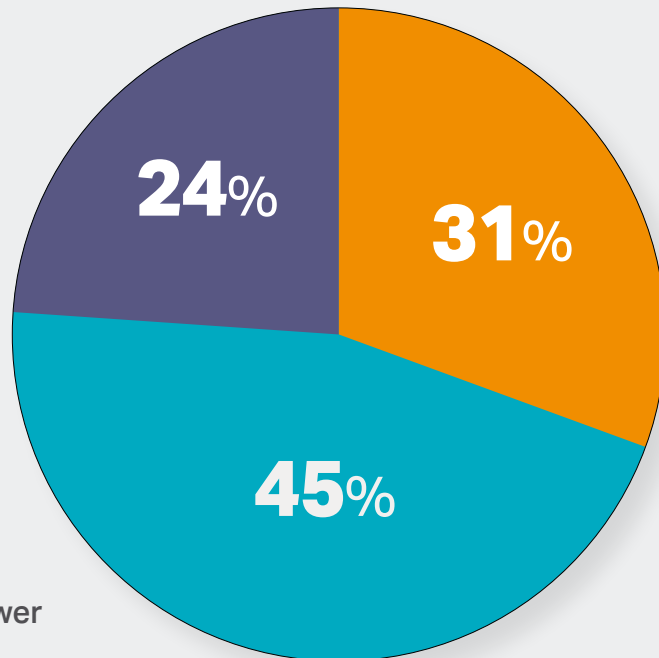
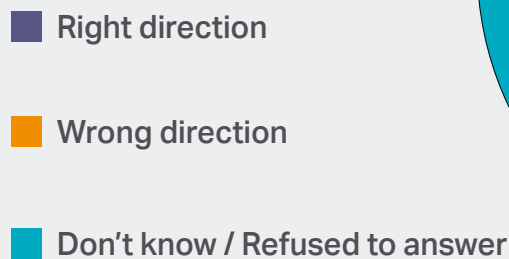
ing with opposition and parliamentary political forces, as well as the military leadership. Following the political crisis, Pashinyan once again marched in the streets of the capital along with his supporters, showing off his political power.

A striking feature of this crisis is that neither the opposition, nor Pashinyan's supporters have rallied in mass numbers. According to some analysts, most of society feels sluggish and tired, especially while mourning the losses in Karabakh. People do not want to go out and revolutionise for the second time in two and a half years because they have seen no prospect of change in the short term. The opposition is, nevertheless, united under a common name, former prime minister Vazgen Manukyan. However, he is relatively old and seems unlikely to inspire the same energy that was displayed in the streets during the Velvet Revolution. There are contenders for power from the 'Karabakh Clan' as well, notably former president Robert Kocharyan. However, his trial is currently underway and he also lacks the popular support to confront Pashinyan. The common goal of the opposition was to force Pashinyan to resign.

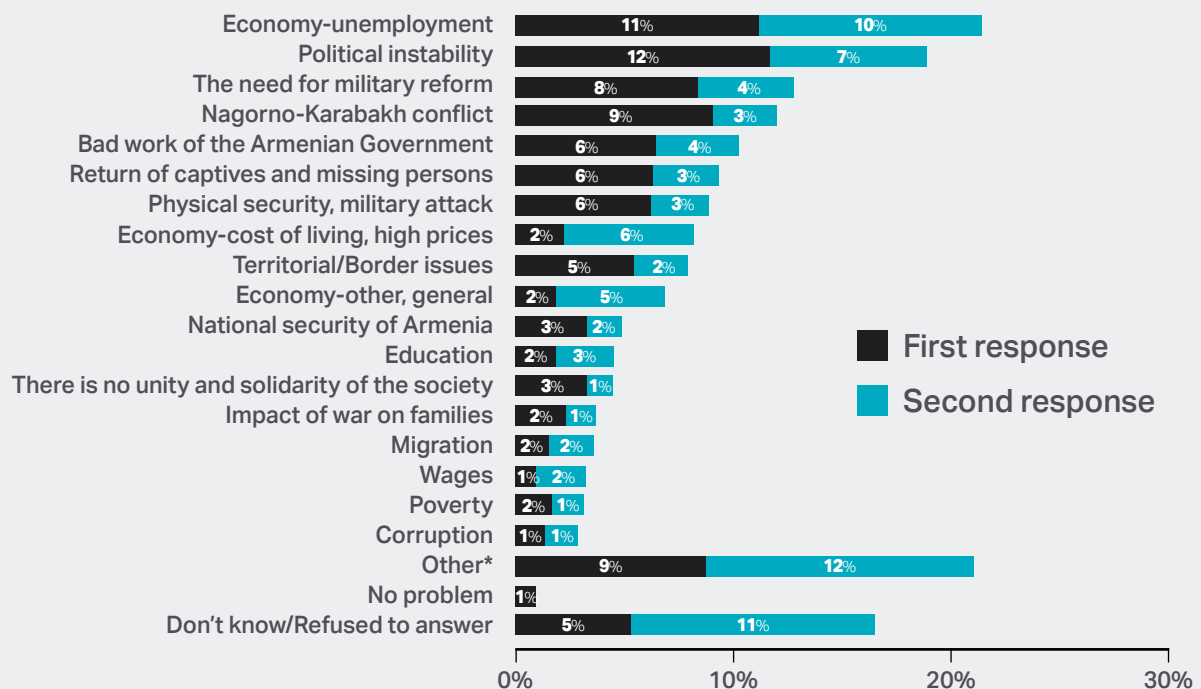
The President's role and motives in this crisis are also noteworthy. Armen Sargsyan has not yet signed the resignation of Onik Gasparyan for the second time and appealed to the Constitutional Court to resolve the dispute. Gasparyan has continued to fulfil his duties and does not intend to resign. The Prime Minister has insisted on the resignation of Gasparyan and, even after the forthcoming decision of the Constitutional Court, the situation seems uncertain. Despite this uncertainty, Pashinyan has already [found](#) his new Chief of the General Staff. The new appointee, Artak Davtyan, from the General Staff of the Armed Forces has stated that the army does not interfere in the political process and will remain neutral on political issues. On the other hand, Gasparyan has still not accepted his dismissal and [plans](#) to file a criminal complaint against Pashinyan.

An extensive poll [conducted](#) International Republic Institute (IRI) in February 2021 [showed](#) that the majority of Armenians think the country is going in the wrong direction because of economic problems and unemployment, political instability, and the need for military reform after the recent defeat. Another poll conducted by MPG/Gallup International found that 39 per cent of Armenians favour Pashinyan, while 44 per cent were seeking his resignation. Overall, the polls have shown that there lacks consensus against Pashinyan, but most people feel that something has to change.

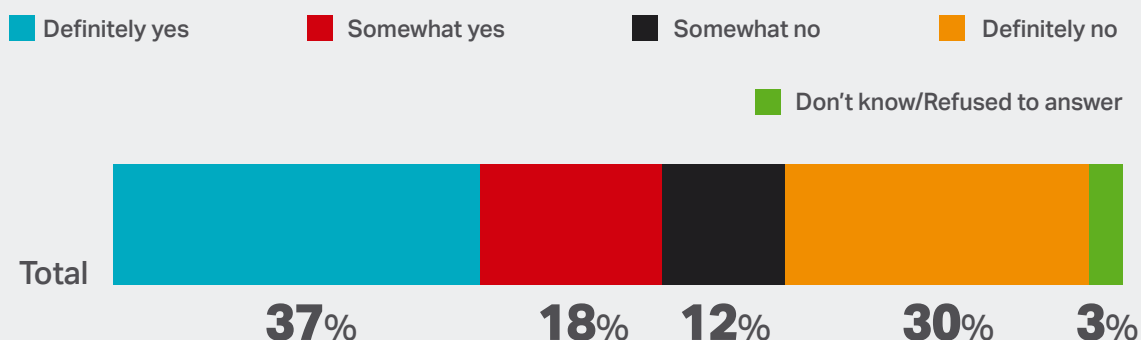
Generally speaking, do you think that Armenia is heading in the right direction or wrong direction?



What is the most important problem our country is facing today? And what is the second most important problem? (spontaneous responses)



In your opinion should snap parliamentary elections be held?



By mid-March, Pashinyan and his party had held several talks with the opposition to solve the ongoing crisis. In a post on March 18, the prime minister [declared](#) his intention to hold elections in June 2021. As stated by the Justice Minister, Rustam Badasyan, Pashinyan will be the candidate for the prime minister once again, having the backing of his party. The decision came after the meeting with the parliamentary opposition, Prosperous Armenia, and its leader Gagik Tsakurian. Pashinyan's discussion with President Sargsyan and the leader of another opposition party, Bright Armenia, Edmon Marukian was also influential in accepting the snap election as a last resort to solve the political conflict.

The polls [showed](#) support for Pashinyan right after the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. On November 2020, support for the prime minister was about 30 per cent and he was the most popular leader among respondents, scoring higher than former Presidents Kocharyan and Sargsyan and even opposition leader Manukyan. However, experts also believe that none of the mentioned leaders can provide short term stability in the country and there are no alternative domestic political forces capable of organising in the short term. While snap elections represent a life and death moment for the ruling party, the major [belief](#) is that the situation in Armenia is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Nevertheless, it is too early to predict whether Pashinyan will be successful in the upcoming elections or not. The people of Armenia [prefer](#) a possible third force above overthrowing Pashinyan and bringing old elites back, which does not seem possible in the short term. There are also

legitimate concerns about the future of the armistice in Karabakh. Regional powers [are hoping](#) that Armenia will honour the agreement regardless of any domestic political changes. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev also stated that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is over and any "revanchist thinking" from the Armenian side will face consequences. Nevertheless, Armenia holds the potential to reshape its image by opening up to the world. The outcome of the upcoming election will be critical for the future direction of Armenia's foreign policy and whether or not the country chooses to move forward on regional cooperation initiatives.

