



Presidential Elections in Armenia and the Opposition's Long March

Marilisa Lorusso

Abstract

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Keywords: *Armenia / Presidential elections / Opposition movements*

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On 18 February 2013, presidential elections were held in Armenia. According to the official results, the incumbent president, Serzh Sargsyan, who was first elected in 2008, won the elections with 58.64 percent of the votes, while his closest rival, Raffi Hovannisian, received 36.75 percent of the votes. Hovannisian disputed the election results and launched a long protest action. The presidential inauguration on April 9 legally bestowed full legitimacy on the second mandate of the incumbent Armenian president, Serzh Sargsyan, but it hardly put an end to the so-called BaRevolution, the opposition movement that took shape after the elections.

1. The strange case of the 2013 elections

According to the official results, the incumbent president, Serzh Sargsyan, running for his second mandate, won with 58.64 percent of the votes. The main opposition challenger, Raffi Hovannisian, received 36.75 percent of the votes, while the other five candidates received from 0.24 to 2.15 percent. Unsurprisingly, none of the latter were expected to be important contenders¹ as Serzh Sargsyan's success was taken for granted. In last year's parliamentary election, his party, the Republican Party, secured 69 seats out of 131. The second biggest party in parliament, Prosperous Armenia (37 seats), abstained from nominating or supporting a candidate in the elections, as did the third largest party, Levon Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Congress (7 seats). Given these circumstances, the Armenian presidential campaign and elections were assessed as highly predictable until January.

In late January, however, the calm electoral campaign was shaken by a shooting: one candidate, Paruyr Hayrikyan, was shot in the back. For a few days, the episode destabilized the political environment, as the Armenian constitution has a specific provision for the event that a candidate is prevented from running, which calls for the election to be postponed.² In the beginning, Hayrikyan did not seem to want to resort to

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¹ According to the data of the Central Election Commission: Armen Melikyan, independent, 0.24 percent; Vardan Sedrakyan, independent, 0.42 percent; Adrias Ghukasyan, independent, 0.57 percent; Paruyr Hayrikyan, Union for National Self Determination, 1.23 percent; Hrant Bagratyan, Freedom, 2.15 percent. The whole documentation of the presidential elections by the Central Election Commission is available on its official website, in Armenian and English at <http://www.elections.am/presidential>.

² Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, article 52 "Should one of the presidential candidates face insurmountable obstacles, the election of the President of the Republic shall be postponed for two weeks. In the event that the obstacles recognized as insurmountable are not eliminated within the aforementioned period of time a new election shall be appointed and the voting shall be held on the fortieth day following the expiration of the two-week's period". Text available in National Assembly website at <http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=constitution&lang=eng>.

the constitutional provision, then he made up his mind, and in a last effort to converge some opposition forces towards one candidacy, he eventually withdrew his candidature. So, after some uncertainties, the date of the election was left as set.

Elections were monitored by approximately 7,000 observers, deployed in the forty-one electoral districts of the country, coordinated by twelve international organizations³ and twenty-six local ones. The general assessment before the election was that the political campaign was marred by a lack of real competition, but - apart from the Hayrikyan episode - was calm. There were reports of vote buying and pressure put on public servants to vote for the incumbent, but the first overall impression expressed by a well-known observation mission (IEOM)⁴ was that

“The 18 February presidential election was generally well-administered and was characterized by a respect for fundamental freedoms. Contestants were able to campaign freely. Media fulfilled their legal obligation to provide balanced coverage, and all contestants made use of their free airtime. At the same time, a lack of impartiality of the public administration, misuse of administrative resources, and cases of pressure on voters were of concern. While election day was calm and orderly, it was marked by undue interference in the process, mainly by proxies representing the incumbent, and some serious violations were observed.”⁵

In a nutshell, the elections were recognized as legitimate, albeit not fully “free and fair”. Nevertheless, this statement could not be read on the first attempt: IEOM's press conference was interrupted by protesters who blamed international observers for legitimizing fraudulent elections. But that was not the most unusual and unexpected event of the day: Raffi Hovannisian's results were quite surprising to many experts. Indeed, the leader of a party that was hardly present in parliament received almost 40 percent of the votes, and turned out to be the leading candidate in the second and third largest cities of the country, Gyumri and Vanadzor, as well as in some other cities and in three districts of the capital. Probably less surprisingly, already late on the night of February 18th, Hovannisian stated that he did not recognize the legitimacy of the elections and started a protest.

³ International expert Center for Electoral Systems (ICES) represented by 35 observers, ODIHR/OSCE - 263 observers, CIS Interparliamentary Assembly - 30 observers, CIS Monitoring Mission - 163 observers, European Parliament - 12 observers, embassies accredited to Armenia - 34 observers. See “More than 7,000 observers to monitor presidential elections”, in *Panorama.am*, 18 February 2013, <http://panorama.am/en/politics/2013/02/18/armenian-elections>.

⁴ IEOM, International Election Observation Mission, i.e. the unified reports signed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) together with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's mission and the European Parliament's observation mission. The three delegations were headed respectively by Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini, Karin Woldseth, Milan Cabrnock.

⁵ IEOM, *Republic of Armenia, Presidential Election, 18 February 2013: Statement of Preliminary findings and Conclusions*, Yerevan, 19 February 2013, p. 1, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/99675>.

2. A new kind of protest

Post-election turbulences are not new to Armenia. In February 2008, when Prime Minister Sargsyan was elected to his first presidency, mass protests lasted until March 1, when the outgoing president, Robert Kocharyan, ordered to disperse the protesters. In few hours, Yerevan descended into violence: ten citizens lost their lives, more than one hundred were hospitalized. The protest was led by the first Armenian president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who had made a comeback to politics just a few months before the election, and who had gathered some opposition forces around himself in the previous five years. Ter-Petrosyan did not run in the 2013 elections.

In February 2013, exactly like five years before, elections were held and contested by the second candidate: same pattern, but different characters. Levon Ter-Petrosyan, an experienced leader, is known for his brilliant rhetoric. The Ter-Petrosyan protest was quite similar to the ones which took place in the colour revolution countries: a charismatic leader that heads for the presidency with the support of the square. An attempt that failed in 2008 in Armenia, and that has not materialized in 2013 either. But the point is that the new wave of protest has been taking shape in a completely different way, somehow puzzling those observers who are used to dealing with colour revolutions. One of the key factors is the person who is leading the protest movement now, Raffi Hovannisian.

A lawyer, Hovannisian was born in Fresno, California, in 1959. He is the son of a well-known and influential member of the American Armenian Diaspora, Prof. Richard Hovannisian. After the big earthquake in Gyumri in 1988, Raffi decided to move to his homeland, and has lived in Yerevan since 1990. The following year, he became the first Minister of Foreign Affairs of independent Armenia. His appointment lasted for less than a year, as his foreign policy views were and still are quite divergent from those of then President Ter-Petrosyan and the current president Sargsyan. Hovannisian has very assertive positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and relations with Turkey, calling for the handing over to Armenia of Azerbaijani and Turkish territories previously inhabited by Armenians.

He is the founder of the first independent research centre⁶ and of the Heritage Party (2002). The party won 7 seats in 2007 - the only parliamentary opposition - and 5 seats in 2012, respectively 6 and 5 percent of the votes. The party submitted resolutions for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh, *de jure* a breakaway region of Azerbaijan, but *de facto* a state since the bloody war of the early nineties, which enjoys close cooperation - albeit without official recognition - with Armenia. Such stances probably make Hovannisian as popular at home as he is unpopular abroad: in the tense phase which the protracted conflict is currently going through, the international community is keen to find interlocutors that are as open to compromise as possible. Hovannisian is not viewed as being amongst those.

While Hovannisian's record with respect to foreign policy issues might be a matter of concern, his policy on domestic issues reveals a completely different picture. Hovannisian worked hard in the last decades for democratization and people

⁶ The Armenian Center for National and International Studies, official website <http://acnis.am>.

empowerment. The way he is leading the post-electoral rallies is understandable only in view of his previous activities, based on respect for the constitutional order and strategic non-violence. He has been travelling up and down the country, meeting people in the streets and squares in a country where there is a huge perceived gap between the man in the street and the ruling elite. His work has been in total contrast to the “normal” pattern of a country that people feel is increasingly becoming a patronal state. As a consequence, he is perceived as a man of the people and a vote to Hovannisian has the flavour of an anti-systemic vote but still within the framework of legality. In this light, Hovannisian's success ceases to be so surprising, and becomes the foreseeable consequence of the perceived deterioration of ethics and morality in the Armenian public sphere, a process that is well documented in many surveys and studies.⁷ This crisis of trust towards the elected representatives has, on the one hand, caused a hostile apathy towards politics in the country, and on the other, made Hovannisian's choice to go out and meet people, talk to them, and keep in contact all the more precious: “I walked into farms and flea markets and met hundreds of thousands of Armenians who lived in poverty, who had no jobs and who dreamed of leaving their homeland. I shook their hands and shared their glance, and I said, quite simply, ‘Hello’. And they responded in kind: ‘Hello’. That was our secret covenant”⁸ - with these words, Raffi Hovannisian expresses how his movement got started.

3. The BaRevolution

The “hello” Hovannisian talked about turned into a revolutionary greeting and slogan. “Hello” in Armenian is “*barev*”, and the movement is named the BaRevolution. A “hello revolution” that did not target President Sargsyan. On February 21, Hovannisian and Sargsyan met in person in the presidential palace to discuss the post-electoral crisis, and the meeting started with a handshake: that meant a lot.

The meeting is itself an unprecedented move by an opposition leader in the landscape of post-electoral revolutions, where the strong confrontation between parties does not normally leave much room for negotiations. The meeting was unsuccessful and Hovannisian, after having updated his supporters in Liberty Square, left Yerevan to

⁷ See for example: Fund for Peace, *Country Profile Armenia*, September 2012, p. 4-5, where group grievance, legitimacy of the state, human rights, security apparatus, factionalized elites are assessed as having worsened in the last five years, <http://www.fundforpeace.org/global/states/ccppr12am-countryprofile-armenia-09b.pdf>; Transparency International, “Armenia - public opinion” in *Global Corruption Barometer 2010/11*, http://www.transparency.org/country#ARM_PublicOpinion, according to the survey 54 percent of interviewed assess as “ineffective” the government's anti-corruption efforts and 50 percent register an increase in corruption in the years 2007-2010.

⁸ Quotation from the Facebook page of *Raffi for President*, 27 March 2013, <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=470816776325112>. The page is daily updated by activists of Raffi's movement. A petition was also launched online through the popular petitions' website: <http://www.change.org/petitions/the-armenian-people-recognize-raffi-hovannisian-as-the-truly-elected-president-of-the-republic-of-armenia>. Moreover, Raffi Hovannisian has a personal Facebook page, used as a diary of the BaRevolution, <https://www.facebook.com/Raffi.K.Hovannisian>. The BaRevolution events are broadcast by streaming TVs (A1Plus, Civilnet); for an analysis of the impact of new technologies see Julia Hakobyan, “Side effect: Live video streaming technologies, online media “blamed” for low attendance at opposition rallies”, in *ArmeniaNow.com*, 5 April 2013, http://www.armenianow.com/vote_2013/45048/live_coverage_streaming_armenia_opposition_rally.

bring the BaRevolution to every corner of the country. This also constitutes a novelty: usually hopeful revolutionaries focus their activities on the capital city, they don't leave the main stage to tour small cities and villages. Tours were repeated again at the end of February and during the first weeks of March. The strategy paid off: a sort of social awakening started to surface, mildly but perhaps not without consequences.

The authorities somehow found themselves stuck. Whereas congratulations to the incumbent president flocked in from Moscow, Washington, and Brussels, part of the country seemed to move in the opposite direction, but not on a scale or in a way to justify repression. Moreover, as the movement consolidated and spread, repression might have simply served to strengthen further the opposition and entrust it with a degree of external legitimacy too. So, apart from some episodes of alleged provocations, the authorities behaved rationally and did not halt the BaRevolution.

On March 8, the first phase of the BaRevolution was declared accomplished and, two days later - when the Constitutional Court was about to reject Hovannisian's appeal against the election results - Hovannisian started a hunger strike. For more than three weeks he was out there, in Liberty Square, fasting and sleeping in the tent he was given permission to use - after an initial hesitation - by the Yerevan municipal administration, claiming the power not for himself but for the people. Here again the BaRevolution displayed some peculiar features. The days of the hunger strike became a long socio-political happening, with concerts, visits, press conferences, and - what is more interesting - a civic forum and debates about the essence of Armenian democracy. The BaRevolution catalyzed persons far beyond Hovannisian's supporters, and Hovannisian himself is more an "opposition hub" than a charismatic leader. Among the opposition forces, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation joined him, while the Armenian National Congress supports Hovannisian's bid for the presidency. Karabakhi war heroes were in Liberty Square and - while Karabakhi "officials" in Stepanakert distanced themselves from the BaRevolution - it is clear that the issue is followed with interest and participation by a slice of the Karabakhi public. Among the Diaspora, the BaRevolution gained the support of young Armenians, including well known artists like Serj Tankian.⁹ Hovannisian's hunger strike was emulated abroad. In the meanwhile, President Sargsyan flew to Brussels and to Moscow, where President Vladimir Putin congratulated him in person. Another prominent Armenian artist and ambassador, Charles Aznavour, sided with the President.

There were voices of possible new meetings between Hovannisian and Sargsyan, but the former was irremovable: the second negotiation was to be held in Liberty Square. The invitation was rejected, but bridges were not totally severed. An exchange of

⁹ Vocals, keyboards, rhythm guitar of the famous US hard rock band System of a Down. Tankian is very popular in Armenia and is committed to the revolutionary cause. On 26 February he wrote an outspoken letter to President Sargsyan: "Based on the overwhelming reported fraud from many NGOs, irrespective of the OSCE report, it seems like it would be scientifically impossible for even you, Mr. President, to know whether you actually won the majority of votes. [...] Maybe your party is out of control and the oligarchs are running out of caviar or something and they want to make sure that the flow of the good times doesn't stop. Whatever the case, it is time for change." President Sargsyan replied on the same day, denying the allegation and asking for full support in the interest of the homeland. Both letters are available on the website of *Panorama.am* respectively at <http://panorama.am/en/politics/2013/02/26/tankyan-sargsyan> and <http://panorama.am/en/society/2013/02/26/sargsyan-tankyan>.

letters started in the third part of March, with proposals and counter-proposals to end the impasse. The requests were for new - snap - parliamentary elections. The Heritage Party was offered positions in key bodies, an effort was made to co-opt the main figures of the BaRevolution, but Hovannisian made it clear that there was no room for bargaining for positions. The hunger strike ended at Easter, thus closing the second phase of the BaRevolution and opening up a third. With these almost messianic words, Hovannisian summed up what had been done and what would come next:

“Our self-purification is complete. We have cleansed ourselves of the fear and cowardice in each and every one of us. Now a new stage - and the final stage - of our struggle must begin. We shall struggle with principle, with courage, and with the invincible conviction that we are the true masters of our homeland. And on April 9 we shall change our destiny forever. We shall have our resurrection.”¹⁰

4. The inauguration

Thousands of people were sworn in on April 9. Two inaugurations took place simultaneously: Serzh Sargsyan's inauguration ceremony took place in an extraordinary National Assembly session held in the Karen Demirchyan Sport and Concert Complex, while Raffi Hovannisian and the BaRevolutionaries took an oath together in Liberty Square. The first inauguration was solemn, blessed by the Armenian Apostolic Church Primate Karekin II, and attended by foreign representatives and guests. But more than for those who attended it, it was remarkable for those who did not. Compared to the inauguration of 2008, President Sargsyan appears much more isolated in the domestic political landscape. The powerful oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party, once a part of the government coalition, was in Moscow on the day of the presidential inauguration, while some party members left before the banquet following the ceremony. The banquet appears to have been restricted to the political circle of the Republican Party and Orinats Yerkir,¹¹ ministers and foreign guests.

By contrast, Liberty Square overflowed with people. After the hunger strike, Hovannisian launched a four-day regional tour for what he called a “national enlistment campaign,” with the aim of recruiting citizens to join him on April 9 in Liberty Square. Protesters gathered in the square and took an oath on the Armenian Constitution together with Hovannisian not to “recognize sham leaders, not to “obey wrongful orders”, not to be “on sale”, nor to be “afraid”.¹² After the oath, upon popular demand a march started and headed for the Presidential Palace, on Bagramyan Avenue. However, the march was stopped and protesters returned to Liberty Square. After negotiations between Hovannisian and Police Chief Vladimir Gasparyan, demonstrators were allowed to proceed late in the evening. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the moments of tensions between protesters and police forces during

¹⁰ “Raffi Hovannisian to end hunger strike on Easter”, in *Panorama.am*, 30 March 2013, <http://panorama.am/en/politics/2013/03/30/raffi-hovannisian>.

¹¹ Country of Law, a pro-government party.

¹² Gohar Abrahamyan, “The Other ‘Inauguration’: Hovannisian declares no ‘sham leaders’”, in *ArmeniaNow.com*, 9 April 2013, http://armenianow.com/vote_2013/45158/raffi_hovannisian_innaguration_liberty_square.

the afternoon, Heritage deputy chairman Armen Martirosyan suffered a broken nose and Hovannisian himself seemed to be in trouble at a certain point. Tension ran high, but mass violence did not erupt. Sargsyan knows the last thing he needs now is an opposition martyr.

Conclusions

The presidential inauguration of April 9 legally bestowed full legitimacy on the second mandate of the third Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan, but it hardly put an end to the BaRevolution. During the long march of the opposition that converged around Raffi Hovannisian, different strategies were pursued to reverse the official results of the February 18 elections. None proved successful. Still, it would be misleading to describe the BaRevolution as a failure: it caused and is still causing a remarkable social awakening, the consequences of which will depend to a large extent on what happens once the country's institutional life returns to its routine. The Republican Party has to face a popular demand for change and growing political isolation. On May 5, elections will be held for the Yerevan Council of Elders, and due to the ongoing political ferment they will be perceived as much more than just local elections. If the ruling party fails to confirm its supremacy in the capital city, challenges to its power might move more assertively from the square to the palaces of power. The first chance to for the President to regain popularity right now is to shape a government more in line with popular expectations. But this is a hard task, as the opposition is unwilling to be co-opted. The first words of Serzh Sargsyan's inaugural speech addressed those

“who cast their votes for other candidates. Thereby they expressed their discontent with the problems existing in the country. By doing so, they sent a clear message to the authorities, demanding more efficient work. Rest assured that all messages are duly received.”¹³

If a hand was outstretched to the opposition, which is not necessarily a clear sign of a change of course, far stronger words were addressed to foreign challengers, particularly those whose agenda is to put Armenia on a more confrontational course *vis-à-vis* its Azeri neighbours:

“Irresponsible people and those who have never experienced war may turn the possibility of war into a subject for cynical and sordid profiteering. I am not one of them: I know what it takes to lose a friend or experience the bliss of victory. I fretted over every soldier's life, every inch of the native land. Therefore, through the vote of confidence vested in me by the people of Armenia, I declare: We do not want war but, at the same time, we are ready to withstand any challenge. I reiterate this for slow learners: any challenge.”¹⁴

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¹³ Armenian Presidency, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan at the Ceremony of Inauguration*, 9 April 2013, <http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2013/04/09/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-assumed-the-office-of-President-of-the-Republic-of-Armenia>.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.



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