
Armenia

A farce is passed off as elections

by Haik Babookhanian

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The fact that elections in Armenia will not reflect the will and desires of the people, became clear already on Dec. 28 of last year, when as a New Year's present, the President appeared on television, and ominously announced that the most popular party in Armenia, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsyutyun, was involved with terrorism, drug trafficking, and espionage. On that day, by illegal presidential ukase, Dashnak was shut down. The 105-year-old organization's headquarters was turned upside-down, the most popular newspapers and magazines were closed, as was its printing house. Then came arrests and interrogations. Within a month, the central headquarters of another opposition party, the Union for Constitutional Rights, and the editorial offices of its newspaper, *Iravunk*, were shut down. A heavy atmosphere of repression hung over society. The official press and state radio and television (there is, essentially, no other radio and television) smeared the opposition, while the latter had effectively no access to the mass media.

The wave of repression was growing. In April, deputies of the Supreme Soviet from the opposition party were beaten, and although the attackers were well known, they absolutely were not held responsible. With the same ease, the organizers and participants in robbery attacks against the lawyers of four arrested members of Dashnak have survived with impunity.

In May, unidentified persons broke up a sit-in demonstration of relatives of the arrested Dashnaks, who were protesting against their being tortured in prison, from which, evidently, one of those detained had died.

Simultaneously, the Supreme Soviet adopted a new election law in which, under pressure from the quasi-mafia industrial-management elite, the unprofessional character of the future Parliament was predetermined, as well as the mechanisms for selecting the Central Electoral Commission, in which 17 of its 23 members turned out to be representatives of the ruling clique. Amendments to the Law on Refer-

endums were also adopted, changing the required quorum from 50% to 33%.

With such legislation and such an atmosphere in society, Armenia approached the start of the election campaign, in the course of which the excesses of the authorities and hysteria of the mass media reached its apogee.

Parties' registration rejected

There were several dozen unregistered opposition political activists, while three political parties were barred from the elections, along with the most influential electoral bloc of four parties—the “National Union-Federation,” headed by the nationally popular political activist in the country, Hrant Khachatryan (chairman of the Union for Constitutional Rights).

The Central Electoral Commission refusal to register was motivated by the supposed submission of forged signatures; however, documented proof of these accusations could not be presented. Regardless of the fact that the electoral bloc “National Union” is a political foe of the ruling clique, there is evidence that a special session of the Security Council of Armenia was devoted to this question. The unregistered bloc appealed to the courts, which by law had to review the complaint within three days; however, the first session of the court took place—almost a month after the elections, and there still has been no decision. According to the testimony of members of the CEC in court, they decided on the validity of the signatures by just looking at them!

Thus, with the ARF-Dashnak, the “Constitutional Union” bloc, and three opposition parties not taking part in the elections, the people were deprived of a real choice.

There was another, deeper reason for the refusal to register Hrant Khachatryan's bloc. By law, the bloc had four representatives in each electoral commission. Then, all the opposition parties together would have had 12 representatives on the commissions, against 9 pro-government ones, opponents, who would have guaranteed honest elections. After the registration refusal, the correlation shifted, so as to practically guarantee a victory for the ruling circles.

State terrorism against opposition

The closer July 5 drew, the stronger became the illegal and crude pressure on the opposition. Members of electoral commissions were openly beaten up, as were proxies, and things went as far as disappearances. Dismissal from work was the lightest form of pressure. In worse cases, candidates, their surrogates, or their relatives were attacked at the police station or the prosecutor's offices, where they faced demands to drop the candidacy, or expect unpleasant consequences.

Finally, state terrorism finished with an armed attack against a peaceful opposition demonstration on June 11. On that day, in the very center of Yerevan, nearly 300 drunken young toughs—some of whom were members of the police,

Army, or KGB, disguised as civilians, and others of whom were representatives of illegal armed detachments of the ruling clique, under the leadership of well-known mafiosi, who occupy important state offices—attacked the demonstrators. The attackers were armed with nightsticks, rocks, and—as was later established—pistols and automatic weapons, with which they opened fire on the demonstrators. Several opposition Supreme Soviet deputies were severely beaten, and a newspaper editor and several people wound up in the hospital. According to eyewitness accounts, the “operation” was led by the deputy minister of defense. All this not only had no consequences for the attackers, but even led to a criminal case against the opposition leaders.

The show of crude force and the creation of oppressive circumstances of terror in society were accompanied by mass media brainwashing of the electorate. Radio and television literally nagged people to death with praise for the ruling party and its draft constitution. The official Supreme Soviet newspaper ecstatically published secret state documents in order to “expose” an opposition leader. Better- or lesser-known figures of culture and science who know as much about the constitution and politics as they do about rocket construction, were recruited to the cause of demonstrating “universal approval” of the ruling party.

It was left to the President to dot the last “i”; in accordance with recent tradition, his statement was rebroadcast on the day before the elections.

The head of state, blaming the opposition for all sins, depicted the terrible nightmare which has awaited the people in the event of an opposition victory. If the current forces remained in power and, even better, their draft constitution were adopted, Armenia in several months would become a flourishing island of contentment and carefree life.

Vote-buying is widespread

The ruling circle has also used the old method of buying votes. Hungry and exhausted voters had bribes bestowed on them by generous candidates, beginning with \$10 for one vote, all the way to constructing water mains and paving streets. The showering of voters with money from the half-state, half-criminal horn of plenty continued on election day, when all day long, cars ferried “their” voters to the polls, picking them up and dropping them off under close control.

On July 5 the happy partying began, which at night turned into a bacchanalia. Drunken crowds of a criminal nature roamed through the city, gathering near the centers of election districts and celebrating their victory even before the votes were counted. The whole motley crowd was busy with destruction: They beat up the surrogates of other candidates, as well as passersby they didn’t like, and ransacked shops. As always, the crowd was led by state employees, and the police stayed away from the epicenters of events.

Of course, there were some electoral districts free of

violations, but this was a rare exception. The enumeration of all the violations would require writing a multi-volume whodunit.

Results of the ‘elections’

Naturally, after all the aforesaid, the results of the “elections” look as follows: In the party slate part of the elections, 40 places in Parliament were distributed to 5 parties. The ruling bloc took 20 seats. Eight places went to the women’s party, which had been created several days before the election and consisted of wives of government ministers, their secretaries, restaurant singers, and so forth. The communists received 6 seats, while 8 seats went to the National Self-Determination Union and the National Democratic Union.

In the single seat part of the elections, out of 150 mandates, 124 have already been determined; in the remaining districts, there will be runoff elections. Out of those already elected, on the order of 90% are representatives of the ruling bloc. On the whole, these are party functionaries, leaders of local governments, enterprise directors, state bureaucrats, workers on the President’s staff, government ministers.

As for the results of the referendum on the constitution, they were published in the government newspaper even before the votes were finished being counted from electoral precincts. Under a law adopted immediately before the referendum, it could be affirmed, though it received, even according to official data, only 37.8% of the votes of the electorate.

Immediately after the elections, the representatives of 10 opposition parties held a press conference. The elections were called a farce, and they spoke about the establishment in the country of brute state-force, which controls all processes. The constitution itself has already established an authoritarian regime. In the opinion of the opposition, the people voted against the new constitution, and thus against the ruling regime.

Even according to official data, in the capital only 6% voted for the constitution. The problem was that the constitution *had* to pass, otherwise the President had announced he would resign. In order to push the referendum through, in violation of the law, the time for voting was extended. The number of voters who had registered before the elections suddenly decreased to 4% when the results were tallied. In the opinion of the opposition, the number of votes “for” the constitution was doubled.

The opposition has sued the Central Electoral Commission in court, for falsifying the results of the constitutional referendum and the elections.

Thus for Armenia, after the post-communist flash of democracy, everything is returning to the customary totalitarianism, with the only difference being that in the communist Parliament, there were no deputies with thieves’ nicknames, and in the new one there are several.