

Parliamentary Elections in Armenia

**Onnik
Krikorian***

Abstract

The article examines the Armenian parliamentary election of 6 May 2012, have important significance for ruling party for international support after brutal 2008 presidential elections which resulted bloody post-election wake. Author argues that Parliamentary elections since 1995 being marred by accusations of fraud, the last manifestation of the parliament was not heavily controlled by pro-government forces, however, coming less than a year before the incumbent president will seek re-election to a second term in office, the 6 May vote can best be seen as a precursor to the presidential election early next year.

While observing attitudes before the elections, author give credit that what more interest to election watchers for this year's parliamentary election was the potential rivalry between the two main governing parties, HHK and BHK. After the elections, most widely publicized incidents was that temporary ink stamps in the passports of citizens who had voted disappeared in less than an hour rather than the 12 hours they should remain visible and opposition and civil society groups claimed that this was evidence that multiple voting was taking place. Even elections hasn't changed power balance in Parliament drastically, main discussion since the vote has instead been whether Sargsyan's re-election bid next year will be challenged by the former president Kocharian which linked BHK and who its candidate might be with some speculating that Robert Kocharian might attempt a return to power in 2013.

* Onnik Krikorian is a freelance photojournalist and writer based in Yerevan. 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.

As the first national elections since the bitterly disputed 2008 presidential vote¹ which left 10 people dead and hundreds injured in its wake, the parliamentary elections held in Armenia on 6 May 2012 were considered a crucial test for the country's fragile democratic process. Not only were the 131 seats to be contested in the National Assembly at stake, but so too was the country's international reputation. Even so, because parliamentary elections have always been calmer and the electorate less interested and engaged than during presidential votes, few expected any major developments, and the ruling Republican Party (HHK) of Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan desperately needed a positive assessment from international observers and foreign governments. Others hoped for at least some improvement in terms of both the conduct of the vote as well as the division of power in the National Assembly.

While the last parliamentary elections held in May 2007² were considered a 'step forward' by international observers, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) body nonetheless concluded that "the stated intention by the Armenian au-

thorities to conduct an election in line with OSCE commitments and international standards was not fully realized." Eager to see progress in attempts to normalize relations with neighboring Turkey and in the long-running conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, it was of paramount importance for the international community that any new government be considered legitimate by the electorate.

The Structure and Stakes of the Armenian Parliament

The Armenian National Assembly is elected once every five years and consists of 131 seats, of which 90 are determined on a proportional party list basis with the remaining 41 decided under a majoritarian system in single-mandate constituencies. With elections since 1995 marred by accusations of fraud, the last parliamentary composition was heavily dominated by pro-government forces. The HHK, led by Sargsyan, managed to gain 64 seats while Prosperous Armenia party (BHK) headed by Gagik Tsarukian, a former world arm wrestling champion believed to be close to former President Robert Kocharian and likely the country's richest man, held 18.

Minor pro-government parties such as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D) held 16 seats and the Orinats Yerkir (OYP) party nine. All four formed a

¹ *Presidential Election, 19 February 2008, OSCE/ODIHR* http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/presidential_2008

² *Parliamentary Elections, 12 May 2007 OSCE/ODIHR* http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia/parliamentary_2007

coalition government, although the ARF-D left in 2009³ after internal and very vocal disagreements over the now stalled normalization process between Armenia and Turkey, via two protocols intended to establish diplomatic relations and to open a border closed in 1993. In the parliament elected in 2007, the only opposition seats were held by the Heritage Party, led by Armenian-American Raffi Hovannisian, independent Armenia's first foreign minister. The Heritage Party had seven seats within the National Assembly and was the only genuine - albeit ineffective - counter balance to overwhelming government control.

Seventeen seats were also held by nominally non-partisan candidates, but in reality these were mainly businessmen from single-mandate constituencies with close links to the authorities. Today's opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK), a collection of minor political parties in opposition to the government, formed by Armenia's first president, Levon-Ter-Petrossian, did not exist as an opposition force until later the same year when those parties contesting the 2007 parliamentary vote failed to pass the five percent threshold for representation as parties, or seven percent for political blocs and thus united in opposition to the government under one umbrella. As a result, the last parliament can be

³ *Dashnaks Quit Armenia's Ruling Coalition, RFE/RL* <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1616799.html>

“There were reasons to expect that the 2012 elections could represent a break with this unfortunate tradition”

viewed for the most part as a mechanism to rubber stamp presidential decisions.

Public Mistrust & Skepticism

Because of this, although 63 percent of respondents said they ‘fully trusted’ the president, with 16 percent ‘somewhat trusting’ him, a 2011 household survey⁴ by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC) showed trust in the parliament to be much lower, at just 16 and 28 percent respectively. Moreover, according to the same survey, only 12 percent of respondents considered the 2008 presidential election to have been conducted completely fairly, with 35 percent believing they were only ‘to some extent’ fair. That largely fits with what many analysts consider to be a continuing trend, where much of the electorate feels itself effectively disenfranchised, and which itself creates an environment for vote-buying to flourish.

“There were reasons to expect that the 2012 elections could represent a break with this unfortunate tradition,” commented Mikayel Zolyan,⁵

⁴ *Caucasus Barometer, CRRC* <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/overview/>

⁵ *Armenia's Parliamentary Elections: A Step Forward or a Wasted Opportunity?*, Mikayel Zolyan, CAD <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/>

a Yerevan-based political analyst and political scientist. “As the political situation in Armenia had been showing signs of change during recent years, there were grounds for optimism,” he continued, referring to the 2011 release of political prisoners jailed following the 2008 clashes and attempts by the government and extra-parliamentary opposition to calm existing tensions by entering into dialogue. Therefore, coming less than a year before the incumbent president will seek re-election to a second term in office, the 6 May vote can best be seen as a precursor to the presidential election early next year.

A New Political Landscape

If 2008 was defined by the return of Ter-Petrossian to politics in September the previous year, by 2011 the popularity of the extra-parliamentary ANC had waned and few political commentators considered it a political force to be reckoned with in the May vote. Although opinion polls are often controversial, and are for the most part distrusted by the public, it is worth mentioning that public opinion polls prior to the election suggested that the ANC would only attract around seven percent of the vote, barely squeezing past the threshold for political blocs to enter parliament, but not enough to seriously challenge the government.

Instead, what was of greater interest to election watchers for this year’s

“In line with developments throughout 2011, the most significant political issue continues to be the significant clash within the progovernment coalition itself, replacing the more traditional past political conflict between the opposition and the government”

parliamentary election was the potential rivalry between the two main governing parties, HHK and BHK. In 2007, for example, this competition manifested itself in the form of bomb attacks on two Prosperous Armenia campaign offices⁶ in Yerevan, though the Republican Party denied responsibility. This rivalry has become more evident over the past year, not least when Vartan Oskanian, for ten years the foreign minister under Robert Kocharian, joined its ranks just weeks before the election. “Clearly there is a serious rivalry between the parties, and the deepening and intensifying conflict within the ruling coalition continues to define the country’s pre-election period,” remarked Richard Giragosian, the Director and founder of the Yerevan-based Regional Studies Center (RSC).⁷

“In line with developments through-

⁶ Armenia: Election Campaign Gets Off To Uneasy Start
<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075967.html>

⁷ Parliamentary Elections Yet Another Test for Democracy in Armenia, Onnik Krikorian
<http://araratmagazine.org/2012/03/parliamentary-elections-2012/>

out 2011, the most significant political issue continues to be the significant clash within the pro-government coalition itself, replacing the more traditional past political conflict between the opposition and the government,” he said in an interview with the author. “As the pre-election period intensifies, this conflict between the Republican and Prosperous Armenia parties can only be expected to escalate.”

And escalate it did, with various disputes reported as Election Day approached. Not only did the two parties compete for the support of teachers and parents by distributing gifts and flowers in schools and kindergartens on International Women’s Day in March; the rivalry became noticeable elsewhere. For example, the BHK-affiliated Mayor of Ijevan, Vartan Ghalumyan, accused his HHK predecessor of attempting to paralyze the legislative body governing the administrative center of the Armenia’s North Eastern Tavush region. There were also violent clashes reported between supporters of both parties in the second largest city of Gyumri⁸ and just days before the election in Masis.

According to media reports⁹, traditional law enforcement officers were supported by large numbers of armed

8 Police Probe ‘Pre-Election’ Violence In Gyumri, RFE/RL
<http://www.armenialiberty.org/archive/english/20120403/1089/1089.html?id=24536536>

9 Special squad soldiers, helicopter in Massis: tension grows on threshold of elections, Tert
<http://tert.am/en/news/2012/05/04/masis-incident/>

special police troops and helicopters. In such an environment, other parties contesting the vote, including the opposition ANC, could be considered as fairly low-profile. The opposition held significantly fewer opposition rallies and did much less campaign advertising. The atmosphere was also calmer than in previous years, with no major confrontations between government and opposition forces. Instead, reports of widespread vote bribery began to circulate, indicating that money rather than threats and intimidation would likely determine the election’s outcome, with Tsarukyan’s Multi Group company even gifting 500 tractors during the campaign period and the Republican Party exploiting its extensive administrative resources in the public sector.

“[...] the campaign was marked by lack of confidence by the public and many stakeholders in the integrity of the electoral process and allegations of electoral malpractice, especially vote buying. The misuse of administrative resources, including human resources of education-sector employees, violated the Electoral Code and contributed to an unequal playing field for political contestants, contravening paragraph 7.7 of the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document,” the OSCE/ODIHR reported in its final report¹⁰ published on 26 June.

Moreover, while acknowledging

10 Parliamentary Elections, 6 May 2012, OSCE/ODIHR <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/88247>

that the pre-election campaign “was peaceful, despite some instances of use of inflammatory language and four violent incidents between supporters of different parties,” it also added that “public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process remained a serious challenge.” Indeed, on 2 April, the U.S. Ambassador to Armenia, John Heffern, lamented the resulting widespread apathy in society and what he termed an ‘atmosphere of pessimism and despair.’ “Those who want to build democracy in Armenia can’t stop with statements about what ‘they’ should do,” RFE/RL quoted him as saying.¹¹ “Instead, Armenians should [...] make their voices heard and establish and utilize mechanisms that deter fraud and hold government accountable. [...] impatience can also be debilitating if it slides into apathy and cynicism.”

Some Progress

Despite such concerns, there were grounds for some hope, at least in comparison to previous elections. “The media overall met their obligation to provide free and paid airtime and ensure nondiscriminatory conditions and unbiased news coverage of contestants during the official campaign period,” OSCE/ODIHR noted while noting that there was still some bias in favor of ‘certain parties’ “which contradict the principle of unbiased coverage set by the Electoral

Code, and cases where campaign materials produced by parties were presented as news items by some private broadcasters, which undermined the credibility and independence of media reporting and deprived viewers of independent reporting.”

Of more alarm to civil society and the parties challenging the ruling Republicans was the electoral roll. With the 2011 census putting the population at 3,285,000, of which 2,871,509 were living in the country, 2,485,844 had been identified as eligible to vote despite the widespread belief that the number of resident citizens is significantly lower. Such concerns were reinforced by media reports. Eurasianet, for example, reported¹² that one Facebook user shared his concerns about an improbably large number of residents at one address. “Edgar Tamaryan 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.”

When the Passport and Visa Department of the Armenian Police did investigate the situation, the number of eligible voters was reduced by just 3,000 to 2,482,593, leading to further allegations that absentee votes would

¹¹ *U.S. Envoy Laments ‘Apathy,’ Urges More Civic Activism In Armenia*, RFE/RL <http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/24535390.html>

¹² *Armenia: Flying the Flag of Facebook for Power to the People - and the Politicians* <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65260>

be manipulated in order to secure victory for the ruling HHK. This may have been why this year's parliamentary election saw the emergence of previously unthinkable alliances. On 6 April, for example, the BHK and the ANC, along with ARF-D and Heritage, announced the creation of a 'joint headquarters' to combat electoral violations. However, there was little other evidence of cooperation aimed at limiting the possibility of government fraud. In fact, on 19 April, Heritage withdrew from the arrangement, although it did support an appeal to the Constitutional Court on 28 April by the BHK and ARF-D to publish the names of citizens that did vote. The request was rejected the day before the election.

But Limited Outcomes

Meanwhile, any hope that policies and ideologies might win out over personalities and rivalries in this year's elections was soon dashed with the vote proving no different than previous years. Indeed, notes Zolyan, this was especially true for a campaign that from the outset looked to be run mainly between the HHK, made up of government-connected businessmen and bureaucrats, and the BHK. "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 major-

ity in the parliament, or whether it would be forced to form a coalition with other parties to form a government," he wrote.

The Weak Link to Foreign Policy

Foreign policy also took a backseat, even if critics of the government allege perceived international support for Sargsyan and the Republican Party in return for breakthroughs in relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. In fact, neither were main issues during the pre-election campaign, in contrast to the 2008 presidential election when Ter-Petrosian sought to gain support by alleging a government 'sellout' to Azerbaijan on Karabakh. Instead, a LINKS analysis¹³ considered that the "2012 Armenian parliamentary elections are very much focused on domestic politics. The economy, Armenia's declining population, crime and corruption, and broader issues related to governance, dominate the discussions. It is a combat of ideas, but more a combat of personalities."

"[...] Armenian political forces have withdrawn into their comfort zone of rhetoric offering the electorate little choice, and worse, offering few indications as to how they are going to deal with an issue that is likely to come to a head in one way or another during the course of the next parliament," it continued. "[...] In truth

¹³ 2012 Armenian Parliamentary Elections: (5) For Armenian Political parties, Karabakh remains the elephant in the room, LINKS <http://links-dar.org/2012/04/22/2012-armenian-parliamentary-elections-5-for-armenian-political-parties-karabakh-remains-the-elephant-in-the-room/>

In fact, neither were main issues during the pre-election campaign, in contrast to the 2008 presidential election when Ter-Petrossian sought to gain support by alleging a government ‘sellout’ to Azerbaijan on Karabakh.

none of the politicians want Karabakh to become an issue in the current election campaign because this will require them to give answers which they don't have, or prefer not to disclose.”

The International Crisis Group also referred to Karabakh in its report¹⁴ on the parliamentary election, noting the critical importance of a clean vote. “After May’s parliamentary elections, Armenia is preparing for a pivotal presidential vote in 2013 that will determine whether it has shed a nearly two-decade history of fraud-tainted elections and put in place a government with the legitimacy to implement comprehensive reform and resolve its problems with Azerbaijan,” the Executive Summary of its report read.

Nonetheless, despite the allegations of vote-buying during the pre-election campaign, the atmosphere on Election Day was calmer than in previous years, with fewer reports

¹⁴ Armenia: An Opportunity for Statesmanship, International Crisis Group
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/south-caucasus/armenia/217-armenia-an-opportunity-for-statesmanship.aspx>

of ballot-box stuffing, although that is not to say that fraud did not occur or that there were no other problems. “For the first time in ten years, all Central Electoral Commission members signed its final protocol without reservations,” commented the Caucasus Institute’s Alexander Iskandaryan.¹⁵ “It is, however, clear that ballot stuffing or vote count manipulation were not significantly instrumental in this election. The action was elsewhere.”

In one of the most widely publicized incidents,¹⁶ for example, reports first shared on Facebook identified that temporary ink stamps in the passports of citizens who had voted disappeared in less than an hour rather than the 12 hours they should remain visible. The opposition and civil society groups claimed that this was evidence that multiple voting was taking place. Such accusations were to be more loudly voiced when the Central Elections Commission (CEC) announced the final results.

A Landslide Victory

The ruling HHK increased the number of its seats in the Armenian Parliament to 69 while BHK managed 37. Meanwhile, the extra-parliamentary opposition ANC managed a token representation in the National

¹⁵ Armenian Elections: Technology vs. Ideology, By Alexander Iskandaryan, CAD
<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/>

¹⁶ Social Media and Armenia’s 2012 Parliamentary Elections, Onnik Krikorian, CAD
<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/>

Assembly with seven seats, and former coalition members OYP and the ARF-D six each. Heritage also managed five seats.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the BHK and even the ANC announced they would take up their mandates. This was a move previously unthinkable in the years following the 2008 presidential election although Ter-Petrosian notably did not take up his. Some analysts suggest that the former president's interest in politics is waning following a decline in support since the 2008 vote. Indeed, of greater significance was the fact that the BHK chose not to form a new coalition government with its previous partners, instead deciding to position itself as a new opposition force, even if their political identity in the eyes of the public remains somewhat at odds with this goal.

“The overall result is that the big parties got bigger and the small parties got smaller,” wrote Iskandaryan, “The two largest parties combined now have over 80% of the seats in parliament. “Meanwhile, the main challenges to Armenia’s political life persist. Armenia’s political system is poorly developed; political parties are either elite groups or electoral machines, largely passive in-between elections. Business is strongly integrated with politics. The biggest challenge of all is that Armenia’s citizens are not looking for meaningful po-

¹⁷ *Vote 2012: Election body publishes final results, ArmeniaNow*
http://www.armenianow.com/vote_2012/38032/parliamentary_elections_central_election_commission_final_results

litical paradigms [...]. This being so, it is logical for a citizen to sell their vote for a bag of potatoes or cave in to economic pressure.”

Yet, while those parties challenging the HHK did at least promise to combat corruption, reduce taxes, increase social benefits, and create new jobs, the governing party did attempt to address some significant concerns by assuring voters that government-linked businessmen, especially those monopolizing key areas of the economy, would not enter parliament on their party ticket. In reality, however, it was business as usual with those figures running again for the HHK, albeit on the majoritarian ticket, claiming that they had handed over control of commercial activity to close family members such as their wives¹⁸ and sons.¹⁹

The issue of Armenia’s oligarchs, however, was still significant one month after the elections when three military doctors dining at a restaurant owned by HHK MP, businessman, and Armenian Football Federation President Ruben Hayrapetyan were severely beaten by Hayrapetyan’s bodyguards.²⁰ One

¹⁸ *To new parliament with old oligarchs: Despite President's assurances, businesspeople still on election lists* http://armenianow.com/vote_2012/36786/armenian_may_parliamentary_elections_oligarch

¹⁹ *Business as Usual: Oligarchs line up for National Assembly seats, Armenia Now*
http://www.armenianow.com/news/vote_2012/35339/parliamentary_elections_2012_businessmen_majoritarian_vote

²⁰ *Tycoon Denies Role In Severe Beating, RFE/RL*
<http://www.armenianliberty.org/archive/english/20120619/1089/1089.html?id=24619451>

“The overall result is that the big parties got bigger and the small parties got smaller”

of them, Vahe Avetyan, later died from his injuries.²¹ Hayrapetyan was eventually forced to resign his parliamentary seat on 3 July²² after public protests in the capital. Public outrage still lingers, with demonstrations continuing at the time of writing, now calling for his prosecution.

Despite the generally positive assessments by OSCE/ODIHR, the European Union, and the U.S. regarding the conduct of the election, in contrast to previous votes, international observers notably avoided commenting on whether the 2012 parliamentary election met international standards for democracy. “[...], in spite of [...] positive changes,” remarked Zolyan, “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.”

Inside Armenia, however, the main discussion since the vote has instead been whether Sargsyan’s re-election bid next year will be challenged by

the Kocharian-linked BHK and who its candidate might be. With some speculating that Robert Kocharian might attempt a return to power in 2013, while others suggest that it will be Vartan Oskanian, post-election developments continue to be linked to next year’s vote. A criminal case has been already been opened by the National Security Service (NSS) over alleged money-laundering by Oskanian through his Civilitas Foundation, a think-tank with its own online media presence that was increasingly critical of the government ahead of the May parliamentary elections.

Of course, many observers consider the case to be politically motivated and linked to a possible BHK challenge against Sargsyan and the HHK in next year’s presidential election. “The fact that this would happen at this time in the political calendar is troubling,” American Ambassador Heffern told RFE/RL.²³

21 *Doctor Dies After Yerevan Restaurant Assault*, RFE/RL
<http://www.armenialiberty.org/archive/english/20120629/1089/1089.html?id=24630525>

22 *Embattled ‘Oligarch’ Quits Parliament Over Deadly Violence*, RFE/RL
<http://www.armenialiberty.org/archive/english/20120703/1089/1089.html>

23 *U.S. Envoy Questions Criminal Case Against Oskanian*, RFE/RL
<http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/24614746.html>