

Armenia's watershed election: More free, but less fair

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As Armenia prepares for a parliamentary election on 2 April, the coming contest has already been marred by pronounced polarisation and deep division. With Armenia moving to a full parliamentary form of government, writes [Richard Giragosian](#), the election will be particularly significant and could very well shape the future of the country.



Armenia is preparing to hold a watershed election for a new parliament on 2 April. This election is especially significant, for several reasons. Most notably, it marks the start of the transformation to a full parliamentary form of government, as part of a process that will culminate in the phasing out of the current semi-presidential system by 2018.

The significance of this election is further demonstrated by a [political transition](#) that has already been underway for some time, involving the emergence of both a new political opposition and the promotion of a new, younger political elite. Both the newly established opposition and the rising political elite are defined not only by a starkly different political style and approach than their predecessors, but also stand out as members of a new, younger generation of leaders and candidates.



Yerevan, Armenia's capital, with the backdrop of Mount Ararat (locally known as Masis). [Serouj Ourishian](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Against that backdrop, Armenian society has also changed, with a demonstrable end to apathy and a pronounced rise in civic activism. Other related changes are not as positive, however, and include the onset of serious [economic crisis](#), driven by the challenge of reduced remittances, the burden of entrenched corruption, and widening disparities in wealth and incomes. An additional undercurrent of instability and simmering discontent also poses new obstacles for the smooth conduct of the vote and a relatively peaceful response to the outcome. Therefore, from this broader perspective, the April 2017 parliamentary election stands as a serious milestone for the future of stability in Armenia.

Personalities over policies

The April election also shares a distressing number of similarities with previous ballots, however. Most notably, the election campaign has once again stood out for its paucity of policy alternatives and a poverty of ideas. Matching Armenia's political tradition, the election is more of a confrontation between strong personalities rather than competition among parties or over policies. And the concepts of political concession and compromise are limited to deal making between members of the ruling political elite. While demonstrating the absence of real political parties, this also displays the primitive nature of Armenian politics, where yet again the ordinary voter is largely deprived of choice and denied any voice in determining the policies of the government.

This paucity of any substantial policy debate is matched only by a string of campaign slogans and a series of political promises. For the government, the promises of future economic growth and pledges of security are merely a reiteration of an already tired script. And in the face of a serious economic downturn and [recent clashes](#) over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, such vague statements seem particularly disingenuous.

This is only further magnified by a surprising political paradox. Unlike most elections where an incumbent government runs on its own record, in Armenia, there is little political memory and even less accountability for holding officials to their platforms and promises. This is also evident in the complete lack of any discussion of the essential policies of a sitting government, such as its record on job creation or economic management.

The opposition is also woefully short on policy specifics. Despite the fading of the country's older, more established political opposition, which is now seen as discredited and marginalised, the emergence of a significant new political opposition has yet to craft or create its own set of policy alternatives. Yet there is a degree of promise from this [new opposition force](#), comprised of an electoral bloc between two new political entrants, the pro-European "Bright Armenia" and the diverse "Civil Contract" parties.

Election outlook: more free, yet less fair

With an election endowed with a combination of [improved voting technology](#) and greater numbers of election observers, the conducting of the poll itself is widely expected to be demonstrably better than previous elections. Such an improved outcome is especially vital for Armenia, which has long been hampered by a string of previous elections that were tainted with serious voting irregularities and voter fraud. But even a "cleaner," improved vote process is not guaranteed, especially as for most Armenian election officials, their only experience is with "fixing" or "rigging" a ballot, and not necessarily with enforcing a lawful and orderly vote.

And an improved ballot in itself will not be enough for real progress, for two reasons. First, even with a clearly improved and substantially "more free" election, the erosion of public trust and confidence in the Armenian government will inherently undermine any public acceptance of the results, no matter who wins. Even more importantly, a second factor hindering democratic progress stems from the recognition that no matter how "free" the election will be, it will also most likely be substantially "less fair."

This contradiction, between a "more free" yet "less fair" election, emanates from the natural advantage of incumbency. Through what has become known as "administrative resources," the state is able to exert pressure on civil servants, such as school teachers and hospital workers, and the army, among others, to coerce voters in its favour. While such an advantage from incumbency is natural for any incumbent government, it is the abuse of such "administrative resources" that makes this such an egregious violation.

Looming instability

Against this backdrop, the question for Armenia is no longer whether the election will be yet another "missed opportunity" for democratic change through the ballot box. Rather, the real test will not be the conduct on election day itself, but will come the day after the vote. And the outlook for stability in Armenia remains bleak, as neither the government nor the opposition recognises the risk of post-election unrest. The situation is especially tense, due to

the deepening level of discontent and dissent.

And as the government's rather arrogant over-confidence may blind it to the looming risk, the opposition's failure to see the danger also prevents it from playing a helpful role to diffuse any crisis or violent unrest. Thus, this approaching election now stands as a watershed moment for Armenia, with the future of the country and the outlook for stability in the balance.

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