

A stylized map of Armenia composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to indicate specific locations or regions.

Parliamentary Elections in Armenia: From Decorative to Genuine Democracy?

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- Armenia's parliamentary elections on May 6, 2012 took place in the context of discussions on potential cooperation between Armenia and the European Union. In comparison with the scandalous events around the presidential elections of 2008 this year's elections are considered a positive step by international observers. However, there were various incidents which indicate that the distortion of the genuine will of the Armenian electorate is no less than before. A final evaluation of Armenia's readiness for deeper cooperation with the EU will be possible only after the presidential election in 2013.
- The parliamentary election has restricted the field of possible competitors in the battle for the president's chair. The alliances formed after the elections in defiance of any political principle or program are the prelude to prepare for the presidential election in 2013, but without favourizing any particular contender of the incumbent Serzh Sargsyan yet. The absence of any consolidated program and political preferences among those parties entering the National Assembly does not instill confidence in a genuine democratic development or an effective reform strategy. The system of an oligarchic democracy has proved itself very enduring.
- Any alternative agenda depends more than ever on the active influence of external factors. These might include the establishment of the Russian driven »Eurasian Union« or the European Union »Eastern Partnership«, based on the principle of »more for more« and focused on »deep and sustainable democracy«. The strengthening of the positive tendencies in relation to the 2013 elections, as well as European Institution's clear formulation of new expectations of progress could act as a catalyst for genuine democratization rather than the »decorative« democracy evidenced in the elections of May 6.

Armenia's parliamentary elections took place on 6th May 2012. According to official results, victory went to the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), led by incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan, which, under proportional representation, won 44.02 percent of electoral votes, giving it 40 of the 90 seats in the new National Assembly, allocated on the basis of party lists. In addition to this, candidates from the RPA were declared victorious in 29 of the 41 single-mandate constituencies. On that basis, claiming 69 of 131 parliamentary seats (up from 64 seats in the 2007 elections), the Republicans will have an absolute majority in the legislature.

Second place went to the Prosperous Armenia party (led by one of the country's richest entrepreneurs, Gagik Tsarukyan). Prosperous Armenia gained 30.12 percent of the vote – twice as much as in the last parliamentary election, when they joined the ruling coalition with the RPA. Taking into account candidates in single-mandate constituencies, Prosperous Armenia will now have 36 seats in the National Assembly and rejected partnership with the Republicans in the new coalition.

The next four parties essentially lag behind these two leaders and include: the Armenian National Congress bloc (headed by the country's first President (1991–1998)) Levon Ter-Petrosyan; the Heritage Party; the Armenian Revolutionary Federation («Dashnaksutyun»); and the Rule of Law party – only just clearing the bar requiring seven percent of the vote for political blocs, and five percent for political parties but likely, nonetheless, to secure between five and seven seats in the new parliament. Contrary to Prosperous Armenian, Rule of Law joined the ruling coalition again. Three other parties, included in proportional representation voting – the Armenian Communist Party, the Democratic Party of Armenia, and the United Armenians party – failed meeting the five percent election threshold.

This election campaign could in no way be described as commonplace. For one thing, consistent with political tradition in Armenia, any parliamentary elections taking place immediately before presidential polls (February 2013) tend, as a rule, to predetermine the outcome of the latter and to resolve the question of who will wield power until the next electoral cycle. Campaigning for the presidential election will take place in less than a year, and the success of the RPA on 6th May has sharply increased the current head of state's chances of a second term.

Secondly, preparations for parliamentary elections took place in the context of discussions on potential cooperation between Armenia and the European Union – a situation which will, first and foremost, depend on significant democratic change within the country. Given the severe social and economic situation in which the country currently finds itself as a result of the global economic crisis, international assistance counts for a great deal. As a result of the scandalous events around the presidential election of 2008 Armenia has already lost financing through the United States' Millennium Challenge Corporation: the repetition of a scenario similar to that of four years ago would obliterate any expectations relating to the European Commission.

Official Yerevan has been trying, in recent months, to convince the European partners of its determination to conduct exemplary parliamentary elections; and certain actions did suggest that this was more than just words. As a matter of fact, though, government agencies in Armenia have done nothing to investigate the tragic events of March 2008, when the dispersal of post-election demonstrations by state security services resulted in the death of ten people. Nonetheless, all political prisoners were released in Armenia during 2011, and freedom of association (having been severely curtailed since 2004) was restored. Encouraging sounds were heard from Brussels in response to this: unofficially, a possible injection of up to EUR 1.5 billion was rumoured – an amount exceeding half the country's annual budget.

Observers testify to progress but ...

Overall, the general consensus of the international community regarding the 2012 elections was positive. Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle welcomed »progress towards a more transparent and competitive electoral process«.

The 2012 elections compare favourably with those immediately preceding them insofar as they at least did not involve violence, and took place without any confirmed incidences of mass ballot-stuffing. In general, equal opportunities for campaigning prevailed throughout – in terms of both media coverage and meetings with the electorate. With regard to international perception of the

elections, considerable significance lay in the fact that the announcement of the results was not followed by mass protests. The actions of the opposition (Armenian National Congress) were limited to an appeal to the Constitutional Court to recognise the elections as invalid. The appeal was rejected; however ANC intends to apply to the European Court of Human Rights.

Notwithstanding fundamental progress in the external, visible aspects of the electoral process, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the distortion of the genuine will of the Armenian electorate is no less than before. The most significant techniques used in limiting free expression of will in the election included employers pressurising staff, the use of various »administrative« (i.e. government) resources, and an unprecedented level of bribery – of voters, proxies, and members of the electoral commissions.

A wide range of educational institutions, public utilities, and health, social, and housing services were dragged into the electoral process. Given government employees' and civil servants' political dependence on their bosses, as well as the merging of business and government, members of the ruling coalition had exclusive leverage in calling in favours or otherwise influencing governmental organs. This relates, predominantly, to the RPA and also – in proportion to their presence in and weight in the government of the country – to Prosperous Armenia and the Rule of Law party. These infringements could not have been possible without the engagement of state bodies at various levels.

The most significant aspect of electoral manipulation concerned electoral registers. These totalled more than two and a half million names, while, according to the previous year's census, there are fewer than 2,900,000 people living in the country. The disparity between these figures itself gives rise to serious suspicions of padding of voting lists – the number of voters (18 years old and above) is very unlikely to be about 90 percent of total number of citizens. The hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Armenia in the post-Soviet years but retaining their citizenship would not have been able to vote since current legislation does not provide for the functioning of electoral districts beyond the borders of the Republic of Armenia.

Various evaluations indicate that the number of citizens present in Armenia on Election Day and those having the right to vote could be up to 700,000 less than the figure

indicated in electoral registers. Groups of local observers attest to numerous instances of residence permits pertaining to multiple (including non-existent) addresses – giving holders the opportunity of voting several times, simply by moving from one electoral district to another. To this end the »marshrutki« (fixed-route taxi-bus) fleet was mobilized – a business to all intents and purposes operated as a monopoly by members of the RPA leadership.

More absurdity was made possible by the use of ink for passport stamps that was intended to evaporate after twelve hours. This innovation was brought in to facilitate, on the one hand, the right of citizens to keep secret the fact of their participation or non-participation in the elections and, on the other, to prevent voting a second time. However, this ink, specially purchased in the United Kingdom, evaporated in half an hour. During the course of voting the Central Electoral Commission saw fit to swap »intelligent« ink for standard, with the result that this innovation ended in a complete fiasco. On the one hand organised groups of multiple voters were fulfilling their mission from early morning, when the »disappearing ink« was still in use, while, on the other, those people voting later had permanent stamps in their passports, violating the principle of confidentiality.

International observers' satisfaction with the apparently calm and organized approach to the electoral campaign could not prevent them from understanding – on the basis of a range of indicators – that things were far from running smoothly. On the basis of their statements (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/90332>) it is possible to conclude that any final evaluation of Armenia's readiness for deeper cooperation with the European Union will be given only after the presidential election in 2013.

And on to the presidential election ...

The parliamentary campaign has, if nothing else restricted the field of possible competitors to Serzh Sargsyan in the battle for the president's chair. The second president of the Republic of Armenia (1998–2008), Robert Kocharyan, whose shadow has long been felt behind the backbone of the Prosperous Armenia party, is hardly likely to enter into open competition with erstwhile brother-in-arms Sargsyan. In the event of a victory for

Prosperous Armenia, Kocharyan would have a strong case for replacing the incumbent president as an »establishment« candidate. But it might now be time for the second president to finally forget about his dream to return to the office.

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1998–2008) Vardan Oskanyan five years ago competed with Serzh Sargsyan for the status of Kocharyan's successor, and retained presidential ambitions up to the current parliamentary elections. Despite his repeated attempts to deny his closeness to the second president, few in Armenia doubt that he represents Kocharyan's »double« – a conviction which has become all the stronger following his joining Prosperous Armenia shortly before the 2012 vote. Oskanyan has chances to run for presidency if Prosperous Armenia decides to remain a competitor to the RPA and provides an alternative to Sargsyan's candidacy. In which case Oskanyan will attempt to present himself to the electorate as an alternative »establishment« candidate: in the event of his succeeding it might be reasonable to expect the appointment of Kocharyan as Prime Minister and unofficial head of state.

The Republican Party, having got their hands on more than 50 percent of parliamentary seats, tried to convince Prosperous Armenia to stay in the ruling coalition and to announce its support of Sargsyan's candidacy in 2013. Both offers of additional portfolios in the cabinet and hints on problematic fate of the leader of Prosperous Armenia Tsarukyan, who could expect no favours in the business arena, were used as arguments. Almost all forecasts envisaged this party remaining in the coalition and, ultimately, declaring in favour of a second term for Sargsyan – a situation it has long sought to avoid. Oskanyan has previously categorically opposed any coalition between Prosperous Armenia and the RPA.

Eventually, Tsarukyan and his party managed to again postpone the statement of its commitment to support an incumbent President and chose to take the status of »constructive opposition«. The issue of whether Prosperous Armenia will come up with its own candidacy in 2013 or return in the ruling coalition under leadership of Serzh Sargsyan remains open. This means that Tsarukyan received certain guarantees, at least till the presidential campaign, of his business interests being protected. Robert Kocharyan would hardly be sufficient to ensure such protection. It is quite likely that patronage

came from the Kremlin, which seems to be concerned with articulated pro-European aspirations of the current Armenian leadership and might decide to promote a counter-balance. Yet in 2011 Prosperous Armenia was still developing links with both, on one hand, Russian, Belarusian and current (lead by Yanukovich) Ukrainian political establishments, and, on another hand, with the European Movement (Tsarukyan in fact sponsored EM's regional Congress in Yerevan in last October. But it looks like some months ago Tsarukyan made a final choice in favour of Russian orientation).

Thus, negotiations between RPA and PAP on a joint candidate for the upcoming presidential elections may include also the issues of Armenia's support of the »Eurasian Union« initiative pushed forward by Russia, as well as of Vardan Oskanyan's or Robert Kocharyan's appointment as prime-minister. The second President hoped that in 2008 the same scenario of prime-minister/president reshuffle as in Russia will happen in Armenia. However, both Serzh Sargsyan and majority of Republicans were strongly against competing ambitions in the country's leadership. Now Kocharyan may rely on Moscow's and PAP's promotion to achieve this goal.

One of the signs that the resolution of many external and internal political issues postpone until the presidential elections is the absence of essential changes in the government despite many expectations. Hovik Abrahamyan, who headed the RPA's pre-election headquarter, returned to his seat of the Chairman of the National Assembly, Tigran Sargsyan was re-appointed Prime Minister, Artur Baghdasaryan kept his position of the Secretary of the National Security Council. That fact, that there have been rather few changes in the government, however, does not necessarily translate to the same choice of presidential candidates as in 2008.

First president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan is unlikely to stay in active politics, having already turned down a parliamentary seat. Now, when all of his former comrades-in-arms from the 2008 presidential campaign are at liberty, and several parliamentary seats are won for them as a result of the May 6 elections (the previous parliamentary elections of 1999 and 2003, taking place without the participation of the first president culminated in total failure), he can consider his mission accomplished.

Of those politicians whose names have been cited in the context of more or less realistic presidential prospects, Armenia's first Minister of Foreign Affairs (1991–92), now leader of the Heritage party, Raffi Hovannisyan, can remain in the race. Establishing his party in 2002 among individuals commanding considerable respect for their active citizenship, he was seen as offering his compatriots an alternative not just to the incumbent government, but also to its irritating opponents. However, Heritage has subsequently proved itself unable to »build« a party structure, and remaining, rather, a loose collection of individual interests, behaved inconsistently and discordantly on several occasions. Pre-election manoeuvres, incomprehensible to the wider electorate, together with the manipulation of party lists, resulted in the most popular Heritage politicians finding themselves in chanceless positions, turned many supporters against the party and its leader.

There is little doubt that the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (»Dashnaktsutyun«, a party with an over 100-year-long history) will field its own candidate in the presidential election. This party has a stable (though small) electoral base, which has, however, reduced somewhat since its period in the governing coalition of 2003–09. The ideology of the ARF, combining nationalism and socialism, has proved difficult to reconcile with the oligarchic nature of Armenian politics, resulting in a loss of supporters. The ARF is arguably the only party in the country not focussed around a leader and it is, in the circumstances, difficult to predict who will be its presidential candidate in 2013.

A quite successful candidate in the 2008 presidential campaign, the leader of the Rule of Law party Artur Baghdasarian, who was then behind only of Sargsyan and Ter-Petrosyan, is almost out of the 2013 race. After recent parliamentary election his party formed a coalition with RPA and committed to support the incumbent President.

These fortuitous circumstances for Sargsyan's forthcoming presidential campaign could be ruined if an alliance of various political forces were to form around a single candidate. However, the very disparate views among the opposition (and insufficient time to resolve these), as well as the absence of any uniting figurehead make such a situation highly unlikely.


The main threat to the incumbent president may still, as in 2008, come from the Armenian National Congress. Ter-Petrosyan's probable resignation might then be seen as an indicator for the appearance of new leaders.

Ex-prime minister (1993–96) Hrant Bagratyan and Armenian Times daily chief-editor Nikol Pashinyan, the former powerhouse behind Levon Ter-Petrosyan's campaign of 2008, hold the most viable claims to the role of new ANC leader. Neither lacks charisma, but they may fall short of material resources which, as has been demonstrated by the domination of the RPA and Prosperous Armenia in the 2012 elections, play an enormous role in securing votes.

Reform depends on external factors

The electoral campaign of 2012 turns out to have been a mere cipher, even if the full and open competition made a big impression on the international observers. It is difficult to identify any single issue, prior to the elections, around which principle-driven discussion could focus; the only possible hot-topic being the elections themselves – their organisation, adherence to the law, and the possibility of falsification. All other rhetoric beyond this fulfilled no purpose other than simply filling the airwaves – doing little to engage the electorate and in no way helping voters understand what to expect from any specific political force, should it achieve electoral success.

Such an atmosphere has given rise to the somewhat strange formation of two separate camps – comprising Prosperous Armenia, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, and the Armenian National Congress on one side, and the RPA, the Rule of Law party, and the Heritage party on the other. Both informal alliances brought together parties, representing the ruling coalition and opposition, having by definition strong ideological controversies. The first »troika« (i.e., Prosperous Armenia, the ARF and the ANC) were united in endeavouring to stop the RPA from using the administrative resource for outright victory in the elections, while, in the second group, the RPA tried to beat Prosperous Armenia at any price, thereby depriving ensuring success in the future presidential race. Two other parties from this camp set about capturing as many of the opposing troika's votes as possible, performing an obvious service for the RPA in the expectation of some form of reciprocity.



The Alliances, formed in defiance of any political principle and solely on the basis of expediency, provided that in the new National Assembly completely different coalitions might be established. The Republicans, despite having gained an absolute majority, realised the lack of legitimacy and were interested in forming a broad coalition. On the basis of relationships developed in the months preceding the elections, and given the issue of the presidential election, the preferred option for the RPA would be a coalition with Prosperous Armenia. This option did not work, and the de-facto coalition of Republicans with the Rule of Law party aimed not so much to increase the legitimacy of RPA, as to support RoL, which rapidly loses its popularity. This unnecessary, artificial alliance has nothing in common either with ideological similarities, or with political pragmatism.

The absence of any consolidated programmes or any clear ideological and political preferences among those parties entering the National Assembly (the exception perhaps being the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) does not instil confidence in democratic development or in elaboration of an effective reform strategy. The system of "oligarchic democracy", which assumes that most crucial issues are best resolved on the basis of the balance of interests of the various clans, controlling all and everything in the country, has proved itself very

enduring. In contrast to this, a more authoritarian style of democracy, as can be seen in Georgia or Russia, is slowly developing. If Armenia is left alone to develop exclusively in accordance with internal trends it would lead to a possible introduction of a unique hybrid of the two above-mentioned systems.

Any alternative agenda could be brought about only through the active influence of certain external factors. These might include the establishment of the proposed Russia-driven »Eurasian Union« (and the case for a discounted price for gas), or the European Commission's »Eastern Partnership« initiative, based on the principle of »more for more« and focussed on »deep and sustainable democracy«. In this context the parliamentary elections of 2012, taking place under a somewhat new regime for Armenia, together with the intended liberalisation of socio-political life in the country, attest to the extent to which the issue of Europeanization is currently being prioritised. The strengthening of various separate positive tendencies in relation to the 2013 elections, as well as European institutions' clear formulation of new expectations of progress – not just in elections per se, but also in the period preceding them – could act as a catalyst for genuine democratization rather than the »decorative« democracy evidenced in the elections of 6th May.



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