
YES, WE CAN'T! THE APATHETIC BUSINESS OF THE ARMENIAN ELECTIONS

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When voters re-elect an incumbent, it usually means the country is on the right track. Well, not everywhere and especially not in Armenia, which held parliamentary elections on April 2.

Armenias foreign debt has tripled since 2008; instead of an agreement with the European Union, it joined the Eurasian Union with no tangible benefits; increasing brain drain has shrunk the population; 30% of Armenias population lives below the poverty line; and in 2016, the escalation of the frozen conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh almost exploded into full-scale war. Yet, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which has been ruling together with the incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan since 2008, has managed yet again to cement its rule with an unprecedented share of votes.

Maintaining the Swamp

These elections were arguably pivotal since they were the first elections to occur after a constitutional referendum in 2015 that effectively moved the country from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary one. Research tells us that a parliamentary system is more conducive to democratization than a semi-presidential one. However, the opposition in Armenia has claimed that the constitutional changes were carried out with the single goal of ensuring President Sargsyans continued power once his second term comes to an end in 2018, but President Sargsyan repeatedly has stated that he would not remain in power after his term ends. Indeed, while he is the partys leader and the partys image revolves around his personality, he did not lead RPAs candidate list. However, given frequent shuffling in the Armenian government and the lack of requirement for strict succession in the new parliamentary system, he could remain in power as the new prime minister as a result of coalition building or rearrangements within RPA.

Since its independence from the Soviet Union, the Armenian political party scene has featured constant floor-crossing, vague party platforms, and the emergence or name changes of various parties and alliances just in time for the next election cycle. The RPA was founded in 1990 based on an anti-Soviet movement and Nagorno-Karabakh's self-determination, fully coming into power in late 1990s. Officially pursuing the foreign policy of national conservatism, President Sargsyan and the RPA have brought Armenia's foreign policy into close alignment with Russia, while trying to maintain pro-European rhetoric. President Sargsyan and the RPA have faced numerous popular protests against habitually rigged elections, rampant corruption, and lack of transparency and accountability.

This time, a total of nine parties and alliances of parties participated in the elections, competing for 105 seats. The vote threshold to enter the parliament was 5% for parties and 7% for alliances. Under the current electoral system, the government requires a stable parliamentary majority consisting of 54% of seats. If none of the parties receives that percentage of the votes/seats and does not form a coalition with other parties, 28 days later, a second round of elections is held between the top two winning parties.

In early March 2017, opinion polls showed that 26% of respondents preferred well-known tycoon Gagik Tsarukyan's alliance of parties, while 22% preferred the RPA. Tsarukyan came to prominence in the 1990s as an arm-wrestling World and European champion and a well-connected oligarch, who generously donated to charitable projects, including paying tuition or covering medical expenses of low-income families. Until 2015, Tsarukyan was also the leader of the second largest political party, Prosperous Armenia (Bargavach Hayastan), which often positioned itself as the party of the people. Indeed, during campaign periods, disregarding the requirement of the electoral law, he would promise to help voters asking for financial assistance. However, in 2015, after publicly stating that he would oust President Sargsyan through street protests, he abruptly left politics. With his comeback in late 2016, Tsarukyan positioned himself as the beacon of change pandering to the impoverished population with economic promises void of any specific policies. However, critics have described his return as a tacit understanding with Sargsyan and an attempt to dilute and draw votes from the traditional opposition parties, such as the Heritage or the Armenian National Congress.

In late March, the preference in opinion polls reversed in favor of the RPA, which received the approval of 29% of respondents. As of April 3, the RPA received 49.12%; Tsarukyan party alliance received 27.32%; the newly formed Yelk (Way out) alliance received 7.7%; and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) received 6.57% of the votes. The Central Electoral Commission will finalize the results and seat distribution on April 9.

It comes as no surprise that observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) noted no irregularities with the conduct of the elections. Along with Armenia and Russia, other members of the CIS are Belarus, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Yet, reporters and independent observers have repeatedly documented illegal crowding at polling stations, absence of police even if required by law, ballot box stuffing, illegal campaigning by electoral commission members, carousel voting, and supervision of voters.

The international observation mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in

Europe (OSCE) and the European Parliament (PACE) stated that the elections were generally calm and improved the representation of women and minorities. Vote count was transparent, but it was marred by irregularities such as influence from party representatives. Reports show how members of the RPA and Tsarukyan's alliance would stand close to voting booths and exert psychological pressure on voters.

However, OSCE/PACE observers also mentioned that the elections and the use of new technologies such as fingerprinting and livestreaming did not restore confidence in the electoral process. The European Union provided Armenia with EUR 7 million for these technological improvements to ensure transparency. There was no substantial debate in the media, which focused more on personalities, rather than party platforms. At the same time, observers mentioned having credible information of vote buying, while refusing to name culprit parties. Also, Transparency International Armenia representatives stated that vote buying was pervasive in the pre-elections period. Sources in Armenia point to the RPA offering AMD 15,000 (\$30) and the Tsarukyan alliance offering AMD 10,000 (\$20) for a vote. A Radio Liberty reporter was assaulted while witnessing money distribution to voters.

The length that the two most resourceful parties would go to ensure votes was expected by anyone familiar with Armenian politics. And the paranoia of allegedly externally orchestrated color revolutions has also spread to the Armenian elections and apparently to Russian operatives who aim to ensure the persistence of a Russia-friendly regime. Starting in late March, multiple Russian accounts on Twitter have been posting fake emails supposedly from USAID Armenia (see below). However, one would think USAID staff would not be sending letter-headed emails from a Gmail account and would also bother to run a spellcheck to ensure correct English grammar.

Make Armenia Droopy Again

It seems both the observers and the locals are finally coming to the realization that democracy is not an overnight effort. As the OSCE mission chair mentioned during a press conference on April 3, the period in-between elections is as [] not even more [] than campaign season, and Armenia needs time to implement reforms. Yet, Armenia has had over two decades to adopt and implement various reforms.

If the results of these elections remain unchanged, then Armenia is likely to continue on the same path: submerged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, pulled even closer into Russia's sphere of influence, and paying lip-service to European cooperation with fluctuating outcomes. Moreover, there seems to be no urgency for improvement since the incumbent regime knows that neither the European Union nor the United States will harshly criticize its undemocratic practices. While the United States has dialed down its rhetoric of championing democracy, the European Union is still interested in advancing its policies in its neighborhood or Russia's backyard. Despite violations outlined by the OSCE, both the EU and the United States congratulated Armenia with well-administered and orderly elections.

Yet, what might seem as discouraging improvements, however, is not the unwillingness of the ruling elite to risk their power by running free and fair elections, or even the disinterest of powerful international players. The most inauspicious factor is the apathy of the opposition and the populace. Local operatives of vote-buying parties do not even attempt to disguise their actions anymore and openly state that they supervise voting in their precincts. In an interview to the Radio Liberty on the day after the elections, the Yelq alliance leader seemed to dismiss violations:

Even if the people voted because they were paid, they accepted that money out of their own volition. Such an apathetic attitude towards violations underlines the endemic social and economic problems in the country that with every elections cycle become further entrenched and harder to eradicate. However, the ruling party is unlikely to acknowledge this apathy and would rather spin the lack of demonstrations and loud complaints as the legitimization of its rule.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether democratic forces would finally manage to reorganize, unite, and spread awareness beyond the capital.

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Kaynak/Source: