

Local Polls Deal Further Blow to Armenian Opposition

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President's party to control capital, as opposition groups claim electoral fraud.

Following victories in presidential and parliamentary elections, Armenia's ruling party swept to victory in a key local election this month, posing serious questions about how opposition groups can recover.

Since the capital Yerevan is home to about 40 per cent of a national population of 2.9 million people, control of the city council is a crucial factor in politics.

In the May 5 local elections, the Republican Party increased its representation in the Yerevan assembly from 35 to 42 of the 65 seats, meaning that once again it gets to choose the mayor.

Victory in Yerevan further consolidated the Republicans, who won the May 2012 parliamentary polls and whose leader Serzh Sargsyan was re-elected as president this February.

Yerevan's current mayor, Taron Margaryan, became mayor in November 2011, and was top of the Republican list of candidates in this election, despite the scandal over his refusal to identify the origin of six million US dollars in earnings which he declared ahead of the polls.

The election left the opposition party Prosperous Armenia party with the 17 seats it already held on the city council, while a newer opposition bloc called Hello Yerevan won six seats. Two large opposition groups, the Armenian National Congress and Dashnaktsutyun, failed to overcome the six per cent threshold required to gain seats on the assembly.

Opposition parties cried foul, accusing the Republican Party of using its access to state resources, legal loopholes and straight bribery to boost its vote.

A statement from Dashnaktsutyun said, "Once again, the identification of the ruling party with the state, the never-ending exploitation of administrative resources, and electoral bribery proved effective. The monopoly on power has been further strengthened."

Levon Zurabyan, deputy head of the Armenian National Congress, suggested that his party had been deliberately robbed of votes in a fraudulent process because the Republicans "are very well aware who they need to be afraid of".

"The Republican Party had offices in almost every courtyard, and these were used for intimidation in the broadest sense," he said. "They know the local electorate very well. They know who will vote in exchange for a bribe, or who they need to threaten with the machinery of state."

The Heritage party, which was part of the Hello Yerevan coalition, might have expected to do better after its leader Raffi Hovhannisyian did unexpectedly well in the presidential election February. (See **Armenia: Presidential Challenger Rejects Poll Result.**)

Heritage's deputy leader Armen Martirosyan joined in the opposition criticism of the Republicans.

"It's clear these elections were fraudulent. On election day, it would have been hard to find a single polling station where wasn't a bunch of criminals outside. The Republican Party used these criminals to pressure and direct voters and to hand out bribes, while the police and National Security Service pretended not to notice," Martirosyan said.

The Republican Party dismissed any suggestion of wrongdoing.

"These elections went well, and the nation placed its trust in us once again. How could we have fixed the elections when the opposition parties have more people on the electoral commissions than we do?" the party's deputy chairman and parliamentary leader Galust Sahakyan asked.

Observers from the Council of Europe were generally positive about the Yerevan election, saying that except for a few incidents at polling stations and a slow and at times apparently chaotic count, the process was "calm and orderly" and "technically well prepared".

Local non-government groups mostly disagreed, and ten of them issued a joint statement condemning the use of bribes, bureaucratic pressure and hired criminals to obstruct fairness.

Armen Badalyan, an analyst at the Centre for Political Studies, believes that the political process has reached an impasse. The Republican Party is unlikely to embark on reforms since it is no longer under

pressure to court voters; and the opposition parties have failed to make headway in any of three key elections held over the past year.

“That means we are in a dead-end situation,” Badalyan concluded.

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