

## **Armenia: Elections Hit New Low**

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Candidates in local ballots resort to desperate measures to get the electorate to vote.

The fifty-year-old man sitting on a stone bench outside the wooden hut was not going to vote in the Armenian local elections. "I don't believe anyone," said Musheg Sarkisian. "The authorities come and promise to give me an apartment and a job, but I just live here as I used to. And I have no job."

As widely expected, the local elections in Armenia on October 20 delivered a resounding victory to two pro-government parties, the Republican Party, HHK, of prime minister Andranik Markarian and the nationalist pro-presidential party, Dashnaktsutiun. Candidates from these two parties were elected as mayor or local prefect in the majority of 639 contests across Armenia.

But residents in three towns in Armenia reported that candidates had resorted to desperate measures - buying votes and ferrying voters - to get people to turn up at the polls.

Much of the population took no interest in the local elections at all. Sarkisian from the town of Gyumri, 90 km from Yerevan, was a typically disinterested voter.

Sarkisian lost his home in 1988 in the devastating earthquake that destroyed the city of Gyumri in northern Armenia. More than 25,000 people died and half a million were made homeless. His low opinion of elected officials is based on their record of failing to look after many of those who suffered, even 14 years later.

"What sense is there in going to vote?" he said. "Whatever happens, the man whom the president or the prime minister supports will get in. That was how it was in the last elections and that's how it will always be."

Although the elections were declared valid, the official turnout was low at around 40 per cent and many believe that even that figure was suspiciously high. In Gyumri, according to the central election commission's figures, fewer than 35 per cent of the electorate voted. But many locals thought that the authorities had artificially inflated the voting register, so they could stuff ballot boxes and rig the ballot.

"We don't have 110,000 voters," exclaimed Nina Davidian. "In the whole town there are something like 100,000 residents. How did they get these figures?"

"You know, our electoral commissions are formed on the basis of who your relatives are," said Anoush Mesropian. "In all commissions there are either the mayor's relatives or his friends. And the fact that the bulk of people do not come to vote actually plays into their hands."

The opposition believes the regime wants all the key posts in local administrations to be occupied either by members of the Dashnaktsutiun or Republican parties which support President Kocharian and the prime minister respectively.

Vigen Khachatryan, leader of the opposition Liberal-Democratic Party, believes that these elected officials will then back Kocharian in the presidential elections next February. "A newly elected mayor or a chairman of the village council will do everything so that Robert Kocharian stays president and the Republicans get a

majority in the parliamentary elections," he said.

In Gyumri, the re-elected mayor, Vardan Gukasian, had succeeded at winning some trust among the local population. "He at least is doing something, there's construction work going on, around a thousand people have found jobs. And they say that the president is standing behind Gukasian," said Nina Davidian who voted for the mayor.

Many votes, however, were simply bought. "It's cold in Gyumri and one of the candidates gave me a couple of metres of firewood," said one old woman. "No, I won't say my name. You'll leave here and I have to live here. You know, the easiest way to get elected is to pay a voter a certain sum. The highest price is ten US dollars. And what can we do? You can live on that amount for a week."

In the town of Vanadzor, in northern Armenia, the price of a vote was even lower - about two dollars.

"We have been infected with a psychology of dependency," said Artur Sakunts, chairman of the Vanadzor branch of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly. "That's one reason why people don't want to take part in the elections."

Vanadzor is also suffering. Its main problem is industrial collapse. Tens of thousands of people used to work in its chemical and metallurgical factories, but now they employ fewer than two thousand people.

"We don't have work or jobs and the situation will hardly change for the better in the near future," said Mara Arakelian, a journalist at the local newspaper Civic Initiative. A taxi-driver has similar thoughts, "As soon as I can get 250 dollars, I will settle my debts and emigrate to Russia. There is work there."

The election here was marked by a similar scepticism about the honesty of the vote and there was also a low official turnout of around 35 per cent. The serving mayor, Samvel Darbinaian of the Republican Party, was re-elected.

In the town of Ashtarak, 20 km from Yerevan, another mayor from the Republican Party, Ashot Galajian, was re-elected, the result that everyone had anticipated. "He is the prime minister's man, how could we not vote for him?" said Srbui Kapantsian. Galajian retained his post after he and his main opponent ferried voters to the polls in minibuses.

International observers have broadly given the polls a clean bill of health, although they have not yet presented their final report. "Despite some violations, they were conducted according to international standards," said Christopher Newbury, a British observer from the Council of Europe. "And in the current political environment in Armenia that is a step forward."

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