



**Regional Studies Center (RSC)**  
Yerevan, Armenia  
[www.regional-studies.org](http://www.regional-studies.org)

**RSC SPECIAL ANALYSIS**  
**Volume II No. 1**

**ARMENIA: PRE-ELECTION ASSESSMENT**

**Richard Giragosian**  
Director  
Regional Studies Center (RSC)  
[Director@regional-studies.org](mailto:Director@regional-studies.org)

**Summary**

In one of Armenia's least competitive elections, incumbent Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian looks certain to be re-elected to a second term. But with an especially weak field of candidates, the lack of real competition may only exacerbate the need for sufficient voter turnout. It also increases pressure for a much improved ballot this time and, if as expected, President Sarkisian secures reelection, he will face raised expectations and greater demands for reform.

Only nine months since parliamentary elections, the official campaign for Armenia's February 18, 2013 presidential election is now underway. As incumbent President Serzh Sarkisian is running for a second presidential term, he faces a field of diverse, but generally marginal candidates. In light of the pronounced lack of any real competition, the more significant test for Armenia is over the conduct, rather than the result of the election. A second related challenge from a generally one-sided race stems from the need to ensure sufficient voter turnout, especially given the lack of pluralistic competition, the lackluster campaign discourse and a perception of low voter interest. Yet at the same time, a second Sarkisian term will also offer a new opportunity for deeper reform, and a fresh chance for statesmanship and legacy, but for whoever becomes the next Armenian president, the imperative will be to tackle a litany of serious, and unresolved, strategic challenges that have gone largely unaddressed during the campaign.

### **Analysis**

As the lack of a strong viable contender suggests, incumbent President Sarkisian seems fairly certain to secure reelection. Despite a pronounced lack of real competition, however, the absence of a viable opponent to the president is not necessarily a surprise, but is a more accurate reflection of the current political reality in Armenia. Moreover, the current political reality, marked by a fairly weak and divided opposition, stems from three main factors. First, an open division between prominent opposition figures, whose inability to unite, explains the opposition's inability to coalesce behind any one personality or consensus candidate. A second factor stems from the absence of authentic grassroots-based political parties, which tends to limit party appeal by an over-dependence on the personality or charisma of an individual party leader. And a third main actor underlying the political reality is the pronounced lack of democratic practices within the existing political parties themselves, which only further stunts the institutional development of political parties. Each of these factors has combined to not only restrict the scale and scope of political choices available to the electorate, but have further undermined the development of a more democratic, modern political culture.

At the same time, however, this particular election is also significant as a confirmation of the changing nature of Armenian politics. More specifically, politics are now facing a new period of dynamic change, driven by a fundamentally different nature of political conflict and the onset of a new period of political transition. In terms of a new political conflict, a serious division has emerged within the ruling political elite, comprised of a deep rivalry between current President Serzh Sarkisian and his predecessor, former President Robert Kocharian, and matched by an open "battle by proxy," between Sarkisian's dominant Republican Party and the country's number two party, Prosperous Armenia, widely seen as the political creation of Kocharian.

### **Election Campaign Analysis**

Overall, a preliminary analysis of the current presidential campaign reveals a mixed record. Starting with an assessment of the negative characteristics of the campaign, the current campaign, similar to past political campaigns (both presidential and parliamentary), is dominated by a contest of personality, rather than any real competition of ideology or a competing choice of policies. The presidential campaign is also marked by a rather primitive, low level of political discourse, with little debate and even less of a choice between competing visions or strategic alternatives among the candidates. Further, a related criticism of the campaign is the affirmation that politics in Armenia is still more of a hobby, and not a profession, with little in terms of campaign tactics and even less political strategy. In this way, this is not a political campaign as commonly accepted, and the current use of "boycotts & hunger strikes" do not represent political tactics, usually used in politics only as a last resort, and not as a first or only resort.

In terms of positive developments, the overall media coverage of the candidates and the campaign has been more balanced, although at times, the media has also been used in a more sophisticated way to foster a generally pro-government environment. Another positive element is an atmosphere of a more pronounced freedom of expression, with no real test of the limits on the freedom of assembly, mainly due to the absence of unsanctioned public gatherings or events, largely because the Armenian National Congress (ANC) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), two main parties that utilize public events as a primary political tactic, are not participating in the election. But overall, the campaign remains plagued by two unfavorable trends: an un-level and unequal political "playing field" and the continued reliance on the use of administrative resources, with pressure on teachers, civil servants, and others, to attend incumbent Sarkisian's political rallies. This practice tends to be used to not only to increase the size of Sarkisian's events, but to also test the efficacy of coercive measures by the authorities.

### **A Test of Armenian Democracy**

Despite a lack of real competition, the February election of an Armenian president will be an important test of the country's democratic credentials. In fact, it is precisely because of the lack of an openly competitive race that necessitates a clear improvement in the vote itself. After some improvement in the country's May parliamentary elections, there will be added pressure to continue that upward trajectory in electoral improvement. But the danger is that the Armenian government returns to its instinctive reliance on vote-buying and voter intimidation. And under the threat of low voter turnout, the authorities may succumb to the temptation to resort to the traditional practice of leveraging the so-called "administrative resources" of incumbency, coercing public servants to create an un-level playing field.

Yet at the same time, this lack of a more competitive field of candidates makes the conduct of the election itself more crucial, and will be challenged by the past behavior of local and regional officials, who generally know no better than to "fix" or "rig" an election by intimidating voters, interfering with the vote count and, as in the cases of past elections, engaging in an often open pattern of voting irregularities and violations, as a means to demonstrate loyalty or to seek promotion. A related test comes from voter list accuracies, including the role of some 5000 new Syrian-Armenian voters, and the use of votes within the armed forces, presenting another challenge to the integrity and performance of the election. And the integrity of the voter list has already raised serious doubts, as the Armenian police recently announced that the official number of total eligible voters stands at 2,507,004, a figure that represents a surprising increase of some 200,000 voters since the 2008 presidential election. For most observers, the unexpectedly high number of officially registered voters is especially surprising in light of Armenia's demonstrable demographic crisis, involving a consistent annual exodus of citizens.

Moreover, the ballot also raises expectations and increases pressure for a much improved, more free and fair election, with the country's generally improved May 2012 parliamentary election as the "lowest benchmark" or metric to measure progress in the presidential contest. Thus, the presidential election stands as much a test as an opportunity for Armenia, offering an opportunity to both deepen and bolster democracy credentials, and to meet and even surpass expectations (both internal and external). And looking beyond, the post-election period is most likely to be calm, with no real danger of political violence or any significant post-election unrest.

### **Who's Out, Who's In?**

Ironically, this election was also defined by who chose not to run. In December 2012, millionaire businessman Gagik Tsarukian, the leader of the country's second-largest Prosperous Armenia political party, disappointed many of his supporters by deciding not to stand as a candidate, explaining that his party would neither field nor support a candidate. That decision, only days after a rare meeting with President Sarkisian, ended months of speculation over what was perceived as the most serious challenge to the incumbent president. Although stemming from the fact that Prosperous Armenia was never able to fully present itself as a true opposition party after serving as such an integral part of the first Sarkisian Administration, the move also reflects the decline of the power and standing of the party, which never seemed able to recover from a disappointing, less-than-expected performance in the May 2012 parliamentary election.

Only weeks after the decision by the Prosperous Armenia party to withhold its participation in the election, Armenia's first president, 68-year-old Levon Ter-Petrosian, the leader of the opposition ANC and the 2008 challenger to Sarkisian, also announced that he would not stand for the presidency. For its part, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) also failed to field a candidate, breaking with the party's past practice of nearly always putting forward a presidential candidate, no matter how weak or marginal the candidate.

## **A Weak Field of Candidates**

Although most presidential elections in Armenia have included a number of marginal candidates, ranging from old guard former Communists to more exotic nationalists, the current crop of contenders is especially diverse. Beyond the incumbent president, only two candidates are seen as serious political figures, although even they are perceived as weak “underdogs,” more capable of raising issues than garnering votes. Of the field of eight candidates,<sup>1</sup> they can largely be divided into three groups: the “incumbent,” “men on a mission” and “assorted actors.”

### ***The Incumbent***

- President ***Serzh Sarkisian***, the 59-year-old incumbent president, was born in Nagorno Karabakh. His early career began as the local head of the Communist Party youth, before rising to various local positions of leadership within the Soviet system. Sarkisian then became the chairman of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic Self-Defense Forces, before moving to Yerevan and being appointed as Armenian Defense Minister in 1993. He later became Armenia’s Minister of National Security in 1996, followed by further promotions to the posts of National Security Council (NSC) Secretary and Interior Minister, and then prime minister in 2007. He was elected to his first term as president in February 2008 ballot, in a ballot that sparked a violent post-election crisis that culminated in a March 1, 2008 crackdown on the opposition, which left at least ten people dead and many wounded, and that ended with the imposition of martial law by his predecessor, Robert Kocharian, who was constitutionally barred from seeking a third term.

### ***“Men on a mission”***

- ***Hrant Bagratian***, a 54 year-old former Prime Minister in the Ter-Petrosian government (serving from February 1993-November 1996), Bagratian was the father of land reform during the early period of independence. An effective opposition parliamentarian affiliated with the ANC, Bagratian’s “mission” centers on elevating the level of political discourse and debate, by raising difficult issues and challenging the government throughout the campaign. He holds little chance for victory, however, especially as his own ANC is withholding its support;
- ***Raffi Hovhannisian***, Armenia’s first Foreign Minister, the 53-year-old US-born Hovhannisian is a first-time candidate, after a past bid to register as a presidential candidate was barred by a controversial delay in the granting of his Armenian citizenship by former President Robert Kocharian, seemingly in order to block his earlier candidacy. As leader of the small opposition “Heritage” (Zharangutiun) party, which he founded in 2002, he has emerged as the leading challenger to President Sarkisian. But he has been weakened by erratic and impulsive behavior, which has also made him somewhat politically self-destructive. His mission seems two-fold: to shift the debate to the right, by articulating rather hard-line nationalist positions over core foreign policy issues, such as Nagorno Karabakh and Turkey, and to fulfill his own long-held personal ambition for a presidential run. But the outlook for his candidacy appears bleak, and may serve as the closing chapter of his already declining political relevance in Armenian politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although there were initially fifteen prospective candidates, only eight qualified as official candidates, as the remaining aspirants failed to meet the requirement of posting an electoral deposit of 8 million drams (almost \$20,000) and were automatically denied registration; see: “Decision 2013: Election body registers eight presidential candidates in February ballot,” *ArmeniaNow*, 14 January 2013.

*Assorted Actors*

- **Paruir Hairikyan**, the 63-year-old chairman of the “Self-Determination Union,” Hairikyan has run as a candidate in almost every presidential election, but never securing more than single-digit support. Although endowed with significant name recognition, largely due to his prominence as a Soviet-era dissident (he suffered through more than a decade of Soviet imprisonment and internal exile, before being deported first to Ethiopia and then to the United States in 1988), he is largely seen as a “spent force” politically, with declining appeal or relevance. He ran against former President Levon Ter-Petrosian in 1991, but garnered only slightly more than seven percent of the vote, and withdrew from the 1996 presidential race in favor of former Prime Minister Vazgen Manukian before running again in 1998, when he came in fifth with 5.4 percent of the vote;
- **Arman Melikian**, the 49-year-old former Nagorno Karabakh Foreign Minister, Melikian is also a long-standing candidate, but garnered a mere 4,399 votes or 0.26 percent of the 2008 presidential ballot. He once served as Armenia’s ambassador to Kazakhstan before his appointment as the Karabakh foreign minister in 2004;
- **Aram Harutiunian**, the chairman of the “National Accord” party, a little-known and even less active party, Harutiunian is best known for earlier failed presidential runs and generally, is publicly prominent only during elections. He came in last in the 2008 presidential election, after securing a mere 0.18 percent of the vote;
- Other even lesser known candidates include **Andreas Ghukasian**, the 42-year-old director of “Radio Hay,” a private radio station in Yerevan; and **Vardan Sedrakian**, an obscure “specialist in Armenian epic poetry and folk tales.”



**Top row** (from left to right): President Serzh Sarkisian, Raffi Hovhannisian, Hrant Bagratian, Paruir Hayrikian; **Bottom row**: Arman Melikian, Andreas Ghukasian, Vardan Sedrakian, Aram Harutiunian

Source: ArmeniaNow.com

### **Framing the Debate**

Beyond the low level of political discourse, an interesting aspect of the campaign was incumbent President's Sarkisian's success in framing the debate by appropriating several core issues from the opposition. More specifically, even before the start of the official campaign, President Sarkisian was able to initiate a new law and order campaign, pledging to crack down on prosecutorial abuse and bolster the country's beleaguered rule of law. But a deeper concern stems from the methods, not simply the political posturing of the president's law and order campaign. In some ways, the rather individual approach, where the president becomes personally engaged in spearheading the effort, raises concerns over an authoritarian approach. This in turn tends to make the rule of law resemble the "law of the ruler," thereby under-cutting public confidence and threatening to only weaken the campaign from the very start.

After launching an early public campaign against corruption in November 2012, he then adopted a new platform based on law and order issues, aimed at further bolstering his image as a serious leader and portraying himself as a more determined reformer. The law and order campaign began with a televised, scripted presidential berating of senior state prosecutors, but also directly targeting the long-serving Prosecutor-General, Aghvan Hovsepian. There was also a deeper political context beyond the display of a new determination to bolster law and order, rooted in a move to diminish or damage Hovsepian. Most notably, the 59-year old Hovsepian is more of an embarrassment for the president, especially as one of the country's most unpopular and distrusted officials, mainly due to his role in the violent 2008 post-election clashes, when he personally supervised the arrests and convictions of over one-hundred opposition activists.

Politically, as a close associate of former President Robert Kocharian, who appointed him to the prosecutor-general post in 2004, Hovsepian may also be more of a potential threat, making the move against him more of a message to other Kocharian loyalists. In this way, further moves against other Kocharian supporters and holdovers still within the Sarkisian Administration can be expected in the opening months of a possible second term for President Sarkisian. And one of the more important holdovers from the Kocharian camp is the current speaker of the Armenian parliament, Hovik Abrahamian. Although successfully surviving the transition from Kocharian to Sarkisian, Abrahamian has never been quite able to fully gain the trust of the current president. Even Abrahamian's seemingly powerful role as Sarkisian's campaign manager was more of a tactical embrace by Sarkisian in order to keep the speaker on a tight rein and in a pliant and manageable position. For Sarkisian, it seems politically safer to keep Abrahamian as the head of the parliament, designed to contain him politically and constrain him personally.

Despite the short-term success in moving first to embrace the issues of corruption and law and order, thereby robbing the opposition of much of its core issues, there is a challenge over the longer term. The challenge for the president is how to remain remote from the possible backlash as he goes further to expose shortcomings and abuse within his own government, as he may become tainted by his own campaign to expose judicial abuse and corruption. Additionally, one possible backlash from his public fight against officials within his own government may be to actually rally and unite powerful vested interests against him. Regardless of the response, if reelected, he will clearly face seriously higher expectations in his next term for meeting his promises. Thus, although a smart tactical move, his strategy of embarking on a high-profile law and order campaign may be a risky move in light of the combination of public skepticism and a possible political backlash. If such a public campaign is more of an insincere political demonstration, the result may only taint and tar the president's own public image. Yet if it is a genuine move to reform, it may only unify and mobilize powerful vested interests against him.

### **The Outlook: A Second Term as a First Term**

In many ways, the likely re-election of Sarkisian will mark more of a first term than a second term. President Sarkisian began his first term saddled by a pronounced lack of legitimacy after his election victory was marred by protests and allegations of fraud. And as those protests mounted into a deadly post-election crisis, with ten people killed in violent clashes between opposition demonstrators and security forces in March 2008, Sarkisian was further hindered after inheriting office after his predecessor, Robert Kocharian, imposed martial law and ordered a sweeping crackdown on the opposition.

For Sarkisian, his inheritance of a seriously polarized society only diminished his political standing and weakened his already limited popularity, making much of his first term a period dominated by the imperative to overcome the twin challenges of deep political division and limited legitimacy. And investing considerable time and political capital in seeking greater legitimacy, this election is also an opportunity for President Sarkisian to garner more of a mandate, to finally escape from the shadow of his predecessor, and to begin to build his own personal legacy.

In terms of foreign policy, a second, final term may also further allow President Sarkisian to look for new bold ideas or initiatives in foreign policy, similar to his politically risky, but bold initiative in Armenian-Turkish normalization, thereby presenting an opportune time for crafting a real and lasting legacy. Thus, from this perspective, a likely re-election of Sarkisian to a second term may actually represent more of a first term fresh start. Yet for whoever becomes the next Armenian president, the imperative will be to tackle a litany of serious, and unresolved, strategic challenges that have gone largely unaddressed during this presidential campaign.