

Social Media and Armenia's 2012 Parliamentary Elections

By Onnik Krikorian, Yerevan

Abstract

Following a bitterly disputed presidential election in February 2008, parliamentary elections held on 6 May 2012 were a crucial test for Armenia's fledgling democratic process. In particular, with 280,340 Facebook users in the country, or 9.45 percent of the population,¹ there has also been much speculation about the role social media can play in that process, not least since the 2011 Middle East and North Africa uprisings. However, despite some notable examples of the use of Facebook to mobilize citizens on non-politicized issues in recent years, the role of social media in the 6 May 2012 parliamentary elections was limited. Nevertheless, online tools did prove viable as a new medium for registering and reacting to reported electoral violations and other problems.

Background

Despite Armenia's poor economy, exacerbated by the global economic crisis, and a GDP per capita of \$5,400 in 2011,² Internet penetration continues to increase. Even so, data from the 2010 Caucasus Barometer from the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC) indicates that only 19 percent of Armenians go online every day. Although data from CRRC's 2011 household survey shows that figure increasing further, a staggering 60 percent of the population had never accessed the Internet at all in 2010. Moreover, early data³ from the 2011 Caucasus Barometer reports that just 7 percent of Armenians use Facebook, compared to 18 percent using other social networking sites. Socialbakers, in comparison, instead puts the figure for Facebook penetration at 9.45 percent.

Whatever the figure, following the last presidential election, international donors have become increasingly interested in funding online projects,⁴ and not least since the state of emergency following the 1 March 2008 post-election clashes which left 10 people dead. With a media blackout imposed on the country for 20 days, blogs were not affected by the emergency situation even though sites such as Radio Free Europe and YouTube were temporarily blocked.⁵ Indeed, some observers likened their role during the post-election environment to that of samizdat during the Soviet era. At that time, the heavily polarized political environment on the ground was replicated in cyberspace with pro-government bloggers also spreading information against the

opposition or posting updates supportive of the newly elected president.

Since 2008, online social networking sites such as Facebook have arguably changed the situation further, rapidly taking over from blogs as the main online medium for sharing news, opinion and information. Attempts last year by the opposition in Armenia to stage its own post-MENA protests calling for fresh parliamentary and presidential elections illustrated that only too well. Encouraged by protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the opposition also declared that it would stage a "Facebook Revolution" in Armenia, but few signed up to the various Facebook pages set up to attract support. Even so, the numbers taking to the streets were significantly higher, with some demonstrations attracting as many as 15,000 people. Most definitely not a Facebook-organized protest, it highlighted that traditional activism remains the main way to engage the population.⁶

Non-Political On-Line Engagement

Of arguably more importance, however, is how Facebook has empowered at least some of those in-between the polarized government and opposition camps. As an example, the most successful use of social media to date has been alongside traditional campaigns to engage citizens in non-politicized, i.e. non-opposition, activism in general. Mobile phone videos posted on YouTube depicting the bullying of pupils by teachers in state-run schools⁷ resulted in changes in the education system, for example, and throughout 2010, in much publicized incidents, hazing in the Armenian military caused outrage among many citizens, and especially those using

1 Socialbakers, Facebook Statistics by Country, as of 11 May 2012: <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/>.

2 CIA Factbook Armenia: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>.

3 Caucasus Internet Access Infographic, <http://katypearce.net/cv/?p=387>

4 USAID, Alternative Resources in the Media, <http://armenia.usaid.gov/en/node/269>

5 YouTube Blocked in Armenia?, <http://blogoscoped.com/archive/2008-03-10-n27.html>

6 Global Voices, Armenia: Social Networks for Social Revolution? <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/26/armenia-social-networks-for-revolution/>

7 Global Voices, Armenia: Abuse in Yerevan School <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/11/armenia-abuse-in-yerevan-school/>

Facebook.⁸ Online campaigns to prevent the demolition of a Soviet-era open-air cinema to make room for the construction of a church, as well as another campaign to protest the introduction of foreign language schools in Armenia, also attracted support crossing party-lines more so than any actions staged by the opposition.

The previous Yerevan mayor also took to Facebook, with some serious discussions occurring online about the municipality's policies, such as the shooting of stray dogs on the streets of the Armenian capital. These are the types of issues that international consultants working on donor-funded projects address, with a number of projects launched to allow citizens to report the problem of potholes and garbage directly to the local authorities. The online site from this project should also facilitate better communication and cooperation between citizens and local officials after pilot projects in three regional cities of Armenia use GPS positioning from mobile phones to map the towns themselves.

The 2012 Parliamentary Election

Given this experience, it was only natural to expect a similar use of the same online tools for the 6 May election. However, despite the emergence of many online news sites, and the sharing of many of their stories, their reach remains limited. A 2011 Media Public Opinion and Preference Survey by the CRRC, for example, found that 87 percent of Armenians rely on television for their daily news and information.⁹ That data showed that only 11 percent relied on social media sites and 9 percent on online news sites.

As the first national election since the bitterly disputed 2008 presidential vote, and in light of increased interest in social media following the MENA uprisings, the media naturally focused on the potential use of Facebook in the 2012 parliamentary election. On 12 April, for example, less than a month before the vote, Eurasianet reported the sighting of a flag decorated with the Facebook logo among the more traditional Armenian tricolors waved at an opposition campaign rally on 30 March in Yerevan's Liberty Square. "I brought the Facebook flag to the rally to show the government that now there is a unique, reliable alternative [for information] to be used by everyone," 24-year old Areg Gevorgian told the online news site. International donors were also interested in the use of social media, the article noted, reporting that Laura Baghdasarian, head of the Region Center, had been funded by the Open Society Founda-

tions-Armenia to monitor the use of Facebook during the pre-election campaign.

"Many politicians and parties have registered accounts in Facebook since last fall," she told Eurasianet, "It is interactive, and this is of key importance; through likes, shares and comments, no other tool provides such an opportunity to understand an audience."

While this is true, there was actually very little engagement online, perhaps in part because of the low importance placed on the parliamentary rather than presidential elections by many Armenians. Indeed, the monitoring by Baghdasarian was actually limited to the Facebook pages of specifically chosen online news sites. Observations on the use of social media by political parties and individual candidates were also not encouraging. "[...] political parties are waging a battle not to gain citizens' love and trust and to acquire new followers, but to speak more, shout louder and disseminate more information than their opponents. In this sense, all the online platforms become not opportunities for dialogue or for establishing contact but simply ordinary platforms," wrote Zaruhi Batoyan on Media.am.¹⁰

Ararat Magazine, for example, even noted the lack of online campaign advertisements by the governmental Prosperous Armenia, even though throughout Armenia there were many traditional billboards for the party and especially its leader, former arm-wrestling world champion and businessman Gagik Tsarukian. Elsewhere on Facebook, although admittedly based on real-world observations by this author, there was little actual engagement among voters. However, that's not to say that Facebook wasn't useful for activists, especially in highlighting concerns about the pre-election environment. Eurasianet, for example, reported that one Facebook user shared his concerns about the electoral register listing an improbably large number of residents in one address on his personal page. "Edgar Tamarian posted about the apparently unusually spacious flat after finding it on a list of registered voters on the national police website; all of the supposed voters hailed from Georgia's ethnic Armenian village of Nardevan. The police claimed the entry was "a mistake" that they had somehow overlooked."

And on election day itself, Satik Seyranyan, editor of the *168 Hours* newspaper, and herself running in the election, reported on Facebook that the ink used to stamp voter's passports disappeared in less than an hour instead of the 12 hours it should have taken. Drawing on concerns that multiple voting could occur in such a

8 Global Voices, Armenia: Army forced to act after hazing video circulates online <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/09/24/armenia-army-forced-to-act-after-hazing-video-circulates-online/>.

9 Armenia2011MediaPublicOpinionandPreferenceSurvey <http://www.slideshare.net/bekaisa/ar-media-presentationenglish>

10 Media.am, How Political Parties are Using Social Media Ahead of Elections ... <http://www.media.am/node/1751>

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

Onnik Krikorian is a freelance photojournalist and writer. He is also the Caucasus editor for Global Voices Online, a leading citizen media site founded in 2004 at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

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