

Arayik Harutyunyan wins landslide victory in Nagorno-Karabakh presidential election

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Former Prime Minister Arayik Harutyunyan has won a landslide victory in the second round of Nagorno-Karabakh's presidential elections, winning 88% of the vote.

Tuesday's vote saw Harutyunyan face Foreign Minister Masis Mayilyan, who came second during the first round with 26.4% of the vote.

On 5 April, Mayilyan urged voters not to take part in the elections to avoid the spread of the coronavirus. He himself did not take part in Tuesday's vote.

Harutyunyan fell just short of the required 50% of votes to win the presidency outright during the first round of elections on 31 March, winning 49.3%.

There has been widespread speculation that Harutyunyan is Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's first choice for the post, though Pashinyan has not expressed support for any candidate.

In an interview with OC Media, Emil Sanamyan, a Washington-based analyst and a fellow at the University of Southern California's Institute of Armenian Studies, said that the results of the first round made the outcome of the second round fairly predictable.

'By calling for a boycott, Mayilyan conceded defeat and also helped lower COVID-related risks that the election carried,' explained Sanamyan.

In his concession speech, Mayilyan stated that the second round was purely technical. 'It [the elections] took place when the country had already confirmed cases of the virus and an emergency situation was declared,' said Mayilyan. 'The results of the second round don't have any meaning for our political team. If they had, then we would not have halted our election campaign.'

The 31 March elections, the first combined presidential and parliamentary elections in Nagorno-Karabakh following a referendum in 2017 that changed the country's constitution, saw five parties win seats in its 33-seat parliament.

Arayik Harutyunyan's Free Motherland Party in alliance with the United Civic Alliance party, won the most seats, 16, with 39.7% of the vote. This was one seat short of the number required to form a majority government.

In a press conference on 1 April, Harutyunyan announced that they were ready to talk with the other four parties who had won seats in parliament to form a coalition.

Voting amidst a pandemic

The elections were marred with controversy due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and around the world. Several presidential candidates, including Mayilyan, published a joint statement before the first round urging the authorities to declare a state of emergency and postpone the elections.

However, the authorities went ahead with the first round on 31 March and instead enforced several measures to prevent the spread of the virus leading up to and during the election, including partially closing borders, and shutting down schools.

Despite concerns, the 31 March elections saw a 72.7% turnout compared to the 51.8% turnout during the 2015 parliamentary elections.

On 7 April, the authorities confirmed its first coronavirus case. However, the second round of elections were not postponed, with outgoing President Bako Sahakyan declaring an Emergency Situation in the country on 12 April.

This allowed authorities to move ahead with the elections but enforce stricter measures on the population in terms of movement and economic activity. On the day of the election, there were 6 confirmed cases in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The rules of the emergency situation mean people can leave their homes only for essential purposes and need to carry special documentation. They were allowed to go to vote on the day of the election.

Soon after the first round of the elections, Arayik Harutyunyan announced that he would not hold in-person meetings during the second-round campaign.

On the day of the elections, polling stations were disinfected and antimicrobial disinfectants were provided to voters. Nearly 71,000 masks and pairs of gloves were distributed. Voters were also given their own pens to cast their votes.

Sanamyan told OC Media that the out-going president, Bako Sahakyan, declared an emergency situation more as a public relations gesture than because of public pressure.

Turnout for the second round was lower than in the first round two weeks prior — from 72% down to 45%.

However, Harutyunyan increased the number of votes gained in every province except in the capital and one polling station in Yerevan. He received 39,860 votes in the second round compared to 36,076 in the first round.

Voter turnout was especially low in the village of Mirik, where the first case was confirmed, with only 10% of eligible voters showing up to the polls.

Arpine Hovhannisyan, Director of the Legal Education and Control NGO, which was monitoring the elections, told Aravot that the low turnout was predictable.

'We have to take into account that the first round also included the parliamentary elections', explained Hovhannisyan, adding that there were also ten presidential candidates in the first round, which would have brought out more possible voters.

On the evening of 14 April, when preliminary results already indicated Harutyunyan was the clear winner, he posted on Facebook that the reason for the low turnout, in his opinion, was that people already knew that he was going to win.

'In any case, we are entering a new phase in the Republic of Artsakh's [Nagorno-Karabakh] democracy', wrote Harutyunyan. 'Nothing is ever done flawlessly, even in the most developed countries.'

A new constitution

The 2020 elections were the first to be held since a 2017 constitutional referendum turned Nagorno-Karabakh's governmental structure from a semi-presidential to a fully-presidential one.

Due to the constitutional amendments, outgoing President Bako Sahakyan's second term was extended so that the next parliamentary and presidential elections would coincide. As a result, Sahakyan served an additional three years after his term ended in 2017.

Despite Sahakyan being expected to participate again in the 2020 elections, on 11 June 2019, he announced that he would not be running.

Many had speculated that postponing the elections would have led to an extension of Sahakyan's already-prolonged presidency which could have caused a constitutional crisis

Presidential candidate, Davit Babayan, the President's Press Secretary and Deputy Chief of Staff, told Azatutyun on 28 March that delaying the election would lead to people politically manipulating the situation.

Emil Sanamyan told OC Media that if the elections were to be postponed it should have happened before the first round on 31 March.

'Had elections been postponed between the two rounds, what we would have had is an effectively split leadership: between the incumbent president and the 2 challengers.'

'That would certainly be a recipe for a political crisis.'

Sanamyan said he believed Bako Sahakyan's actions were taken in coordination with Yerevan. 'Had [Armenian PM] Nikol Pashinyan called for postponement, it would have happened,' he said.

On the evening of 14 April, Armenian President Armen Sarkissian called Arayik Harutyunyan to congratulate him on his victory. Sarkissian specifically noted, 'Nagorno-Karabakh once again proved that it is an established country with its state institutions and, most importantly, with its citizens. Today more than ever there is a need to be united and unified.'

For ease of reading, we choose not to use qualifiers such as 'de facto', 'unrecognised', or 'partially recognised' when discussing institutions or political positions within Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. This does not imply a position on their status.

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