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## **Democracy in Armenia: The Only Way Forward**

Artur Baghdasaryan  
Speaker of the National Assembly of Armenia

Russia and Eurasia Program  
*Caucasus Initiative*

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On August 31, 2005, the Chairman of the National Assembly of Armenia, Artur Baghdasaryan, delivered remarks at CSIS. Russia and Eurasia Program Fellow Cory Welt moderated the discussion. The following is a summary of the chairman's presentation.

Artur Baghdasaryan's party, Orinats Yerkir (Country of Law), came to power by forming a coalition with two other parties in Armenia, the Republican Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (or Dashnaktsiutun). Orinats Yerkir considers itself a "reformist force" in the Armenian government. It entered the ruling coalition, according to the chairman, in order "to change something for the better."

Baghdasaryan noted that while Armenia is engaged in a process of active reform, the collapse of the Soviet Union "has [still] not come to fruition." Many politicians and other elites have still not broken with the stereotypes created and instilled in them by the communist regime. "Old thinking," Baghdasaryan argued, has hindered the process of reform by reinforcing corrupt political structures. "We...believe that these old stereotypes should be broken and [that] we should make a quicker leap towards the future." The only way to "go forward" is to introduce free elections and, in general, to promote an acceleration of political reform in Armenia.

Armenia's main governance challenge is the establishment of a legal sphere that complies with international standards. Baghdasaryan emphasized that democracy is built on "law rather than exception[s]" and that Armenia has properly begun its reforms with the main law of the country – the constitution. "If in any part of the [government] there is an excessive concentration of power," said the chairman, "we should realize that this power may be used for both good and evil." The goals of political reform in Armenia include the decentralization of authority, the creation of an effective system of human rights protection, "the...exclusion of any influence of the executive power on the judiciary," and strong local governance. The chairman also asserted the importance of strengthening the power of the parliament, noting that "a country with a weak parliament cannot be democratic." Baghdasaryan acknowledged that "none of this is very easy to realize in Armenia," and that the struggle "between the new and the old" has been going on for two years. Having received a positive opinion from the Council of Europe on proposed constitutional reforms, the government hopes to organize a referendum on the reforms in November.

Baghdasaryan emphasized the importance of organizing democratic elections. He pointed out that a new electoral code will improve the prospects for democratic elections, and that for the first time in Armenia a national voter registrar is being created. “Free and trustworthy elections” are an “investment in Armenia.” In general, the chairman called for the establishment of a “free market, free society, [and] free media” in Armenia, but stated that the precondition for all these things is the holding of free elections. In this regard, the chairman also spoke approvingly of U.S. assistance which, he said, facilitates the development of democracy in Armenia.

Baghdasaryan blamed the post-Soviet oligarchic order for hindering the process of reforms. “We have to keep developing a free market and not only talk, but act, in the fight against corruption.” The chairman asserted that there should be “no privileged people before the law....Business should not be a combination of sport and war. It should be something the middle class can initiate.”

Finally, the willingness of civil society to fight for their rights is of tantamount importance to Armenian democracy. A large part of Armenian society is not aware of their rights. They need to be, and they must learn how to fight for them.

On the foreign policy front, Baghdasaryan emphasized the importance of communication and cooperation with other countries in the region. “We should change our thinking and build up our relationships on the basis of the future,” said the chairman. The chairman also called for Armenia to “go forward with a constructive dialogue” with Turkey. Such a dialogue will require “daring,” but the sooner it happens, the better the results will be. Baghdasaryan expressed support for Turkey’s membership in the European Union, “if Turkey complies with all the standards required.” Baghdasaryan added that he foresaw the entire Caucasus region in a large and expanded European family.

Baghdasaryan also spoke of the potential for a regional parliamentary assembly to address local conflicts and to help create a lasting peaceful Caucasus. Coordinated democratic reforms in Armenia and throughout the whole region will “bring [all three states] closer.” The assembly could also be a mechanism to help the Caucasus become a united economic area.

Baghdasaryan asserted that Armenia and Azerbaijan are “quite close” to resolving the Karabagh conflict. Within Armenia, the political parties have signed a joint agreement to work towards peaceful resolution. The conflict, he said, cannot be resolved by compromises on one side. “Both sides should yield for the sake of the future” and the end result must be a “just and fair solution.”

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