

Presidential Elections in Armenia

On February 19, 2008 presidential elections were held in Armenia. This elections appeared to be one of the most competitive ones ever conducted in Armenia. This time pro-governmental candidate- incumbent prime minister Serzh Sarkisyan faced a real political opponent - Armenia's first president (1991-1998) Levon Ter- Petrosyan. There were nine presidential candidates but since the very beginning of the campaign it became obvious that the main political fight would be between these two candidates. Sarkisyan could rely on his administrative support while Ter-Petrosyan referred to wide public support, including some opposition parties and groups among political elite, youth, civil society organizations, intelligentsia. Ter-Petrosyan being in political shadow for the last ten years (after his forceful resignation in 1999) has decided to run the presidential campaign aimed at challenging the existing political regime.

The official election outcome announced by the Central Election Commission was the following: Sarkisyan got 52,9 % of votes while Ter-Petrosyan could assume 21,5 %. These extremely contested results followed by wide public protest brought the country to a political standoff.

Thousands of protesters gathered in Armenia for 10-day continuous rallies claiming a presidential election was rigged to hand victory to Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisyan. The protesters blaming the authorities in election fraud, demanded to annul the announced results and re- run elections in free and fair atmosphere. In a response to this, on March 1, the peaceful demonstrators were attacked and violently dispersed by the state authorities. As a result of clashes between the demonstrators and police 8 people died, hundreds of thousands were injured. This was followed by mass detention of activists, closure of opposition media, detention of activists, Ter- Petrosyan was isolated from public and put under house arrest. President Kocharyan decreed a 20-day state of emergency during which public gatherings were banned and the media could cite only government and law enforcement bodies when covering national political affairs.

Political life is becoming gradually stabilized, however, there is no consensus reached between the conflicting sides and the society is divided and polarized. It is difficult to say that the crisis is solved. The political dispute was rather suppressed by use of violence than resolved. And since it is so there is no guarantee for internal stability until ultimate consolidation of all political actors.

Below, see the article by presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrosyan that was published in Washington post on March 5, 2008.

In the further online Bulletin editions we will provide more analysis on this issue, including the positions of the representatives of opposing sides.

Principles or Procedures?

Dilemma of Democracy



Nowadays, the society is a part of political processes in democratic countries. The people select their representatives and charge them with responsibility to take care of them. Politics is a union of incoming and outgoing impulses. Incoming impulses are people's needs, requirements and decision made by the people (majority), with which this or that political group gets a decision-making mandate. The elections and freedom of choice is one of the major principles of liberal democracy. Outgoing impulse already represents a mandate implementation, i.e. how the elected ones respond to the trust declared to them by voters.

Larry Diamond is one of the outstanding representatives of modern democratic theory; he establishes 11 basic principles of liberal democracy:

The first principle refers to elections: electoral outcomes are uncertain, opposition vote is significant and no group that adheres to constitutional principles is denied the right to form a party and contest elections. Besides, the consolidated democracy is characterized with agreement on certain game rules by political elite (those having won the elections and those also from the opposition), to consolidate on the issues that are of vital significance for the country, dialogue and settlement.

The second principle of liberal democracy states that the military and other democratically unaccountable actors should be subordinate to the authority of elected civilian officials and institutions. The military are not actors of democracy; they are servants of the liberal-democratic system.

The third principle refers to the right to self-expression of citizens. In the environment of liberal democracy, citizens have multiple channels for expression. They have constitutional right for doing that.

The fourth principle is related to the freedom of belief, discussion, speech, assembly, demonstration and petition of individuals.

The fifth principle ensures freedom of alternative sources of information (including independent media to which citizens have politically unfettered access).

In the sixth principle Diamond defines that the executive power is constrained by the autonomy of the government institutions such as an independent judiciary, parliament and other mechanisms of horizontal accountability.

Civil liberties are effectively protected by an independent non-discriminatory judiciary whose decisions are respected and enforced by other centers of power – the seventh principle.

The eighth principle states that the citizens are politically equal under the law.

The ninth principle defines that minority groups are not oppressed.

The tenth principle states that the rule of law protects citizens from human right abuses.

The constitution is supreme – is declared in the eleventh principle.

Diamond considers liberal democracy as a unity of democracy and constitutional liberalism. In 90s, Larry Diamond wrote a book where he linked the degree of democracy to the political culture in developing countries. Political culture is directly linked to values.

Understanding of democracy is related to what values a country have – countries perceive it without liberalism. Democracy per se is nothing without liberal values, it is only a word. Recognition of liberal values by the society and political elite, their acceptance and implementation defines stability and sustainability of the democratic system.

The present political crisis in Georgia, first of all, if we generalize the issue and make a generalized analysis, has been caused by different vision of liberal democracy from the side of political elite. In the political elite we consider not only the ruling political force, but also the opposition too. The fact that the liberal – western values are not very firmly established in our daily life, culture and political thinking on all the levels and in all the directions, provides violation of all the eleven principles of liberal democracy.

Often the political forces mix up procedures and principles of democracy and the struggle is directed on making the procedures more noble, not the principles. This way nothing will be added to democracy and possibly the democracy can become a victim of such confrontation. Liberal democracy relies on free society. Free society has the values that create principles of democracy/liberal democracy.

Silence on Armenia

Washington Post
By Levon Ter-Petrosian

Wednesday, March 5, 2008; Page A21

YEREVAN, Armenia -- In Armenia's presidential election last month, I stood as the main opposition candidate against incumbent Prime Minister Serzh Sarkissian. The election followed a sadly familiar script: The regime harassed the opposition's representatives, bribed and intimidated voters, stuffed ballot boxes, and systematically miscounted votes. Indeed, the rigging of the outcome did not begin on Feb. 19. For the duration of the campaign the country's main medium of communication, television, which is tightly controlled by the regime, churned out propaganda that would have made Brezhnev-era Soviet propagandists blush in shame.

We in the opposition were angered by all of this but not surprised. What surprised and dismayed us was the deafening silence from the West. What dismayed us even more was the technical report of the observer mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which rubber-stamped Sarkissian's farcical claim of victory. The people of Armenia, unlike the OSCE monitors, chose to see what happened at the polling stations. Naturally, they discounted Sarkissian's claim and gathered to demand annulment of the results. They staged a continuous protest at Opera Square that became the most wonderful celebration of freedom and one that should be studied as an example of nonviolent, lawful resistance against illegitimate rule.

Deeply concerned that the ranks of protesters were swelling by the day, the regime decided early Saturday to resort to force. Riot police were ordered to disperse the crowd, detain the opposition leaders and put me under house arrest. After several hours, citizens reassembled at another site, demanding to see their leaders, but instead they encountered more riot police, later reinforced by units of the Armenian army, which was ordered to crush the protest. At least eight people were killed this weekend, and emergency rule has been declared.

How did we come to this? Why did the regime headed by outgoing President Robert Kocharian and "president-elect" Sarkissian think it could get away with using force against its own people? Surely the two men had their reasons, but the West's signal, even if unintentional, that they did not have to worry about a strong international reaction was the most important one.

We in Armenia have been trying to understand the roots of such indifference to the rape of our democracy by the Kocharian-Sarkissian regime. The available evidence suggests two explanations: First, some influential organizations and actors in the West, and in Europe in particular, are naively wedded to the notion of positive reinforcement. They seem to think that praising small improvements, instead of criticizing major flaws, creates an incentive for good behavior. Anyone who has studied this regime closely, however, understands the absurdity of such an approach. Second, and perhaps more important, is the oft-stated claim that the only people able to

settle Armenia's long-standing conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region will be leaders who are themselves from Nagorno-Karabakh -- as Kocharian and Sarkissian are -- and who are perceived domestically as hard-liners. This is analogous to the "only Nixon could go to China" logic. The problem is that despite being in power for the past 10 years, Kocharian and Sarkissian have done little to move the negotiating process forward. More important, any leader who must make consequential and difficult choices must have the trust of his people. Sarkissian does not have that trust. After what he and Kocharian did on March 1, he will not be able to govern here, let alone make difficult choices. So what should be done? What do the people of Armenia expect from the West, and the United States in particular? At the very least, we expect a strong and unequivocal condemnation of the violence that occurred March 1 and a recognition that the government, not the opposition, bears responsibility. This condemnation should accompany a stern warning against continued persecution of the opposition and its leaders -- mistreatment that is reaching unprecedented levels -- as well as a demand to lift the restrictions on the media and restore the people's rights to free assembly and unbiased information. We also expect a reassessment of the conduct of the election. Any serious reassessment will inevitably lead to the conclusion that a new election must be held. If these steps are not taken, Armenians will draw two very undesirable conclusions: that peaceful and lawful means of political struggle are ineffective and pointless, and that the West cares about democracy only when it is politically expedient to do so. The West must do everything possible to dissuade Armenia's citizens from reaching those conclusions.

The writer was president of Armenia from 1991 to 1998 and was the main opposition candidate for president this year. He is under house arrest.