

# The Defeated Leader's Triumph

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

Armenia recently held a snap parliamentary election for the second time in two and a half years. While the first of these elections (December, 2018) was a response to the demands of the new political situation created by the revolution in May 2018, the political crisis caused by Armenia's defeat in the Second Karabakh War (September 27 – November 10, 2020) necessitated the second. Both elections resulted in the triumph of Nikol Pashinyan. In this article, I will talk about the road to the June 20 elections, the pre-election conditions, the election results, and the reasons why the revolutionary government was able to maintain its position despite the huge loss of territory and human lives in the war.

## The political situation in Armenia after the war

Defeat and heavy losses in the Second Karabakh War caused a panic inside Armenia and sparked anti-government protests. On the night of November 9, 2020, hours before the signing of the trilateral ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, 17 political parties issued a [statement](#) demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan. Among them was the Prosperous Armenia Party, represented in parliament and led by businessman Gagik Tsarukyan. The day after the agreement was signed, the united opposition declared the prime minister a traitor, held their first mass protest in Yerevan, and [announced](#) the establishment of the National Salvation Committee. It seemed that the opposition was well-organized with a concrete plan and that the government would not withstand the pressure when, in the following days, Vazgen Manukyan, an experienced politician who had previously served as prime minister and defense minister, [was nominated](#) to head a provisional government; under the leadership of Catholicos Karekin II, the church, for centuries the most influential institution in Armenian society, [joined](#) in the calls for the

prime minister's resignation and supported the idea of [creating](#) a provisional national unity government; the National Academy of Sciences and Yerevan State University [called](#) on the government to resign; and the December 5 rally issued an [ultimatum](#) to Pashinyan to resign by the afternoon of December 8. The most important component, however, was missing – mass support from the people.

It proved impossible to gather large crowds for the protests. This is the likely explanation for the failure of the opposition coalition to break the parliamentary majority which backed the government, as well as the fact that the police maintained order without disobeying and continued to protect administrative buildings. Thus, Pashinyan neither resigned voluntarily, nor was it possible to remove him through legal means. As a result, the anti-Pashinyan movement attempted, as a last resort, to carry out its plans through illegal means, with the military interfering in politics. On February 25, 2021, the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces issued a written [statement](#) calling for the prime minister's resignation, which was immediately [supported](#) by the National Salvation Committee. The General Staff's appeal was similar to what happened in Turkey on February 28, 1997, and went down in history as the Postmodern Coup, because the generals did not take the army to the streets and did not declare their seizure of power. On March 1, Pashinyan held a large [rally](#) of his supporters in Yerevan to counter this threat with the support of the street, the revolution's main resource. The best way to end the confrontation, the instability, and the political crisis was to turn to the people again, and knowing that he had greater public support than his rivals, on March 18 Pashinyan [announced](#) a snap parliamentary election and set June 20 as the date.

He promptly decided to amend the election law as well. Under the previous legislation, deputies were elected through a hybrid proportional and rating system. In other words, voters voted both for nationwide parties and blocs, and, as in a

majoritarian system, for individual candidates within a certain territory. If they crossed the minimum barrier, parties and blocs won a certain number of seats according to the number of votes they received, and in the rating system, the candidates who received the most votes were elected. This system facilitated the election of prominent regional figures with influence and power on the ground. The proposed amendments to the Electoral Code provided for the abandonment of the rating system and the transition to a fully proportional system. On April 1, a special session of the parliament approved a [draft law](#) *On addendums and amendments to the Constitutional Law on the Election Code*. The change in the electoral system was designed to facilitate (successfully, as it turned out) the victory of the Civic Contract Party, which was built around the figure of Pashinyan and relied on his personal reputation, and whose representatives include a large number of figures new or little-known to the public.

### **The election campaign and the border conflict**

According to the law, campaigning was supposed to start on June 7, but in fact it began immediately after the war. The Central Election Commission [registered](#) 22 political parties and four blocs to participate in the elections. One difference compared to previous elections was that two of the three presidents who ruled Armenia during independence (Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Robert Kocharyan) participated directly, while another (Serzh Sargsyan) was involved indirectly. The first president, Ter-Petrosyan, was on the electoral list of the Armenian National Congress, of which he was the leader, and Kocharyan ran as a candidate in the Hayastan (Armenia) bloc together with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*) and former governor of Syunik Vahe Hakobyan's Reborn Armenian Party. Sargsyan's Republican Party formed a bloc called I Have Honor with the Homeland Party founded by Artur Vanetsyan, the former head of Armenia's National Security Service who resigned after a disagreement with Pashinyan, but the former president himself did not run,

despite actively campaigning.

There was no doubt that Karabakh and war would dominate the pre-election discourse in Armenia, but starting May 12, the border dispute was added. On that day, Pashinyan [announced](#) that in the morning, Azerbaijani soldiers had violated the border between the Azerbaijani region of Lachin and the Armenian region of Syunik (Zangazur) and advanced 3.5 km in the direction of Sevlich (Garagol). In the following days, the border clashes continued, sometimes escalating, sometimes waning, and throughout the campaign the issue became an additional argument in the hands of the opposition, who said that Pashinyan could no longer protect Armenia's borders just as he could not protect Artsakh. Pashinyan presented a different [interpretation](#) of the events, saying that his victory was not in Azerbaijan's interests and it was trying to influence the results of the elections to get the Armenian people to vote the way it preferred (i.e. for the opposition). Was that really the case? It is difficult to say for sure: on the one hand, it is known that the President of Azerbaijan has repeatedly [issued](#) stern warnings to revanchist forces promising to recover Armenia's lost territories, especially Hadrut and Shusha. But on the other hand, the Azerbaijani side could have waited until after June 20 to resolve the border dispute – the issue was not urgent. Moscow's indifference to the Armenian government's [request](#) for assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization in resolving the border conflict, as well as its direct [request](#) for assistance from Russia under the 1997 Interstate Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, showed that Russia was not concerned with the current situation and would not rush to intervene.

This can be explained by the fact that, first, despite its commitments to Armenia as an ally, Russia preferred to remain relatively neutral during the 44-day war and in the following period as well, which allows it to act as a mediator and arbitrator in resolving all issues between Azerbaijan and

Armenia, and as a result to become even stronger in the region. For example, at an early stage, Russia [increased](#) its military presence in Syunik, and additional border forces were brought to the area from Russia. (The Zangazur road, which will connect Azerbaijan's western regions with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, will be controlled by Russian border guards.) Second, what happened on the border was expected to negatively affect Pashinyan's approval rating, but Moscow was not worried, as the political alternative in Armenia was a bloc formed under the leadership of President Putin's personal friend Kocharyan. On the eve of the election, Putin and Kocharyan spoke twice. During Kocharyan's visit to Moscow in early April, it was reported that they [talked](#) online for about an hour. In May, it was [reported](#) that Kocharyan had spoken with Putin again by telephone while in Russia. Overall, in the first half of 2021, Putin and Kocharyan, a pensioner with no official position, held discussions three times online and over the phone, which says all there is to say about the attitude of the Russian state toward Kocharyan. Shortly before election day, several well-known ethnically Armenian Russian businessmen – [Samvel Karapetyan](#), owner of the Tashir group; [Sergei Ambartsumyan](#), director of the Monarch group; [Karen Karapetyan](#), former Armenian Prime Minister and a senior figure in Gazprom; and others – called on the Armenian people to vote for the Hayastan bloc. On the eve of the election, Russia's central media gave Kocharyan special attention, while Russia's state-run Sputnik-Armenia, which operates in Armenia, provided media support for the second president's campaign and attacked Pashinyan. In an [interview](#) with RIA Novosti, Russia Today, and Sputnik-Armenia, Kocharyan said that the Armenian government was distrusted in Russia and that Pashinyan had built his careers in journalism and politics on anti-Russian slogans.

The Hayastan and Honor blocs' rhetoric and promises were similar. Both [stated](#) that they would [attempt](#) to get the Azerbaijani army out of Nagorno-Karabakh (meaning Shusha and Hadrut) through negotiations. In light of their ideological

and political proximity, they were expected to form a [coalition](#) government after the elections. That is to say, if they could win at least 54% of the seats in parliament, as required by law, they would reproduce the old regime overthrown by the revolution. The first president, Ter-Petrosyan, tried to offer a third option in a highly polarized society. Referring to the Pashinyan and Karabakh clans, he [said](#) that the people were being offered the choice between a government that had failed and a force that was trying to restore the looting, criminal, oligarchic system, but the path to progress lay elsewhere. Ter-Petrosyan [predicted](#) that the upcoming elections would be the most embarrassing in the country's history, and that there could even be clashes between the two extremes. However, his catastrophic prognosis did not come true.

### **Electoral arithmetic and the political results**

According to the official [data](#) of the Central Election Commission of Armenia, 49.4% of voters (1,282,411 people) took part in the June 20 elections. The turnout was very close to the previous figure – 48.63% in the December 2018 elections. These figures show that half of the citizens in Armenia have lost faith in both apolitical and political institutions. Although Pashinyan's Civic Contract Party received only 53.91% (687,000) of the vote, compared to 70.43% (884,000) in the last election, it won more than 54% of the seats in parliament and the right to form a government on its own without the need for a coalition partner. The main alternative to the ruling party, the Hayastan bloc, came in second with 21.9% (269,000) of the vote, giving former President Kocharyan the status of opposition leader. Although the I Have Honor bloc, backed by Sargsyan, failed to pass the minimum threshold of 7%, receiving only 5.23% of the vote (66,000), it will nevertheless be represented thanks to a law requiring at least three political parties or blocs in parliament.

Immediately after the election, both Hayastan and I Have Honor

refused to recognize the results and [announced](#) that they would dispute them in court, [claiming](#) that serious violations had taken place and that administrative resources had been used to the maximum in favor of the ruling party. However, Russia's official position and unwavering acceptance of the election results suggest that the opposition's protests will not go beyond formal legal proceedings and will not have any political consequences. In parallel with the OSCE [mission](#), the observation missions of Russia's dominant agencies – the CIS Parliamentary Assembly, the CIS Executive Committee, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Russian-Belarusian Parliamentary Assembly – gave a generally positive [assessment](#) of the elections; the Russian president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov [stressed](#) that Pashinyan won a resounding victory; and finally President Putin personally [congratulated](#) Pashinyan – all of which leaves no doubt about the election's legitimacy. Consequently, Sargsyan was forced to [recognize](#) Pashinyan's victory four days later.

And now the question on everyone's mind: how did a leader who lost a war and, in just a month and a half, lost territories which had been under Armenia's control for 28-29 years, regain the people's confidence and successfully defend his power?

The June 20 elections can be seen not only as a routine vote for a legislature and a government, but also as a plebiscite on the country's future. The people were choosing between *the old* and *the new* and their competing visions. Kocharyan and Sargsyan, politicians from Karabakh, were in power for 20 consecutive years, a period that is not remembered as one of progress and prosperity. Only three years ago, the country was transformed by a peaceful revolution, and not enough time has passed for the people to properly assess the newcomers. The population understands that the Karabakh problem, like all the others, was inherited by Pashinyan and wants to give him time. Pashinyan represents the future in people's eyes, while Kocharyan and Sargsyan represent the past. The promise to



*restore the borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic* could not have evoked any positive emotions in a society where families have just survived a war and are still searching for the bodies of their children. Pashinyan, however, spoke about the future, his promises were in that mold, and that turned out to be more important than the specific content of what he said. Kocharyan, an experienced politician, also spoke about this factor in his dispassionate [analysis](#) of the election, saying that the majority of voters voted against the return of the previous government. “We could not break through that impression, and that was probably the last bullet of the revolution,” he said. Positioning himself as a third option, the first president Ter-Petrosyan’s position that *the government is bad, and the radical opposition is even worse*, failed to generate enthusiasm, and his party received only 1.54% (about 20,000) of the votes.