

## **Armenia: Young Demirchian Gains Ground**

Unable to rely on state television, the son of former communist-era leader of Armenia is making a strong showing in the presidential election campaign.

Children waving election flyers carrying Stepan Demirchian's portrait, women in doorways and old men looking out of windows were the first people to greet a convoy of 15 cars pulling into the tiny village of Ara last week.

The mountain village in the Aragatsotn region north-west of Yerevan was the first stop in a seven-location election tour by the opposition candidate who appears to be making the strongest impression ahead of the February 19 poll.

As his bid for the presidency gets unfriendly coverage on state television, Demirchian is running to a punishing schedule of public meetings to pursue a campaign, which relies heavily on his youth, political freshness and his late famous father.

Several analysts suggest the strategy is working and Demirchian is now picking up the most support among the ten opposition candidates challenging incumbent Robert Kocharian. Opinion polls are still very unreliable in Armenia, but two recent surveys in Yerevan also suggested Demirchian was running in second place.

For the people of Ara and six other villages last Saturday, the younger Demirchian's arrival was a real event. The entire community turned out in the main square, some attracted by the black Volga cars of his cavalcade, others out of genuine enthusiasm for the opposition candidate. The atmosphere was warm and excited.

"Save us, Stepan Demirchian," implored a villager, delighted at being given the microphone to say what he wants. His old shabby coat, worn trousers and shoes suggest someone whose life has been an uphill struggle, yet he does not seem to feel awkward in front of Demirchian's faultless suit.

Another woman, Marine Sarkisian, pushes her way through the crowd and kisses the candidate. "We want him to be the president of our country," she said.

Yet, Demirchian himself is quite reticent at the microphone. He merely repeats what his supporters have already said, telling voters not to feel intimidated by Kocharian's governing administration.

"The authorities are doing their best to hinder our meetings with the electorate and to limit our television air time," Demirchian told the crowd. "But we're trying to overcome obstacles and we are extremely happy that our meetings are so popular."

His programme, promising government support for the needy, state investment in industry and a foreign policy balanced between the West and Russia, is almost identical to that of other candidates.

In a personality-driven campaign, the popularity of Stepan Demirchian chiefly springs from one cause. His father Karen Demirchian was Armenia's Communist Party boss in the 1970s and 80s and made a strong challenge to Kocharian in the last presidential elections in 1998. In 1999, he became speaker of the

Armenian parliament, but in October of that year, was one of eight top officials assassinated in the parliament chamber.

When his father was murdered, Stepan was not a politician. Trained in electro-technical science, he became the director of one of the most profitable and best-performing factories in Armenia Mars, which produces electronic chips.

But, as Karen Demirchian's son, said Alexander Iskandarian, a respected political analyst with the Caucasus Media Institute in Yerevan, the younger Demirchian has inherited a large electorate. "People that are nostalgic for happy Soviet times" when his father was in office, he said.

President Kocharian is counting on the votes of the government bureaucracy and their supporters, Iskandarian explained. The other strong opposition challenger, former communist-era mayor of Yerevan Artashes Geghamian, is drawing support from the "protest electorate" of people who have done badly out of the last ten years.

As the sun climbed in the sky on a freezing cold day, voters became more enthusiastic and cheers became louder. At the entrance to each village, folk musicians played and men sacrificed rams, performing a ritual popular in the mountains that dates back to pre-Christian times.

A 65-year-old villager of Aparan, barely moving through the crowd, said that Karen Demirchian, in his eyes, had been the best man in Armenia and he truly hoped that his son would be the same.

"I do not play on the popularity of my father," Stepan Demirchian told IWPR. "Of course my name plays a major part in my campaign is my name and other candidates try to accuse me of using it to my advantage but people appreciate me for who I am. Even though I never planned to enter the politics I felt responsible to continue what my father has started and I took the leadership [of the People's Party] because people wanted me to do so."

His relative youth - Demirchian is 42 - is also playing to his advantage.

In Vartenut village, one eighteen-year-old girl dressed in a white dress was serving wine to the people. "I have all dressed up like this for Demirchian," she said. "I will vote for him because I love how he looks, I love how elegant he is and I love how he talks."

"Of course," Demirchian admitted. "I am touched by the fact that women like me but I have more serious to offer."

Yet his popularity has its limits.

Amongst the crowd there were also sceptics. Unemployment, poverty and broken promises from politicians have eroded the belief amongst voters that a new president can make things better in Armenia. That means that many Armenians will not vote at all in this election.

Serjik Engoyan and Aghvan Adamian, both unemployed, confessed they had come to the meeting because there was nothing to do at home. "No matter how great the efforts of the candidates are it is anyway clear that Kocharian will be the winner," they said. "Then, why bother?"

Iskandarian said that Kocharian was still the overwhelming favourite to win the election. It is still important, however, who comes second, especially if the vote goes to a second round.

Iskandarian foresees two scenarios. In one, the opposition will manage to unite behind a single candidate (candidates are allowed to pull out of the race by February 9). In this case, he said, Demirchian has a good chance of being that candidate. "Kocharian is still expected to win the elections but a kind of political instability might result," he said. "Many leaders will reject the elections results and will declare them false."

Under a second scenario, the opposition will fail to unite, but Demirchian will still come second behind Kocharian. In this case, Iskandarian said, Kocharian will win more comfortably and the opposition will not be strong enough to contest his victory.

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