

Armenia's Voter Fatigue

Author: IWPR

Pro-presidential parties sail home as turnout hits an all time low.

If Armenia's parliamentary election and constitutional referendum on May 25 proved anything, it was that most voters were utterly sick of politics after eight months of campaigning.

As expected, the dominant Republican Party stormed to victory, although concerns were voiced about ballot-rigging.

Preliminary figures from the central election committee showed that only about 51 per cent of the electorate took part, the lowest turnout since parliamentary elections began in post-Soviet Armenia. The reasons people gave to IWPR to explain their lack of interest ranged from a general sense that all elected politicians are equally useless, to specific allegations of fraud.

"I am tired of voting," said Gayane Petrosian, a schoolteacher from Ashtarak, a small town 20 kilometres from Yerevan. "We vote and vote again, but nothing changes."

"The voter apathy was predictable," said Stepan Grigorian, a former candidate. "The previous parliament was ineffective, and the elections are not fair."

"We cast our votes, but afterwards the (election) commissions cook up the results that the authorities tell them they want," said Petrosian.

"Why should I waste my time and get frayed nerves voting?" said Galust Ghushian, a worker from Ashtarak. "Our previous deputy spent four years in parliament, but did nothing for the people. The next guy will be the same. I didn't vote."

Rafik Movsesian, a pensioner from Oshakan, 30 km from Yerevan, said that a day before the election the head of the village summoned the poorest families, distributed aid packages among them, and threatened to take them back if they did not vote for his choice of candidate.

IWPR heard the same story in the northern town of Ijevan. "It makes no difference. We were told to vote for the Republican Party, so we did," said local resident Valeri Mirzoyan.

The Republican Party is led by Prime Minister Andranik Margarian, and the influential defence minister Serzh Sarkisian was number two on its candidate list. So it came as no surprise when it was declared the winner, although it did not secure an overall majority.

On May 28, the premier offered a coalition partnership to the Orinats Yerkir (Country of Law) and Dashnaktsutiun parties, which finished third and fourth respectively. With the help of deputies nominally elected as independents, this should give him a comfortable majority in parliament.

The opposition Justice bloc came second, but under Armenia's mixed constituency and party-list system it

looks likely to get just 15 of the 131 seats in parliament - not enough to make it a significant player. All 56 of the seats in first-past-the-post constituencies were taken by pro-government candidates.

A new government will be announced in mid-June, with Margarian tipped to be prime minister again and his party retaining the important defence and law-enforcement portfolios.

Justice bloc leader Stepan Demirchian accused the government of stealing the election, "The published results have nothing in common with the people's will. This was another disgraceful election."

Observers sent by the European institutions also said that the ballot fell short of democratic standards.

"Parliamentary elections in Armenia marked an improvement over the recent presidential voting, but failed to meet international standards in several key areas," declared a joint observation mission sent by the parliamentary assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR.

Giovanni Kessler, the head of the OSCE assembly delegation, noted "a number of serious incidents and shortcomings during the electoral process".

And the head of the ODIHR team Robert Barry said violations were recorded in 30 per cent of the polling stations that his people visited. "I can only imagine what happened in places where they were not present," he said.

The international observers commented that the low turnout was a clear indication of a lack of voter confidence both in the electoral process itself and in political institutions.

The Armenian election committee's chairman, Artak Sagradian, agreed ruefully, "I think we still have a long way to go before we come up to international standards."

Voters were also asked to approve a referendum amending the constitution - but they turned it down. Support for it fell far short of the required approval by one-third of the whole electorate.

Again voter apathy is likely to have played a part. The amendments proposed by President Robert Kocharian had not been widely publicised, still less understood by most voters. It is unclear what the president will do now to push through his amended constitution.

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