

## Armenia's Parliamentary Elections: A Step Forward or a Wasted Opportunity?

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### Abstract

In spite of certain improvements, such as relatively balanced media coverage of the campaign and a drop in violent incidents, Armenia's 2012 parliamentary elections largely repeated the pattern that had been established in previous years. The ruling political force secured an overwhelming victory, employing questionable means such as bribing voters and exerting administrative pressure, and the opposition refused to accept the victory as legitimate. In terms of foreign policy implications, the elections will hardly lead to significant changes, as foreign policy issues were not at the center of this campaign.

### Election Fraud: Never Again?

Armenia's record of parliamentary elections is hard to call a success story. Somewhat ironically, the only parliamentary elections that resulted in a change of government took place in 1990, when Armenia was still technically part of the USSR. The opposition unseated the Communist establishment and initiated a process aimed at Armenian independence and democratization. However, in post-Soviet Armenia the record of parliamentary elections is controversial, to say the least. Starting with the 1995 parliamentary elections, most elections have been marred by allegations of widespread fraud and the refusal by the opposition to accept the election results as legitimate.

There were reasons to expect that the 2012 elections could represent a break with this unfortunate tradition. Eight parties and one party bloc faced each other in the elections to the National Assembly of Armenia. Three parties, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), Prosperous Armenia (PPA) and the Country of Laws party, represented the ruling coalition. Two parties, Heritage and Dashnaktsutyun, and one party block, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), represented the main forces of the opposition. The other three parties represented marginal political forces with little chance of appearing in the parliament. The main issue in the elections was whether the ruling RPA would keep control of the National Assembly or other parties would be able to break its political domination.

As the political situation in Armenia had been showing signs of change during recent years, there were grounds for optimism. While the previous national elections in 2008 led to violent clashes, loss of life and numerous arrests, the strained political situation has gradually eased since then. A major step toward a calmer political climate took place in 2011, when the government released the remaining political prisoners, removed the limitations that had been put on opposition rallies, and initiated negotiations with the opposition ANC.

Though these negotiations did not lead to any palpable outcome, they did help to calm the political climate.

The desire to overcome the consequences of 2008 was among the factors that prompted declarations from Serzh Sargsyan's government that the elections would be the most free and fair elections in Armenia's history. These declarations were aimed, first and foremost, at the international community, particularly European agencies, who, according to the rumors circulating in Armenian political circles, had in turn promised to speed up Armenia's rapprochement with Europe and provide substantial financial aid. Among other factors which fed the hopes of a democratic breakthrough were the spread of new on-line media and the rise of civic activism, especially among the youth. Finally, many in Armenian civil society and opposition circles believed that the international context, shaped by the Arab spring and the Russian post-election protests, would make the international community less tolerant of the election irregularities that it had accepted in the past. Certainly, the elections of May 6, 2012, did represent a certain change compared to the previous Armenian elections, though not necessarily in the direction that Armenia's pro-democracy activists hoped for.

### Domestic Cleavage in the Elections

Debates about economic and social problems or the challenges of reform were not central issues in the campaign. Rather, the most important issue in the 2012 elections was whether the ruling Republican Party would gain an absolute majority in the parliament, or whether it would be forced to form a coalition with other parties to form a government. To preserve its monopoly on power, RPA had to struggle not only with the opposition, but also with its main coalition partner, PPA. RPA, which has been a part of government coalition since 1995 and became the leading party in 1998, was founded and still presents itself as a nationalist-conservative party. However, like most post-Soviet ruling parties, after gaining

power it has become something which resembles a trade union of bureaucrats and businessmen that is much more interested in keeping its monopoly on power than issues of ideology. Thus, in spite of its nationalist-conservative ideology, it has embraced pro-European and pro-democracy rhetoric, when such talk was needed to attract European aid, and recently advocated rapprochement with Turkey. PPA, which may be characterized as a centrist and at the same time populist party, is even less ideology-driven than RPA. This is a party formed completely around one leader, in this case, one of Armenia's richest businessmen, Gagik Tsarukyan. PPA was created with the active participation of the second president of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan, and many observers note that the internal rivalry within the coalition between RPA and PPA mirrors the strained relations between former allies Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, the current and former presidents.

The main opposition force in these elections was the ANC, which itself was a union of various political parties and organizations that supported Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 2008, and refused to acknowledge the official results of those elections. Though Ter-Petrosyan himself and his party Armenian National Movement (ANM) position themselves as liberal-democrats, it is hard to discern a specific ideological orientation in the ANC in general. Two other relatively strong opposition parties, Heritage and Dashnaksutyun, may be quite close ideologically, however they differed in their attitude to the government. Heritage has always been in opposition, it even supported Ter-Petrosyan in 2008, however soon their ways parted and in 2012 it was joined by the Free Democrats, a splinter group, which left the ANC because of its conflict with Ter-Petrosyan. As for Dashnaksutyun, it had been a part of government coalitions since Kocharyan came to power, and supported Serzh Sargsyan in 2008. Its main reason for leaving the government coalition in 2009 was not internal politics, but its opposition to the Armenia–Turkey protocols.

The election campaign seemed to confirm some of the positive expectations that surrounded it. Arguably, the most positive development has been the media coverage of the campaign. In the past, Armenian TV broadcasters, largely under direct or indirect government control, have often been strongly biased in their coverage of election campaigns. However, this year provided relatively balanced coverage of the campaign, offering the opposition leaders opportunities to express their views and extensively covering their activities. This improved balance in the media was a result of the government's understanding that the spread of new media made it almost impossible to shut opponents out of the media field. Besides, the Armenian government realized that

the international community would be monitoring the campaign and particularly its media coverage quite closely. The election campaign also represented a positive development in terms of the opportunities for the opposition to conduct their campaign. While during the previous years, campaigns had been marred by numerous incidents, in which opposition rallies were obstructed and opposition supporters were attacked, this year opposition parties faced relatively few obstacles in campaigning, with the exception of several violent incidents.

However, in spite of these positive changes, the elections of 2012 hardly represented a move in the direction of genuine democracy. The campaign was affected by widespread vote-buying and pressure on the voters, inflated voter lists, accusations of multiple voting and other shortcomings. Even though pressure on voters and the distribution of election bribes is notoriously difficult to document, numerous such cases came to the public attention during the campaign. In one case, publicized by the Armenian media, one of the ruling coalition parties, Country of Laws, distributed cans of jam to voters. In another case, a charity foundation headed by the leader of Prosperous Armenia distributed 300 tractors. The Republican Party, which controls most state institutions in Armenia, including the education system, used its access to amass support.

The official results of the elections awarded an overwhelming victory to RPA, which won 44.78% of the votes on the proportional list, and the most mandates from majoritarian districts, securing a majority sufficient for forming a government without the support of any other parties. Its competitor among the ruling coalition parties, PPA was a distant second, and opposition parties barely made it into the parliament. Finally, the Country of Laws party, which is perceived as a junior partner of the Republicans, also received about 5% of the votes and will enter the parliament, something that, according to many observers, would have been virtually impossible without bribing and pressuring the voters. Opposition parties, who were joined by PPA, refused to accept these results as legitimate. Civil society criticized the elections harshly, citing vote buying, abuse of administrative resources, and political pressure and harassment of employees by both public sector and private employers. However, unlike 2008, the opposition did not attempt to mobilize its supporters to stage massive protest rallies and decided to accept the mandates allocated to them by the official results.

While paying bribes to voters and the use of administrative resources helped to secure the victory of the ruling coalition, the weakness and tactical mistakes of the opposition also contributed to the final results. ANC, which enjoyed massive support several years earlier, had

lost many of its backers due to internal squabbles and its failed attempt at “dialogue” with the government in 2011. Heritage lost many potential voters because of its electoral list, which failed to generate excitement, and its bickering with other opposition parties. Dashnaktsutyun, which had left the ruling coalition in 2009, is still perceived by many opposition voters as standing too close to the government camp.

Civic society innovators and new media activists, who did not identify with any of the opposition forces, mostly remained passive during the campaign. As a sign of the opposition’s failure to attract some of the most dynamic educated young voters, many politically-active young people preferred to spoil their ballots.<sup>1</sup> Some youngsters even “voted” for American vintage movie star and Internet meme Chuck Norris, adding his name to the ballot below the names of the real candidates and posting photographs of the spoiled ballots on a Facebook page created especially for that purpose. So much for “the Facebook revolution,” which had been eagerly anticipated by some and feared by others.

While opposition parties and the PPA were the obvious losers of the elections, RPA may also have a cause for concern: the sweeping victory, achieved by questionable means, may yet prove quite dangerous. RPA has found itself in the position of the only force responsible for the fate of the country at a time when it faces grave internal and external challenges. Since RPA owes its victory to the support of the business and bureaucratic elites, it is highly improbable that it will be able to pursue the economic and social reforms necessary for Armenia’s development, despite the fact that it had promised such reforms during the campaign. Even though it severely weakened its political opponents, RPA did not eliminate the causes for dissent in the country: as the Arab spring has shown, when popular discontent is not channeled into a functioning political system, it might prove to be a deadly threat for the rulers.

### Foreign Policy Issues in the Elections

Foreign policy issues played only a small role in this election campaign. According to Armenia’s constitution, the president defines foreign policy and the parliament has relatively less influence in this matter. However, the parties made a conscious decision to stay away from foreign policy issues in their campaigns. Both in Armenia–Turkey relations and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution, the two most pressing issues for Armenian foreign policy, the current situation can be characterized as “frozen.” Therefore, debating these issues did

not seem to make sense in the current context. Besides, the positions of the main political forces on these issues have in some ways become closer, even though in their public activities they often prefer to focus on the differences. Finally, today issues like Armenia–Turkey relations and the Karabakh conflict is not at the top of society’s agenda: the Armenian public is focused mostly on internal issues, such as corruption, the economy, migration and the need to hold free and fair elections.

Of course, everything said above does not mean that the political forces taking part in the elections did not have their own approaches to foreign policy issues. RPA largely defended Sargsyan’s foreign policy initiatives since 2008, praised the football diplomacy and Armenia–Turkey protocols as a sign of the government’s proactive approach to foreign policy and blamed Turkey for the failure of the process. They argued that Armenia had emerged from the process with a more solid international reputation, while Turkey suffered a loss of credibility in the eyes of the international community. This view was criticized by opposition parties. ANC argued that while the Armenia–Turkey protocols could have been a positive step, the provision creating a historians’ commission amounted to a sell-out of the genocide issue and resulted in halting the process of international recognition of the genocide. Moreover, as the ANC argued, Armenia’s Republican party government allowed Turkey to deceive it, since Turkey received what it was looking for from the protocols, i.e. the historians’ commission and a halt to the international genocide recognition process, while Armenia was left empty-handed. Heritage and Dashnaktsutyun, who had opposed the protocols from the outset, were even more critical of them and demanded recalling Armenia’s signature. The remaining ruling coalition parties, Prosperous Armenia and Country of Laws mostly refrained from discussing this topic.

Discussions regarding the Karabakh issue were also quite rare in 2012. This silence represented a contrast to 2008, when pro-opposition and pro-government camps sharply criticized each other: Ter-Petrosyan condemned the government for being unable and unwilling to find a solution to the Karabakh conflict, while the government camp accused Ter-Petrosyan of being too soft on the issue. Ter-Petrosyan responded by accusing the government of bending to Azerbaijan’s pressure and leaving the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities out of the negotiations.

However, after 2008 Sargsyan changed the rhetoric, which his supporters employed during the election campaign, and issued statements implying his readiness to make serious concessions in Karabakh, particularly the withdrawal of Armenian forces from what he called the “security zone,” in exchange for Azerbaijan’s acceptance of the principle of self-determination for Nagorno-Kara-

<sup>1</sup> There is no “against all” option on the ballot in Armenian elections.

bakh. However, as negotiations over the Madrid Principles stalled, and the Azerbaijani government began to stress its readiness for a military solution, the Armenian government returned to the more assertive rhetoric of the previous period. As for Armenian society at large, the debates over the acceptable level of concessions in case of a compromise solution are increasingly seen as irrelevant, given the uncompromising position of Azerbaijan. The continuing firefights between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in the border zone only confirmed the perception that no compromise is possible, at least in the near future.

This public consensus was also reflected in the positions of political forces in the 2012 campaign. Though Ter-Petrosyan continued to advocate a compromise solution for Karabakh, this theme was no longer a prominent part of the ANC's campaigning. The ANC criticized the government for leaving Nagorno-Karabakh authorities out of the negotiation process, and claimed that the only acceptable solution is one that is approved by Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Heritage criticized the government for being too soft on Karabakh and defended its proposal to unilaterally recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. As for Dashnaksutyun, it has always been a proponent of a more assertive position on the issue. Other political forces largely refrained from addressing Karabakh in the campaign. To sum up, a certain degree of consensus exists across the Armenian political spectrum that in current conditions a compromise solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is unrealistic and the most pressing goals at this stage are preventing an escalation of the conflict and bringing Nagorno-Karabakh back to the negotiating table.

Though the question of whether Armenia should have a pro-Russian or pro-Western orientation is increasingly becoming a part of the public debate, it was mostly ignored by the political parties. These groups usually try to refrain from expressing opinions on the issue of Armenia's "Western" or "Eastern" perspective, or rather claim, as impossible as it seems, that they support both

options: the leading political forces were at great pains to emphasize their support both for continuing alliance with Russia and deepening cooperation with the West. During the campaign there were speculations that RPA had closer relations with European structures, while PPA enjoyed the tacit support of Putin's government. In the opposition field similar speculations singled out Heritage, led by American-born Raffi Hovannisian, as allegedly pro-American. However, these parties refrained from addressing these speculations publicly and did nothing in their campaigns that would confirm these speculations. ANC also refrained from raising issues of political orientation, though it did make some references, which made it obvious that on the one hand they did see a more "Western" future in Armenia: thus it argued that Armenia should follow the path of the reforms set by Georgia. On the other hand, they also criticized the West for turning a blind eye to human rights violations in Armenia and in this way "legitimizing" the current Armenian government.

Taking all of these issues into consideration, it is hard to expect any major changes in Armenia's foreign policy as a consequence of these elections. The key variable is not so much Armenia's political parties, but the West's reaction to the recent elections. In this respect the West has found itself in quite a difficult position. On the one hand, in spite of some progress compared to previous years, the elections were still quite far from the democratic ideal, and failing to evaluate them accordingly would not only compromise the moral standing of the West in Armenia and the region, but also could send the wrong signal to other governments in the post-Soviet space, particularly those of Georgia and Azerbaijan, where elections are expected soon. On the other hand, criticizing the elections too harshly would risk alienating the Armenian leadership and pushing it further into the arms of Russia, which in turn is pressuring Armenia to take part in the Eurasian Union initiatives. Whatever the decision, it will affect not only the state of democracy in Armenia, but also that of the whole region.

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#### *Further Reading*

- International Election Observation, Republic of Armenia—Parliamentary Elections, May 6 2012, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/90332>
- Yerevan Press Club, Report on Monitoring of Armenian Broadcast Coverage of the May 6, 2012 Elections to the RA National Assembly, [http://www.ypc.am/media\\_research/In/en](http://www.ypc.am/media_research/In/en)
- Partnership for Open Society, Statement on the 2012 Parliamentary Elections in Armenia, May 11, 2012, <http://www.partnership.am/en/Statements/38416>