

Armenia: Opposition Candidate Campaigns to Annul Election

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Raffi Hovhannisyian did better than expected, but insists he was robbed of victory.

Raffi Hovhannisyian, defeated in Armenia's presidential election, has been touring the country, telling supporters he is the real victor, as part of a campaign to get the results overturned and a fresh ballot held..

The United States-born politician's tour of the country, in which he has made a point of stopping to chat with members of the public, has been dubbed the "Barevolution" – from the Armenian word "barev", meaning "hi".

Official results from the February 18 ballot show that the incumbent president Serzh Sargsyan won easily with 58.7 per cent. But Hovhannisyian's unexpectedly high score of 36.7 per cent has galvanised his supporters and emboldened him to allege openly that the vote was rigged. (See **Armenia: Presidential Challenger Rejects Poll Result.**)

Hovhannisyian is head of the Heritage Party, a small opposition party, but he appears to have become the focus for anti-Sargsyan feeling once the major opposition forces boycotted the poll.

There is wide popular dissatisfaction about poverty, the sluggish economy, and the number of people forced to emigrate to find work.

"Hovhannisyian became de facto the unifying candidate for the opposition," Yervand Borzoyan, head of the Mitk think-tank, said. "The authorities were very complacent as they thought his ratings were low, given that his party won only five per cent in the parliamentary election in May last year."

Hovhannisyian certainly sees himself as a unifying figure.

"There are no party flags here, there is no Heritage, Dashnaktsutyun, or Armenian National Congress. We all understand that this isn't a party political fight, but a campaign to get ordinary Armenians to return from abroad, for the children to come back to their homeland," he said.

Hovhannisyian won outright in only one of Armenia's 11 administrative regions, Shirak, but he performed well in many towns across the country. That trend could be a headache for Sargsyan in future elections.

Levon Barseghyan, head of the Gyumri Press Club, said that most voters in Shirak's rural areas voted overwhelmingly for Sargsyan, so Hovhannisyian's overall victory in the region was thanks to the urban electorate in Gyumri, Maralik and Artik.

In Gyumri, the region's main town, he won nearly 43,000 votes to Sargsyan's 17,000.

"People voted for Raffi because the situation in the region is dire, and there's a section of society with nothing to lose but its votes," Barseghyan said.

Hovhannisyian also won in Vanadzor, the third-largest city in Armenia after Yerevan and Gyumri.

Despite winning Kapan, the main town of the southern region of Syunik, Hovhannisyian lost overall there. On a visit to the region, he called for the dismissal of regional governor Suren Khachatryan and used meetings with the mayors of Meghri and Kajaran to accuse them of rigging the election results against him.

In Gyumri, Hovhannisyian's post-election tour drew a crowd of 5,000 or 6,000. While a smaller number – some 2,000 – took to the streets in Vanadzor, locals said that was bigger than any demonstration in many years.

Hovhannisyian dismisses criticisms that he has imported American-style campaign methods.

"There is nothing to be ashamed about in greeting people and receiving a greeting in return. That isn't some western technique, but an ordinary Armenian greeting, which carries great power," he said.

Stepa Safaryan, a political analyst with Hovhannisyian's Heritage Party, said this post-election tour was unprecedented, and marked the launch of a sustained campaign for the election result to be annulled.

"The people are calling on Hovhannisyian not to take a single step backwards. He made a deal with the people and as he's said, he will not allow history to be re-edited," Safaryan said. "These visits are an inauguration, the sealing of a compact between a citizen and his electorate."

President Sargsyan's allies do not seem unduly shaken by Hovhannisyan's campaign.

"Everyone is surprised that Hovhannisyan got so many votes. He probably surprised himself," said Hovik Abrahamyan, the speaker of parliament.

Manvel Sargsyan, head of analysis at the Armenian Centre for National and International Studies, wondered whether the ruling elite was being too complacent about what seemed a genuinely new trend in various parts of the country.

"This is the first time the population has displayed so much energy not just on election day, but after the polls as well," he said.

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