

## **Karabakh Election Battle**

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Unexpectedly strong contest in mountainous territory too close to call.

Nagorny Karabakh is experiencing an unusually lively election campaign for the mayor of its main city, Stepanakert.

Five candidates are fighting for the post, employing Karabakhi television and a new independent newspaper to advertise themselves to voters, in the most important contest in the region's August 8 municipal elections.

As always, the Azerbaijani foreign ministry in Baku has issued a protest at the conduct of elections in the republic, which is internationally recognised as being part of Azerbaijan. And, as always, the Armenian authorities in Karabakh have rejected the accusations.

In a statement the Nagorny Karabakh foreign ministry declared, "We proceed from the understanding that only legitimately elected authorities possess the necessary powers and bear responsibility for the fate of the people who live on the territory entrusted to them."

The election marks something new for Karabakh because three of the candidates are in different ways connected to officialdom and there is no clear favourite in a territory where one contestant usually wins a resounding victory.

Originally, there were ten candidates, but the field has now narrowed to five, after two were denied registration and three pulled out. Most observers are agreed that the ballot comes down to a fight between two men, Pavel Najarian, a former deputy mayor of Stepanakert, and Eduard Agabekian, chairman of the committee on social issues in the Karabakh parliament.

Najarian was one of the participants in the 1988 movement for secession from Azerbaijan and has a reputation of being an experienced business professional, having managed the local buildings material plant, one of the most successful factories in Karabakh in recent times.

He is also the favourite because he is generally believed to have the support of the local authorities.

Agabekian is a popular politician with the reputation of being a brave member of parliament who speaks out for the democratisation of society. He is one of the founders of a recently-formed political organisation, Movement-88, whose aim is to "revive the spirit and national consciousness of 1988, the beginning of the Karabakh movement for self-determination".

The current mayor Amik Avanesian is also running for re-election, although he lacks the public and political support he once had and few rate his chances. Most residents of the city say in his time in office he has done almost nothing to deal with their problems.

Both leading candidates have been busy trying to win hearts and minds.

Najarian has made a point of saying that the spiritual as well as the physical welfare of Stepanakert is important.

“Stepanakert needs a church, which will allow people to have firm faith in the nation and themselves,” he said. “I am deeply worried about the sickness that has stricken our society – people’s indifference to what is around them. To cure that sickness people have to have a healthy spiritual and social way of life.”

Agabekian says he will fight for “the supremacy of the law” in Stepanakert, before which “everyone ought to be equal, irrespective of their social position, merits and party allegiance”, suggesting he will, if elected, be an independent mayor.

The responsibilities of the mayor and of the government are blurred and one of the other candidates, Iosif Adamian, a well-known local businessman and wine-maker, argues that the mayor’s office needs to be restructured and made more autonomous.

“The office of mayor is not a gift and not a weapon for different groups, but an organ which is the guarantee of social justice and citizens’ rights,” he said.

David Karabekian, a university lecturer, noted that “many legal questions connected with the activity of the local authorities and their relations with the central republican authorities have not been worked out. The legal vacuum not only makes possible pressure from above but various kinds of bureaucratic arbitrary rule with all its accompanying side-effects: corruption, protectionism and so on.”

The new mayor will have to deal with a wide range of problems to do with housing, jobs and utilities. Avanesian is promising, if re-elected, to build 700 new houses.

Despite the lively campaign and assurances from the central electoral commission, many Stepanakert voters are wary of the candidates and their promises and believe the outcome is all but predetermined.

“I believe that the candidate who has the current authorities behind him will win,” said local resident, Karen Arakelian, formerly a refugee from Baku, reflecting the views of many. “ [Although] I don’t think there will be any crude breaking of the electoral rules.”

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