
Post-Election Analysis: The New Armenian Parliament

June 1999

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Introduction

Signifying another step on the road to strengthening multiparty democracy in Armenia, the Armenian electorate went to the polls on May 30th and elected a new parliament. The new 131-seat parliament, or National Assembly, represents yet another break with the controversial Ter Petrosian period of organized crime, governmental corruption, political assassination and intimidation, and the flagrant misuse of state power against the political opposition. The new composition of the recently elected parliament offers renewed optimism that the institutionalization of democracy and the establishment of the rule of law can finally be achieved in Armenia.

This recent election, however, does not necessarily guarantee a resolute advance of Armenian democracy, particularly in light of the curious composition of the new political parties, blocs and coalitions now dominant in the parliament. A much more dynamic and balanced system of government needs to be allowed to develop further. The very nature of the Armenian presidential republic, by virtue of the concentration of powers in the executive branch of government, demands a balanced counterweight from a strengthened and responsible legislature and a more independent judiciary. Just as important as a balanced system of government is the need for greater accountability and transparency. Accountability, to allow for a deterrent to the temptation of political corruption and bribery, and transparency, or informed public debate, for all governmental decisions and legislative actions. The need for greater transparency has already been demonstrated by the heated allegations of unethical and often illegal elements of the privatization of the state-run ArmenTel national telecommunications firm and the sale of the Yerevan Brandy Factory.

The Parliamentary Elections

A rather disappointing turnout of slightly under 56 percent of the over two million Armenian electorate voted in the May 30th parliamentary election. Electing candidates from twenty-one political parties and groups, the voters chose 75 individuals from single-mandate constituencies and another 56 seats selected on the basis of party lists reflecting votes for political parties or blocs. The Unity, or "Miasnutiun," Bloc emerged as the dominant force in the new parliament, garnering nearly 450,000 votes or nearly 42 percent of the vote. Following the Unity Bloc, the Communist Party of Armenia came second with just over 12 percent of the vote. The Rights and Unity Bloc placed third with almost 7.97 percent, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) "Dasnaktsutiun" with 7.83 percent, and the Country of Laws, "Orinats Yerkir," group and the National democratic Union (NDU) with 5.28 and 5.17 percent respectively.

By surpassing the five percent vote requirement for gaining seats on the proportional, party-based system, these six political parties and blocs now constitute the leading elements of the parliament. The allocation of the 56 seats from the proportional system, as of now, is as follows: the Unity Bloc with 29 seats, the Communist Party with 8 seats, the Rights and Accord group with 6 seats, the ARF with 5 seats, and the Country of Law and NDU with 4 seats each. Seven other political parties and groups collected under the five percent minimum but were able to have one or two candidates elected by majoritarian vote.

Looking at the seventy-five seats elected in single-mandate constituencies by a majoritarian vote, 33 candidates of the Unity Bloc were elected, 3 deputies from the ARF, two deputies each from the NDU, the Communist Party and the Country of Laws were elected. Four candidates were elected from parties that could not meet the proportional voting requirement, including former interior minister Vano Siradeghian of the Armenian National Movement (ANM). An additional 29 "independent" or non-affiliated candidates were also among the seventy-five seats chosen. The final allocation of seats is, as of this writing, still forthcoming and may be subject to minor change.

Overall, the composition of the new smaller 131-seat legislature reflects the results of an electorate increasingly frustrated by the conduct of their political parties governing the country for the last several years, and growing tired of a declining living standard in a substantial and glowing level of income inequality. Expressing frustration in ballots, or even more negative, expressing disgust in refusing to vote, as evident in the low turnout, the electorate has created a new political reality. This new political landscape features a parliament controlled by the "Miasnutiun" Unity Bloc, an odd mix of the People's Party, led by 14-year ruler of Soviet Armenia Garen Demirchian, aligned with the right-wing Republican Party of Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian and formed from the remnants of the former Yerkrpah group. The Unity Bloc dominates the new parliament by virtue of its holding 62 of the 131 seats. The second largest, but distant, group is the Communist Party, led by Sergei Badalian, with an impressive achievement of holding ten seats, mirroring the electorate's frustration with the painful effects of the economic reforms of the past few years. The third largest group is the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) with eight seats, a significant result following a mature and well-run political campaign by the ARF throughout the country. Also holding eight seats is the Rights and Accord group headed by the well-known Hrant Khachtrian and backed by the Nagorno Karabagh defense minister. The National Democratic Union (NDU) of failed presidential aspirant and former prime minister Vazgen Manukian, and the "Orinats Yerkir" or Country of Law group, backed by Interior and National Security Minister Serge Sargsian, each hold another six seats.

The role of the ARF is all the more promising given the party's discouraging history of being banned by the Ter Petrosian government, having its official media outlets shut down, and having much of its top leadership in the country subjected to a painful series of "show trials" more reminiscent of the Stalin era. The denial of political participation in the 1995 parliamentary elections and the inadequate time to prepare for the 1998 presidential elections by the actions of the Ter Petrosian government have also challenged the ARF to demonstrate its ability to overcome the previous political polarization through its active participation in this election.

Voting Irregularities

Over two hundred foreign election observers and 4600 locally certified election monitors found problems relating to inadequate lists of registered voters. A significant percentage of voters, estimated at roughly between 13 and 14 percent of all voters, were prevented from voting due to glaring inaccuracies of local voting lists. Many voters were forced to seek immediate redress by appealing to special courts for official permission to vote in the election. According to the independent Noyan Tapan news agency, some 21,000 of the estimated 150,000 voters initially omitted from voting lists were forced to secure legally-sanctioned permission to vote. Many of the smaller political parties, including the NDU and the SDU, are also protesting this issue, contending that the voters omitted from the official lists were largely their supporters.

President Kocharian has pledged to "punish election abuses" and to investigate all substantiated allegations. The government will have to improve the technical voter registration process in the face of the coming elections for local government council slated for November. It must be noted that the lack of a national population over the last decade and the uncoordinated computerization of national voter lists are a significant factors in the election's shortcomings.

The analysis of the foreign monitors differed somewhat, however, with the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) issuing the most critical report, alleging that the election "failed to meet international standards" and that it proved to be the continuation of the flawed 1995 parliamentary elections, differing only in "the methods and types of manipulation." The Council of Europe delegation, although citing the inaccuracies of the voter lists, stressed the "considerable improvement" over the 1995 elections. Similarly citing voting irregularities, the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) also commended the "serious progress" in democracy, especially in contrast to the 1995 parliamentary and the 1996 presidential elections.

What is the Unity Block?

The emergence of the Unity Bloc as the dominant force in the new parliament, with a significant 62-seat position, is a curious development in Armenian politics. Although the dominance of the Unity Bloc was predicted for the past several months, the bloc itself is an odd pairing of the Garen Demirchian's Peoples' Party and the Republican Party of Armenia, a recently-formed organization led by Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian and comprising the "Yerkrapah" group, the dominant political element in the former parliament. The Republican Party is basically a revamped political party organized along the ideological lines of the formerly-dominant parliamentary group, the "Yerkrapah" Union of Karabagh Veterans. The Yerkrapah group, admittedly not a true political party and more of a public organization, lacked the internal discipline and structural elements of a true party and therefore benefited greatly by being recast by the defense minister into a new entity to emerge on the political landscape. This transformation led to a fresh approach by the largely right-wing Republican Party stressing economic recovery, a focus that has become the electorate's core political demand in the face of an economic reality featuring growing unemployment and an average annual per capita income of \$400. Such an economic focus further enhanced the party's electoral marriage to Demirchian's Peoples' Party. The political alignment of Demirchian, who ruled Armenia during the Soviet-era years of 1974-1988, with the defense minister effectively marginalized the electoral threat posed by Sergei Badalian's Communist Party, the National Democratic Union (NDU) led by former presidential contender Vazgen Manukian, and Paruir Hairikian's Self-Determination Union (SDU) bloc. Looking at the political return of Demirchian, there are signs of a pattern common to many of the former Soviet states whereby a former communist figure can bridge the obvious credibility gap by appealing to the people for a nostalgic return to a period of economic stability and job security. In this case, however, the return of Demirchian (or other communist figures in other countries) does not necessarily mean a full return to Soviet-period policies. Instead, Demirchian combines a vague platform of economic management experience with a critical view of the pain of economic reform. Such a political victory will nonetheless challenge Demirchian to devise more than vague nostalgic appeal to formulate prudent economic policies and to provide effective political leadership in the face of serious constraints. This challenge is highlighted in the fairly superficial extent of the program offered by his populist Peoples' Party, a party formed in the wake of his 1998 defeat in the presidential election and aimed at providing a vehicle centered around his growing personal popularity in order to expand his national political presence in the country.

The defense minister reportedly provided his party's organizational strength to the alliance while gaining from the growing popularity of Demirchian, also a failed challenger to Robert Kocharian in the last presidential race. It is also significant that the overwhelming majority of the new deputies of the Unity Bloc come from Sarkisian's Republican Party, suggesting the potential future rift between the two mismatched groups over the sharing of legislative powers. Reflecting the recent promises by President Kocharian to reform a cabinet to reflect the new political landscape, the Unity Bloc will most likely follow the resignation of Prime Minister Armen Darbinian with the possible replacement of several key ministerial positions, possibly including Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian. The position of Interior and National Security Minister Serge Sargsian is also now questionable and the Unity Bloc will most likely encourage the president to modify the dual nature of the minister's portfolio.

The Unity Bloc, set to establish a working majority with a group of 25 supportive independent and non-affiliated newly-elected deputies, will also move quick to implement some of its promised "revisions" of the country's economic reform program, including a new effort to address growing unemployment, the guarantee of free health care and social programs in order to consolidate its base of support. Demirchian's public position calling for a greater role for the state in economic planning and production and his hints at adopting elements of a more traditional "welfare state" also promise some real alterations of Armenian economic reform. Specific issues will probably include greater state funding of pensions, education and health care and a reexamination of Armenian policies regarding the conditionality of the international lending institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). The issue of international lending is a significant factor given the government's continued reliance on IMF and World Bank funding. The World Bank alone has provided more than \$500 million since 1992 and provides the financing of much of the government's annual budget deficits.

The Coming Weeks

One of the first issues for the new parliament when it convenes its first session on June 10th will be the question of parliamentary leadership. It will be interesting to see how the role of the defense minister will be clarified in the political equation. It is suggested that Defense Minister Sarkisian will be tempted to assume the position of prime minister, with Demirchian as parliamentary chairman, but the complicated nature of the direct involvement of a military figure in the political arena raises another set of dangers. According to the constitution, Sarkisian will be forced to relinquish the defense ministerial portfolio if he assumes the role of prime minister. The power base of defense minister may be too attractive to give up especially in contrast to the challenging and frustrating premiership. Hopefully for the course of Armenian democracy, the electoral success of the defense minister and the similar political involvement of Nagorno Karabagh Defense Minister Samvel Babayan in supporting the Rights and Unity bloc, do not foretell a blurring of the military and political establishments. The danger of a militaristic, Chilean General Pinochet-style of government would be the gravest challenge to Armenia's infant democracy. A more likely scenario features the coming, and almost inevitable, confrontation of President Kocharian with the Demirchian-Sarkisian camp. No longer the darling of Armenian politics, the former Nagorno Karabagh and current Armenian president, Kocharian is not seen as the fresh face among the usual assortment of tired and tainted political figures. Having endured a stable first 100 days in office, the president seems to be less than satisfied with his government's record on implementing his initially ambitious and optimistic agenda. The president, as all political leaders new to office, has learned the essential nature of true democratic governance: compromise and consensus.

With the looming challenges posed by the new parliament, President Kocharian will be faced with renewed parliamentary questioning over the country's prominent privatization deals, a legislative assault on the government's budget and economic reform policies, and most likely a battle over cabinet and personnel changes. All indicate a coming confrontation. The president will most likely follow the "Moscow model" of his friend and ally, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, whereby a confrontation with a resurgent parliament can only be contained by ensuring the concentration of real power in a strong presidency supported by authoritative actions and edicts. The Moscow model is marked by a series of tactical political moves aimed at thwarting the opponents' attempts to set policy and seeking to deter and outmaneuver a legislative attacks by a parliament inherently vulnerable by its fragile composition and tenuous alliances. Such a political strategy of "tactical combat" may also suit Kocharian, the veteran of the more dangerous arena of Karabagh politics and an adept politician not to be underestimated.

Although this scenario does not exactly foster the needs of a more balanced system of government, greater transparency and more governmental accountability crucial to the consolidation and institutionalization of Armenian democracy, an effective executive branch checking a potentially militaristic and overly-ambitious parliament may contribute constructive

elements of compromise and consensus to the essentially immature state of Armenian politics. It is also imperative that the smaller political parties and groups within the country, both in and out of the parliament, exert a greater and more responsible influence over the course of Armenian democracy. Specifically, the need for greater debate and transparency in the formulation of public policy, the need for a more open and accountable government, and the need for a determined and effective effort to combat corruption at all levels of Armenian society, are challenges that all elements of the political spectrum should address.

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