

situation, other activists and online users posted photographs of the stamp to show if it did or did not disappear.

Prior to election day, on 4 May, Facebook and Twitter, the micro-blogging service which has even fewer users in Armenia than Facebook, were used by some to share first news of an accident at a campaign rally and concert by the ruling Republican Party (HHK) in which dozens of balloons, apparently filled with hydrogen, were ignited by a cigarette. Over 150 people were hospitalized in the incident.

Perhaps the most promising development, however, was the deployment of an online election monitoring site, iditord.org, based on the popular Ushahidi platform. Allowing citizens to submit electoral code violations via telephone, SMS, Twitter, or its own web interface, around 1,000 reports were registered from the launch of the site in early April to the end of polling on Election Day. Since then over 100 more reports were added.

About the Author

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11 PanArmenian.Net, Expert: police not interested in iDitord forgery records http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/106761/Expert_police_not_interested_in_iDitord_forgery_records

Youth NGOs in Armenia and the 2012 Parliamentary Elections

By Inge Snip, Tbilisi, Uppsala

Abstract

During the campaign for Armenia's May 6, 2012, parliamentary elections, there were some reports of aggressive encounters between youth groups affiliated with the main political parties. However, in contrast to previous elections, there was little or no violence on election day itself. Moreover, due in part to a surprisingly high level of cooperation between several youth NGOs, the OSCE, Western diplomats and local observation missions deemed the elections to be relatively more free and fair than previous ones. The polarization of the political field has led to a more active society—less apathetic and more engaged; this polarization has created space for a larger number of youth NGOs to operate in the country, and a more polarized NGO field. Although civil society in Armenia remains highly politicized, the expanding public space provided more breathing room for non-politically aligned groups. The following article examines the background of youth activism in Armenia, takes a closer look at the different youth groups and their aims, and analyzes their roles during the campaign and on election day itself.

Youth Activism in Armenia

The sun had not risen when a group of ambitious youth wandered the streets of an ice-cold Yerevan in search of election fraud during Presidential elections of 2008

Nevertheless, showing the vulnerability of such systems, the site was brought down for 20 minutes by a Denial of Service (DOS) attack on 5 May, and for a few hours the following day when voters went to the polls. According to PanArmenian.Net, however, only two cases reported on the site are being investigated by police.¹¹

In conclusion, while the use of online tools was more evolved for the recent parliamentary election in Armenia compared to other votes before it, a combination of apathy and low voter interest prevented them from becoming crucial and indispensable means for combatting fraud or engaging the electorate. Even so, with Armenians traditionally more interested in presidential votes, that will likely not be the case when the incumbent president, Serzh Sarkissian, runs for re-election in 2013. Nevertheless, social media will have to be used as part of a wider and more traditional campaign by civil society and political parties alike.

in Armenia. In the previous days, this international group—Armenians joined by Georgians, Russians, Danes, Dutch and Norwegians—had prepared assiduously for this election observation mission. Composed

of groups of 4 to 5, including at least two Armenians, the youth had made a structured analysis of which polling stations to visit. The main focus was determining where to observe the opening and where to monitor the ballot counting, since most fraud takes place at those times. With temperatures dropping to -20 degrees Celsius, icy roads and a cutting wind, the elections were a challenge to the voters, the polling station workers and the observers alike. The Federation of Youth Clubs of Armenia (FYCA) in cooperation with the Danish youth group SILBA organized this international observation mission in order to promote youth sociopolitical participation as impartial observers and their active engagement in the electoral process. With more than 200 applications from Armenians to participate, it seemed as if young people were active in civil society in 2008.

However, opinion polls conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in 2008, 2009 and 2010 showed only low levels of active youth participation. Moreover, young people in 2008 generally did not go to the polling station to tick a box and vote. The FYCA's election mission in 2008 observed much the same thing: "[t]he age distribution of the voters was mostly on the side of the elder generations; the young voters were less active." Most NGOs—whether youth or general—were politically aligned in 2008: either in favor of former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan or against him; few were neutral, according to Emil Danielyan, an Armenian journalist for RFE/RL and other outlets.

In contrast to the politicized civil society in 2008, now it seems as if NGOs are breaking away from their ties with political parties and are overcoming their differences in order to ensure more free and fair elections. Of the 2012 elections, the Economist wrote that "in a further sign of progress, Armenia's quarrelsome civil-society movement mobilized to keep the elections clean." A Western diplomat present in Yerevan during the elections explained to me that the involvement of NGOs in general was not only much greater, but also much more successful than it had ever been.

The importance of an active—and independent—civil society for the democratization process is crucial. Scholars such as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba have argued that civil society (as political culture) is essential to ensure a healthy democracy since it leads to a society in which there is more open information, resulting in fairer elections and citizens holding their government responsible for its actions.¹ Moreover, Robert D. Putnam utilized Pierre Bourdieu's idea of social capital to show how the state of civil society in essence indicates

the amount of social capital—trust, respect, shared values—there is in a society. The larger the amount of social capital, the more society holds together.²

However, not everyone agrees about the positive side effects of a strong civil society. Pawel Zaleski and John Agnew argue that civil society has obtained a large amount of political power without being democratically chosen to have such power, and therefore it is impossible to hold it accountable for its actions.³

This being said, in a country such as Armenia, where an independent civil society still is far from a reality, one should wonder what the actual impact of civil society and youth participation is, and whether it has a positive or negative effect. Moreover, even if we accept the argument that civil society acts as the protector of democracy and democratization projects, a fair concern would be the fact that NGOs are not elected and thus, although they hold political power, they are not held accountable in any way.

On the other hand, what is the impact of social capital in Armenia? According to the 2011 Social Cohesion Survey conducted by the CRRC Armenia, the numbers seem more grim than what most political analysts claim. These results are supported by journalists like Danielyan, who is skeptical about what civil society in Armenia can do to promote democracy. He believes that a lot of the international grants provided to the country are being wasted. Although there are quite a few organizations, such as Counterpart International, which in his opinion seem to be doing interesting work, he argues that little information is disseminated about what this group is up to and the results of its projects are not very encouraging.

Armenia's Youth NGOs

Since an independent civil society is important for democratization, it is interesting to take a closer look at the composition of youth NGOs and to distinguish among the various types of youth involvement. First of all, there are the youth groups of the political parties, including the youth movements of the Republican and Prosperous Armenia parties. As noted above, civil society in Armenia is highly politicized. Moreover, it is also filled with people who are mainly interested in advancing their careers. A close analysis of the youth groups aligned with the Republican and Prosperous Armenia

1 Almond, G., & Verba, S., *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes And Democracy In Five Nations*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage), 1989.

2 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2000.

3 Pawel Zaleski, "Global Non-governmental Administrative System: Geosociology of the Third Sector," in: Gawin, Dariusz & Glinski, Piotr [ed.]: *Civil Society in the Making* (Warsaw: IFiS Publishers), 2006; John Agnew, "Democracy and Human Rights," in Johnston, R.J., Taylor, Peter J. and Watts, Michael J., *Geographies of Global Change*, 2002, Hoboken: Blackwell.

parties suggests that few of the activists are there for the political ideas and that most of the volunteers become involved to secure a nice government job.

A second type of youth activism includes the civic sector youth, including those involved in environmental and human rights movements, such as the FYCA and Solidarity of Students. These groups are more vocal and more determined in fighting for their rights than the political youth. Moreover, the political youth are often attached to the policies and standpoints of their seniors within their respective political parties or groups, and thus are less independent in their activities and opinions.

Armenian young people actively participate in various advocacy campaigns and often join political parties, according to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) Armenia office. This view is shared by political analyst Robert Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Centre. Both NDI and Giragosian see the successes of youth environmental groups as indicators of their engagement and commitment to deepen civil society. Likewise, although journalist Danielyan is skeptical when it comes to the role of civil society, he does agree that youth organizations working on the environment have recently had some major successes with their campaigns. NDI explains:

“Through advocacy efforts, a group of young people in Yerevan succeeded in making the government change its decision about the construction of trade kiosks in a downtown park. And, as a result, the semi-constructed kiosks are being dismantled by the local authorities. Such examples and others drastically change the environment in the country.”

However, Giragosian does not consider youth activism and their work through NGOs as changing attitudes in the country “as they are not yet in positions of influence.” Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that the success of the campaigns shape public opinion.

Thus, in essence it could be argued that civil society’s role, and the active participation of youth in it, has changed over the past few years in Armenia. Giragosian: “The popular demand for real change is much more pronounced, thanks to greater civic and political activism and a decline in the apathy of the past.” This new activism is a result of many different factors, but includes

the divide between the two ruling coalition parties, the Republican Party of President Serzh Sargsyan and Prosperous Armenia, led by businessman Gagik Tsarukyan, that became more apparent in the wake of the elections.

Youth Activism During the 2012 Elections

Even though the composition, activity and scope of civil society has changed only slightly in recent years, it is interesting to analyze its role during the 2012 elections. Several youth NGOs managed to organize election monitor missions, with the NGO *It’s your choice* claiming to have more than 4,000 active observers. A Western diplomat confirmed that several NGOs had thousands of monitors actively observing the elections. He, moreover, was very pleased to see the prominent NGOs working well together, something which had not been evident previously in the politicized Armenian civil society. In addition, young people were actively involved in ensuring that the elections would be more free and fair via new social media, such as Twitter and Facebook.

The cooperation and the active involvement of youth, both in monitoring the polling stations and reporting irregularities online, resulted in a more transparent election day. For example, due to active online reporting, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) had to address what has been called “the case of the disappearing stamps.” After multiple complaints online, including a statement by former foreign minister Vartan Oskanian, that the stamps placed in passports after the bearer voted had disappeared after a couple of hours, the CEC had no other choice than to react. NGO *It’s your choice* however, did release a press statement noting that the elections were largely democratic despite various irregularities.

Thus, although civil society in Armenia is still highly politicized, the last elections did show that the active involvement and cooperation of NGOs is possible—which could indicate a possible change in the independence of Armenia’s civil society. Moreover, recent successes by environmental youth groups in advocacy campaigns give hope for a more pluralistic and effective independent civil society. As the representative of NDI told me “[s]uch examples and others drastically change the environment of the country.”

About the Author

Inge Snip has been living intermittently in Georgia for the last 4.5 years. She has worked for several NGOs and is a founder of *Evolutsia.net*, a news and analysis website covering the political landscape of the Caucasus. She is currently finishing a Master degree in Politics and International Studies at Uppsala University, for which she did individual research on elite configuration at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University in New York City for 6 months. Inge has a LLB degree in International and European Law from the University of Groningen, and a Russian language certificate from the Kyiv National Economic Trade University, where she studied for one year. For a full resume see, her linkedin profile at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/ingesnip>.