

Was the change of government from semi-presidential to a parliamentary system in 2015 necessary for Armenia?

FND101 Freshman Seminar Section B

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As tension arises between Azerbaijan and Armenia, in the current geopolitical situation, Armenia faces yet another possible constitutional change. On January 19, 2024, the prime minister of Armenia publicly announced to the minister of justice that Armenia needs a new constitution (Sahakian, 2024). Making amendments to the constitution is a fundamental process for a country. It should be a topic for mass discussions, which raises many questions about the purpose of such changes in the constitution.

Since its adoption in July 1995, the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia has undertaken two significant changes in its history. In 2001, as Armenia joined the Council of Europe (“Armenia // 46 States, one Europe”, 2024), new requirements arose around the constitution. In 2005, the new changes were amended, which lessened the role of the president by shifting some of its duties to the parliament (“Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia”, 2005), being fundamental in the process of developing democracy in Armenia.

The second amendment was in 2015, which fundamentally changed the structure of the government from a semi-presidential republic to a parliamentary republic by shifting almost all the president’s duties to the parliament and the prime minister (“Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia”, 2015). This raised many questions regarding the need for such amendments. The change from the semi-presidential system to a parliamentary system was unnecessary for Armenia, as the political system lacked well-developed and diverse political parties, and the country was not stable enough for such a drastic change, considering the tough background it had faced.

Modern governments are based on the principle of the separation of powers. A typical separation of power includes a division of three branches. First is the legislative branch, which is responsible for forming and passing the laws in a country. The second branch is the executive branch, which is responsible for executing the law. This includes the cabinet, the head of which is the prime minister, and the ministries. Lastly, the judicial branch is responsible for maintaining justice. These three separate divisions form what

is called the checks and balances system. This allows each branch to check the other branch and maintain balance in the government (James et al., 2023).

The Second Amendment fundamentally changed the semi-presidential republic to a parliamentary government system. In a semi-presidential republic, there are two elected political powers: the president and the parliament. The leader of the executive branch (the cabinet) is the prime minister, appointed by the president, and shall enjoy the confidence of the majority of the parliament and oversee domestic policies. The president, on the other hand, is the head of the state and is responsible for the foreign and defense policies of the country, as well as other duties. However, according to the latest constitution, those responsibilities are transferred to the parliament and the prime minister, and the president undertakes a more ceremonial role in the government (“Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia”, 2015). As we will see, this change introduced many problems for which the country needed more time to prepare.

First, the political system was not prepared, as Armenia did not have well-developed and diverse political parties. As the president’s power shifted to the parliament, the importance of it increased. The idea of the opposition in the parliament plays a crucial role in the functioning of a country. First, the opposition must hold the government accountable if it believes its policies put the public interest at stake. Second, it discusses alternative policies that lead to better and more well-developed laws for the country. Lastly, they provide diverse viewpoints. In a democracy, the government is elected to represent the people, and having multiple political parties with different views better represents the people (Schmitz, 1988). Although the name “opposition” suggests that they should always be opposite the major party, in reality, they should mainly cooperate with them to improve the country.

However, in Armenia, the political party system is not diverse, and the political parties need to be developed to cooperate. In 2017, the parliament of Armenia consisted of four political parties, with the significant party holding 55% of the seats. After the 2018 snap elections, the parliament had one political alliance with a 2/3 majority and two parties. Most things stayed the same in 2021: one political party with an almost 2/3 majority and two alliances (“Parliamentary Elections”, 2021). Conversely, Finland has been a parliamentary republic since 2000, and now the parliament consists of nine parties, partnerships, and coalitions, with a majority of 55% (Clausnitzer, 2023). Lack of diversity can lead to hyper-concentration of power in the hands of one political party, which can lead to disregard of the public interest and priorities shifted from the people to that political party, as they have the majority of the votes and can pass whatever law they want. Hence, the political system was not ready, so changing from semi-presidential to parliamentary was unnecessary.

Secondly, the country was not ready for such drastic changes, considering the background of Armenia and the economic and geopolitical situation in 2015. From 1920 to

1991, Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. Although it was considered democratic, it was not what we expect today. In 1991, Armenia declared itself an independent democratic republic (“Declaration of Independence”, 1991). Suddenly, the people of Armenia undertook the responsibility of shaping a country. The geopolitical situation did not help since Armenia was in the middle of the first Artsakh war against Azerbaijan.

Moreover, the energy crisis happened, hitting the economy (Balabanyan et al., 2006), and those years are known as the years of dark and cold. Although the semi-presidential government system before 2015 concentrated most of the country’s power in the hands of the president, pushing Armenia further from democracy, it is argued that it is what Armenia needed. A developing country with a poor economy and external conflicts needs a leader to lead the country out of the challenging situation and to stabilize. In such cases, a more “authoritarian” democracy is preferred, as a single leader (Ross, 2006), the president, is directly elected and responsible for leading the country. Conversely, in a parliamentary system, there is no true leader, as the only elected power is the parliament, and no single political figure is responsible for successes and failures. Considering these difficult circumstances, Armenia was not economically stable enough to transition to a parliamentary system, and thus, the change was unnecessary.

In conclusion, we see that the decision to transition from semi-presidential to parliamentary was not necessary, considering that the political system had lack in diversity and development and the country had a difficult economical and geopolitical situation. A constitution is the fundamental law that should express the desires of the people, rather than the interests of the current political power. We are on the verge of possible amendments to the constitution, and every citizen must participate in the amendment process, by critically assessing the proposed changes, participating in ongoing discussions and debates. It is our civil duty to participate in the design process of our government and to cast votes that truly reflect our desires.

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