

RSC SPECIAL BRIEFING
SPECIAL PRE-ELECTION ASSESMENT

23 January 2013

SUMMARY NOTES

The Regional Studies Center (RSC) held a special briefing on 23 January 2013, offering a special assessment of the upcoming Armenian presidential election. The briefing presentation focused on five specific aspects of the Armenian pre-election situation:

- (1) General pre-election observations;
- (2) An analysis of the election campaign;
- (3) An identification of five specific election challenges;
- (4) Implications from the election; and
- (5) Election surprises.

In addition to these summary notes from the special briefing presentation, a longer, more in-depth RSC Armenian Pre-Election Assessment Report is also available separately.

Although this special pre-election briefing was devoted to only one topic, it is part of our broader series of closed monthly briefings, providing an informal “off-the-record” discussion of current developments in Armenia and the broader region. As an independent “think tank,” the Regional Studies Center (RSC) offers this series of closed monthly briefings as an important source of objective analysis and consistent information, serving a target audience of representatives of the diplomatic community and international organizations in Armenia.

23 January 2013

RSC SPECIAL BRIEFING SPECIAL PRE-ELECTION ASSESMENT SUMMARY NOTES

I. General Pre-Election Observations

- Generally, the February 2013 Armenian presidential election can be defined as the country's *least competitive election*, with an absence of any real candidate capable of posing a serious or viable challenge to incumbent President Serzh Sarkisian;
- But this *lack of pluralism and weak field of candidates* is not necessarily President Sarkisian's fault, unlike Belarus, Uzbekistan, and other post-Soviet states, that are plagued by closed and predictable elections with no opposition candidate allowed to stand; And unlike previous Armenian presidential contests, there are no "straw man" candidates this time (in contrast to past candidacies of Artashes Geghamian, Viktor Dallakian, for some examples); Although President Sarkisian and the incumbent Armenian government are responsible and can be held accountable for ensuring a competitive environment and more equal playing field, it is not the government's responsibility to ensure opposition candidates in this context;
- Moreover, this current lack of a strong or viable opponent to the president is not necessarily a surprise, but rather, is a more *accurate reflection of the current political reality* in Armenia, where the opposition remains fairly weak due to three factors: (1) an open division between prominent opposition figures, largely based on the opposition's inability to unite behind any one personality, (2) a lack of true grassroots-based political parties, and (3) a pronounced lack of democratic practices within the existing political parties themselves;
- Yet at the same time, this *lack of a more competitive field of candidates makes the conduct of the election itself more crucial*; It 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" to measure progress in the coming presidential contest; A final observation is that the *post-election period is most likely to be calm*, with no real danger of political violence or any significant post-election unrest.

II. Election Campaign Analysis

- As with past political campaigns (both presidential and parliamentary), the current presidential campaign 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 *primitive and low level of political discourse*, with *little debate and even less of a choice* between competing visions or strategic alternatives;

- 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, as is the case with the current campaign;
- Generally, there are *three tiers of candidates*: (1) the *incumbent president*, with his limited appeal and lack of personal or political charisma overcome by both the inherent advantage of incumbency and the unnatural advantage of the use of so-called “administrative resources,” including compelling civil servants and other workers to turn out for political rallies and events; (2) “*men on a mission*,” consisting of two candidates (former Prime Minister Hrant Bagratian and former Foreign Minister Raffi Hovhanissian), intent on voicing important issues to help raise the level of political discourse and to challenge the president to respond; and (3) *assorted other candidates*, comprising old faces, perennial candidates, and lesser and unknown individuals;
- Ironically, the *non-candidates have become almost as significant as the candidates* themselves; The non-candidacies of prominent political figures choosing not to stand include Prosperous Armenia party leader Gagik Tsarukian; his party’s prominent public face, former Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian, who was basically intimidated by the authorities not to stand; and opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) leader and former President Levon Ter-Petrosian; 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;
- One *positive element* of this campaign is the fact that, overall, *media coverage of the candidates and the campaign has been more balanced, although the media has also been more sophisticated in pursuing a generally pro-government media environment*, as demonstrated by the airing of military documentaries of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, seemingly designed to promote nationalistic feeling and remind the public of the “threat to Armenia” from Azerbaijan, and the timing of a release of a new movie glorifying the life of a popular “national hero” (Karekin Nzhdeh), whose personal political views also served as the formulation of the political ideology of President Sarkisian’s ruling Republican Party; Moreover, the media has also been subject to the overt use of “*singers and stars*” to promote President Sarkisian and his ruling Republican Party;
- A *second positive element* is the fact that this period is marked by an atmosphere of a more pronounced *freedom of expression*, although there have been *few attempts to test the limits on the freedom of assembly*, mainly as there have been no unofficial or unsanctioned public gatherings or political 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;
- Finally, the campaign also 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, hospital and factory workers, etc., to attend incumbent President Sarkisian’s political rallies; This practice tends to be used to not only increase the size of Sarkisian’s events, but to also test the efficacy of coercive measures by the authorities.

III. Five Specific Election Challenges

- The combination of a lack of a more competitive race and the low level of political discourse generally foster a *low level of voter interest*, suggesting that a *possible low voter turnout* will challenge or even undermine the vote results;
- The current question of this campaign is *to what degree that individuals engage in voting against the president, rather than voting for a candidate*, reflecting a possible political preference for “none of the above” in terms of the candidates;
- A third challenge is posed by the *conduct of the election day vote* itself, with serious pressure from the *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;
- *Voter list accuracies*, including the role of some 5000 new Syrian-Armenian voters, and the use of votes within the armed forces, also present another challenge to the integrity and performance of the election;
- Another challenge will come from expectations for a *greater degree of legal challenges to questionable vote results or conduct*, as civil society activists and local Armenian election observers will seek to “name and shame” violators.

IV. Election Implications

- The presidential *election is as much a test as an opportunity* for Armenia; It offers an opportunity to deepen and bolster democracy credentials, and to meet and even surpass expectations (both internal and external);
- The election is also an *opportunity for President Sarkisian* to garner more of a mandate, to finally escape from the shadow of his predecessor Robert Kocharian, and to begin to build his own personal legacy; Moreover, the likely re-election of President Sarkisian to a second term actually represents *more of a first term fresh start*, given the fact that much of his first term as president was devoted to overcoming the legacy of political polarization and division inherent in the aftermath of the March 2008 post-election crisis, and to bolstering his limited legitimacy through much of his first term;
- In terms of foreign policy, a second, final term may further allow President Sarkisian to look for new, *bold ideas in foreign policy*, similar to his political courage in handling Armenian-Turkish normalization.

V. Election Surprises

- In terms of election surprises, the recent release of polling data indicate an unusually higher-than-expected number of committed and determined voters, suggesting that the *possibility of low voter turnout may be somewhat exaggerated*;
- *Less cross-over voters than expected*, as ANC supporters do not seem likely to shift support to ANC parliamentarian Hrant Bagratian, and as the level of likely ARF support shifting to Raffi Hovanissian is also less than expected;
- Most notably, the *campaign period raises interesting questions*: Is Prosperous Armenia now that weak to not fight at all? Is it due to deep divisions within the party, or does it reflect a recognition that the party has no where to go other than to rejoin the pro-government elite? Will a possible pre-election deal result in a post-election sharing of ministerial portfolios in a second Sarkisian presidency?
- An additional surprise stems from the *campaign discourse*, especially in light of President's *Sarkisian's bid for an "elevated position,"* referring to other candidates as "competitors," and not "rivals," and by publicly stating that Azerbaijan (or any other country) is "not Armenia's enemy," in part confirming that the nationalist discourse and rhetoric of the past no longer resonates among Armenian voters; Yet President Sarkisian has also revealed that he remains somewhat *"out of touch" with real voter concerns*, most clearly in a public speech praising the State Revenue Committee (SCR), one of the country's most-despised and least-trusted state institutions;
- Moreover, in terms of the political script and deliberate discourse of the campaign, what is missing as driving issues (Armenia-Turkey, the genocide issue, Nagorno-Karabakh and the opening of the Karabakh airport, etc.) is significant, demonstrating that *nationalism no longer resonates* (now suggesting a broader trend after the same situation applied during the May 2012 parliamentary election);
- And another election surprise is the fact that among all candidates, there is still *not enough attention or discussion of policy priorities* in terms of entrenched issues and negative trends (such as migration, widening disparities in wealth and income, poverty, the power of oligarchs, etc.), and *not enough attention to emerging civic issues*, such as the environment, urban construction and development, hazing, abuse and deaths within the Armenian Army, with the latter an especially volatile issue; While that first set of entrenched issues and negative trends represent the general priorities of the majority of the Armenian electorate, the second set of emerging civic themes reflect the issues that drive youth activism, making it especially irresponsible for the candidates and political parties to ignore, and making it *politically dangerous to ignore general expectations for reform and public demands for change*.