

Armenian Elections: Technology vs. Ideology

By Alexander Iskandaryan, Yerevan

Abstract

International observers evaluated Armenia's May 6, 2012 parliamentary election as competitive, vibrant and generally peaceful, with a campaign characterized by freedom of speech, assembly and media. The results highlighted important trends and challenges in the country's development: Armenia's two major catch-all parties succeeded using non-ideological methods—mostly economic incentives and counterincentives—winning over 80% of the vote between them. While signaling an ideological void which needs to be filled, this outcome may also point toward the emergence of a two-party system, and a more open—if still elitist—political competition.

The Background

The May 6, 2012 parliamentary election in Armenia was quite unusual in terms of its results as well as the way the campaign and election day unfolded. It will take a while before we can fully understand the role played by this election in Armenia's modern history; at this stage, we can just evaluate the trends signaled by the election and the context in which it took place.

The Armenian parliament has 131 seats, of which 90 are filled by a proportional vote based on party lists, and 41 by a majority vote in single-mandate constituencies. Eight political parties and one political bloc, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), registered to take part (the threshold for a bloc to enter parliament is set at 7% and for a party at 5%).

The number of competing parties was already unusual, since in the previous parliamentary election, which took place in 2007, 22 political entities registered, and in the one before that, in 2002, there were 16; both times, most contestants fell far short of the threshold. In 2012 for the first time, there were only three outsiders in the campaign, taking advantage of the election publicity to promote their specific causes, and they won a combined 2.02% of the vote. The small number of outsiders may be seen as a sign that Armenia's political party system is gradually maturing; the fact that the Communist Party is one of them makes Armenia different from many post-Soviet republics, where communists still enjoy high degrees of popularity.

The Results

The layout of the new parliament reflects Armenia's political realities, with the ruling party well ahead of its opponents. 70 seats in the new parliament went to the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), with the incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan holding the first position on its list. The Republicans won almost half of the proportional vote and more than two-thirds of the single-mandate constituencies, ending up with a slight majority of the seats in the new parliament.

The rest of the seats were divided among a host of competitors: 36 seats (28 proportional+8 single-mandate) went to the Prosperous Armenia Party, 7 (all proportional) went to the Armenian National Congress, 6 (5+1) to Rule of Law Country, and 5 each (all proportional) to Dashnaksutyun and the Heritage Party; the latter had several Free Democrats on its list. The remaining two seats were won in single-mandate constituencies by candidates who were not formally affiliated with or supported by a political party or bloc.

Given this election's record turnout of 1.57 million voters, representing over 62% of the electorate, the Republican Party set a record with 664,400 votes, or 44.02% of the proportional vote. It broke the 1999 record set by the highly popular Unity Bloc led by Karen Demirchyan and Vazgen Sargsyan, which won over 448,000 votes, equivalent to 41.67% of the total in 1999, when 1.1 million people voted. In fact, the runner-up also broke that record, if by a tiny margin: the Prosperous Armenia Party came in second in the 2012 election, getting over 454,000 votes, which was just over 30%.

The Players

Beyond the two major parties, the other four winners won just enough votes to edge past the threshold: three parties scored 5–6% each, and the bloc, 7%. Prior to and during the campaign, experts expressed doubts about some of these parties' chances to enter the parliament, but in the end, all the genuine contenders were elected. Notably, for some of them, this was an achievement, and for others, a downgrade. For example, Heritage had six seats in the old parliament and took five in the new one. A small and not very consolidated party, it had to make a genuine effort to preserve its presence in Armenian politics, and only succeeded by means of an aggressive and expensive campaign. As for Dashnaksutyun, it held 13 seats in the 2007 parliament, but seemed to rest on its laurels, running a low-key campaign and barely making it into the new legislature, mainly by virtue of its traditional electorate and its image as Armenia's oldest party.

Few experts expected Rule of Law Country to win entry into the parliament this time. This one-man party seemed to be on hold since 2007, when it won 6 mandates and joined a coalition. The party is known largely for its young charismatic leader who currently heads the President's Security Council. However, just a couple of months prior to the 2012 election, Rule of Law Country deployed substantial funds and a variety of campaign advisers to turn itself into a spoiler of sorts, apparently as a safeguard for the Republicans, and scrounged just enough votes to get past the threshold. Indirectly, this proves that the Republicans were not as sure of winning the majority as they wanted everyone to believe.

The only bloc in the competition, the Armenian National Congress, was one of the disappointments of this election. Assembled from a number of parties, most of them tiny, the Congress is led by Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. It has been around since 2008, when its leader stood in the presidential election as the incumbent president's main competitor, winning over three times the number of votes that the ANC got this time: 21.5% against 7.08% (though it is a bit of a stretch to compare the parliamentary elections to the presidential voting, especially in a country with strongly personalized politics). Apparently, time worked against the ANC, which stood behind the mass post-election rallies in March 2008, operated as an extraparlimentary opposition for four years, and got caught up in this outsider routine. Its 2012 campaign was certainly much less intense than expected.

The Consequences

The overall result is that the big parties got bigger and the small parties got smaller. The two largest parties combined now have over 80% of the seats in parliament. It is too early to judge if Armenia is moving towards a two-party system, but this seems to be a trend, especially if we look at the nature of the campaign and what the two winners represent.

For the first time in Armenia's history, this election won generally positive assessments from international observers, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the International Expert Center for Electoral Systems (ICES). For the first time in ten years, all Central Electoral Commission members signed its final protocol without reservations. Of course, some cases of fraud were observed, and many more alleged, as is the tradition in Armenia. It is, however, clear that ballot stuffing or vote count manipula-

tion were not significantly instrumental in this election. The action was elsewhere.

As noted in the detailed statement made by the OSCE ODIHR, this campaign was characterized by freedom of assembly, speech and media. For the first time ever, all parties had ample opportunity to address the voters. Once this happened, it turned out they had little to say. The campaigns were almost non-ideological unless we count anti-corruption rhetoric; the promises made by parties were vague and all boiled down to handing out more money. One of the parties even vowed to lower taxes and increase welfare packages at the same time without explaining where the funds would come from. On the whole, the contest was about campaign technique rather than ideology. The true currency on the market was paternalism: apparently, it sells well in the existing political culture, and certainly better than ideology.

Both major parties in the Armenian parliament represent elite groups. With almost no ideology to speak of, they are catch-all parties, a phenomenon becoming typical in the modern world. The main competition in this election was not between them and the opposition, but between the two of them. In fact, the two were in coalition prior to the election, and it was in their interest that small parties entered the parliament so that the de-facto monopolized legislature would have an appearance of fragmentation. Meanwhile, the two allies fought hard with each other, using the same set of tools: what the OSCE politely called "gifts" and the opposition referred to as "bribery." There was also what everyone called "abuse of administrative resources." The bribery was about cash, sometimes disguised as charity, with companies affiliated with parties handing out jars of jam to voters or giving tractors to rural communities. As to administrative resources, they were apparently used to get out the vote among employees of schools, hospitals, companies owned by party members, and so on.

Such practices are common in many post-Soviet countries. What makes this election special was that these tools were not used by one party but by at least two. Typically, in one village school teachers would be bribed, promised raises or threatened with layoffs by the Republicans, while workers at the local factory would get the same treatment from Prosperous Armenia, and in the neighboring village, Prosperous Armenia would target the school and the Republicans, the farmers. What intellectuals from the capital were saying on TV had very little relevance to the game. The huge sums of money spent by the contestants on "gifts" are the best proof that election day fraud was not on the agenda, otherwise the tractors would have been a total waste. The two leading parties were fighting hard for the

votes, in many cases simply buying them up or bullying people into giving them away. As the results show, large numbers of Armenians cooperated with this strategy.

The situation in Armenia is reminiscent of post-World War II Italy, in which socialist parties were trying to play on the ideological field and losing, whereas the Christian Democrats were achieving success using non-ideological methods very similar to those used in this election, i.e. economic incentives and counterincentives.

Prospects and Challenges

For the first time since the mid-nineties, all of Armenia's significant political forces are now represented in the parliament. In all probability, this will also be the first time since 1995 that election day is not followed by mass protests. The Armenian National Congress gathered its supporters in Freedom Square two days after the election; its leaders promised to contest the results in the Constitutional Court but said they would take the mandates anyway, unlike what they did following the Yerevan city mayor election in 2009.

According to political tradition, the ruling party will certainly forge a coalition despite having more than half the seats. For the first time, the parliament will become the scene for a competition between opposition groups, Heritage and ANC, whose campaigns were both based on radical anti-government rhetoric. In fact, the competition inside the legislature will now proceed along two dimensions: between, and inside, the majority parties

and within the opposition. The political elites will continue to evolve and become institutionalized; they will redistribute spheres of influence, establish unions and enter agreements.

The way Armenia's political calendar works, parliamentary elections serve as primaries for the presidential elections due less than a year later. Two parties, the Republicans and the Congress, have already announced that their leaders, i.e. the incumbent president and the first president of Armenia, will stand in the 2013 election. Should the forthcoming election prove as "competitive, vibrant and peaceful" as the OSCE judged the current one to be, it will continue the trend for open political competition, something uncommon in the former Soviet world.

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 political paradigms and the dominant discourse is a simplistic "good guys vs. bad guys." This being so, it is logical for a citizen to sell their vote for a bag of potatoes or cave in to economic pressure. However, the only remedy is to improve campaign techniques and allow politicians to compete for votes, something Armenia is hopefully learning to do.

About the Author

Alexander Iskandaryan is a political scientist and Director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute, a think tank and educational center. His main areas of study are ethnopolitical conflicts, post-Communist transformations and nation-building.