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Iskandaryan, Alexander

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Armenia: Stagnation at Its Utmost

By Alexander Iskandaryan, Yerevan

Abstract:

The lack of developed political parties is the main problem plaguing Armenia's domestic politics. Given widespread political apathy and low trust in political institutions, the ruling party is able to keep its balance and hold on to power despite its low legitimacy.

A Changing Political Landscape

The last few years have seen changes in the political landscape of Armenia. The changes did not happen overnight and there was nothing revolutionary about them; their result has been a new design of Armenia's political administration.

Elections Without Choice

Over approximately eighteen months, from early 2012 to mid-2013, the long-ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) succeeded in taking over almost all of the country's political arenas. Republicans won the vast majority of elections held during that period, including the parliamentary and presidential polls, and local elections across the country and in the capital city Yerevan. By the end of 2013, this unprecedented victorious march concluded with members of the RPA in all key positions: president, prime minister, speaker of the parliament, mayor of the capital city, most MPs in the National Assembly and members of the Yerevan City Council. On the local level, Republicans also took over in tiny rural communities with less than a thousand residents, as well as in small and medium sized towns. The takeover on the community level was a two-way street: in some communities, Republicans won the race against independents or members of other parties; in other communities, previously non-partisan mayors joined the Republican Party.

The result of the takeover has been the final establishment of a classical *one-and-a-half party system* in Armenia. The system is common in hybrid democracies; for example, it was in place in Mexico in the 1920s to the 1990s during the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and in Japan in the 1950s to 1990s with the Liberal Democratic Party at the wheel.

Typically for this type of system, the RPA is not so much the ruling party as the "party of power." In practical terms, it functions as a trade union of public officials and affiliated businesspeople. It also provides career opportunities for ambitious young people ready to climb the social ladder according to the rules of the game. Finally, it ensures the smooth operation of electoral mechanisms. It is quite indifferent to ideology, despite being rooted in the Soviet dissident movement and boasting a hodgepodge of a right-wing political platform.

The RPA—and some of its competitors—use *gifts*, a euphemism for bribes, to gather votes, according to observers. This practice does not necessarily involve money changing hands, but rather, runs a gamut of non-ideological vote attraction methods, ranging from the construction of village roads and presenting communities with agricultural machines, through access to benefits and resources of various kinds, to the handing out of food, seeds, and, money. Needless to say, in this kind of game, incumbent authorities possess crucial logistical as well as financial advantages.

Opposition Weakness

The reason the system is called one-and-a-half-party is that the ruling party, *first*, dominates during decades (over seventy years in Mexico, over forty in Japan), and *second*, is much larger and more powerful than all of its opponents (all put together, they stand for the "half party"). For such a system to be in place, it is insufficient to have a dominating ruling power (something many post-Communist countries have). It is also essential that all the other parties should become inefficient and marginalized.

It took Armenia's political system over two decades to mutate into its present state; most of this time, the Republican Party has been in charge (ruling on their own or in coalition since 1999). The current paradigm stems from trends within the RPA, clearly manifest since the early 2000s, but not less from ones in the political party system as a whole.

In the years following independence, Armenian opposition has adhered to a line of radical political thought, based on which it evolved a "winner takes all" behavior strategy that boils down to trying to come to power by means of elections or a revolution. After two decades of applying this strategy, political parties have failed to become sustainable grassroots institutions and remained disposable electoral machines that rely on radicalized discourses to win the critical mass of voter support needed for a change of power. After a few botched attempts to take over, the machines are doomed to fall apart because they lack the ideological and logistical base needed for sustainability. The weakness of Armenia's opposition parties isn't just bad luck;

they are built that way. Unable to destroy the political system, they are also unable to become part of it. In order to operate permanently, not just during election campaigns, a party needs human resources, ties to the media, an expert pool and financial base. Existing opposition groups have none of these things, and lack the motivation to engage in day-to-day political activity, because the radicalized approach promises them a simpler, if illusory, way to win.

The parties' political programs are chiefly negative; they slam the authorities but do not offer meaningful solutions to existing problems. The vision is that getting rid of the bad guys in the government will automatically reduce poverty, social inequality and corruption. Opposition leaders have been in politics for a quarter of a century; many of them were in power at some point, so that voters have no reason to trust them any more than they do the incumbents. Overall, *wide social discontent in Armenia is permanent, but support for a particular actor or party is short-lived*. This situation makes it easy for the authorities to lure voters away using non-ideological methods.

Another typical, though counterintuitive, feature of the one-and-a-half party system is the significant presence of opposition parties in the legislature. Indeed, the 2012 Armenian parliament includes more opposition parties than any before it. However, as befits this system, opposition MPs have little influence over decision-making and merely legitimize the rule of the RPA, which has a majority in the parliament. Politics is made elsewhere.

The reason that this system is sustainable is not that the authorities are legitimate, but that no one challenges them. Up to 2012, most of the opposition was non-parliamentary, and it radicalized its rhetoric to the maximum extent, denying the system's right to exist. This made sense, because the system had denied them the right to be part of it. The same rhetoric is now used by actors and groups that have taken part in elections and won seats in the parliament. When MPs insist that election results and the whole power pyramid have no legitimacy, this does not sound convincing. The demand for radical rhetoric is growing as economic recession persists, but the supply is getting shorter.

Armenia's political party system will keep deteriorating. Parties will weaken and fall apart. Driven out of the political domain, the public's political demands, expectations and perceptions will keep moving over to civil society. In Armenia and some other transition states, this segment does not just include the civil society in its classical sense (groups engaged in the protection of human rights, public service provision, advocacy, etc.), but also the embryos of political groups that engage in modern forms of political protest, more networked

and radical than traditional ones. Before they evolve into political parties, these groups will need to undergo many changes, the hardest of which is to become aware of their political rather than civil nature. Accordingly, the RPA will remain comfortably in power for years, despite wide social discontent and the low legitimacy of all governance institutions.

Politics Outside Politics

The civil society groups that function as replacements for the ineffectual political parties mostly engage in street protests that they themselves (and the society) perceive as civil rather than political activism. The protests can be triggered by a variety of causes, such as environmental concerns or the demolition of old buildings; in fact, they possess all the characteristics of political protests. The advocates and participants of these protests are chiefly recruited from the same social group, mostly young and educated residents of the center of the capital city, altogether a few thousand people. The theme of a protest may have no direct relevance to this social group. The group has no hierarchy, or perhaps many interlinked hierarchies. It is not structured, but has a nucleus of the most active members. A novel phenomenon in Armenia, its emergence appears to be directly connected to the deterioration of traditional opposition groups.

In the last few months, the biggest activity organized by this cohort has been Electric Yerevan: a protest against plans to raise the rates for electricity. The street protest ran for weeks during summer 2015, involved barricading one of the city's busiest streets, and finally caused the government to announce the temporary suspension of plans to raise the rates. As the protest unfolded, the atmosphere around the barricades in Baghramyan Avenue escalated, there were clashes with police, and the site became a symbol of confrontation with the authorities. The reason for the protest was local, but the trend is significant: benchmark political protests are happening without the involvement of mainstream political opposition.

A new phenomenon in the public discourse is the protesters' sharp anti-oligarch narrative. Directed against unfairly made fortunes, the merger of business and politics, and the corrupt nature of large business in general, this narrative is close to that of the New Left in Europe and Latin America. It is unlikely that its adepts are aware of the parallel, since the narrative has a clear domestic origin. It does, however, amount to the emergence of a left-wing discourse, which is unprecedented in Armenia since independence from the USSR.

The protests remain weak and confined to one social group. It is likely that the authorities will keep fulfill-

ing the protesters' demands as long as they do not concern issues of crucial importance. However, since the protests are political by nature and have a mobilization resource that does not depend on specific issues, they are likely to spring up again and again in connection with various themes. This may open up prospects for the emergence of new forms of political activism. So far, the movement lacks a hierarchy, has little expertise and no structure. An instinctive shift towards socially-oriented and even semi-Communist narratives is insufficient for the protests to spill over to other social groups.

Conclusion

Political apathy is the population's most common reaction to the low legitimacy of a political system, which

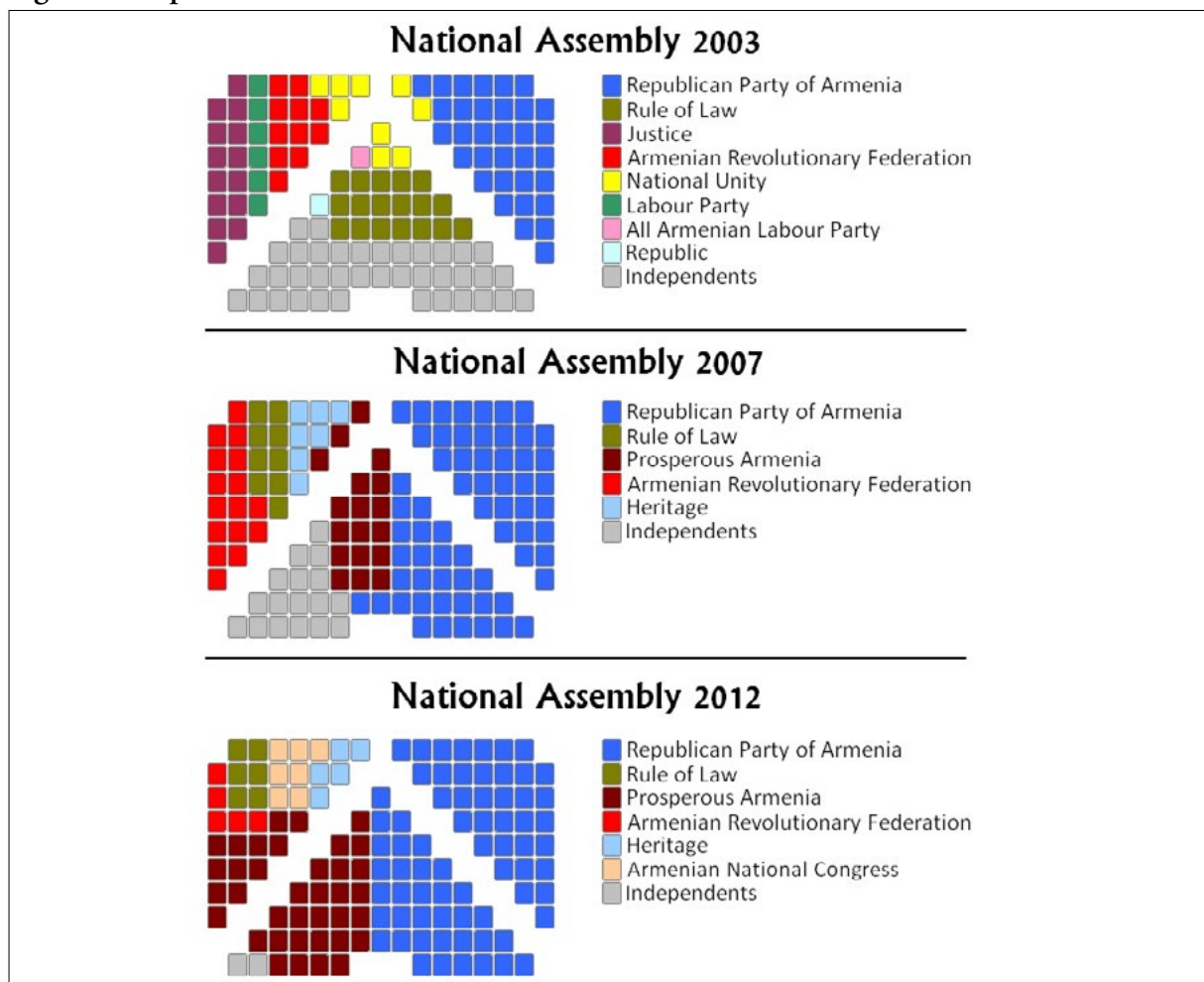
makes it easy for the authorities to win elections. Deterioration of the opposition field kills any remaining hopes for change and leads to stagnation, although social discontent remains high and even grows. Many countries' experience shows that this kind of precarious stability can persist for decades until someone challenges it.

The weakness of Armenia's political parties prevents them from challenging the party in power, which, in its turn, is incapable of performing the functions expected of a political party. Demand for opposition politics in Armenia is huge, but supply is dwindling. By now, it has dwindled sufficiently to represent no challenge to the regime.

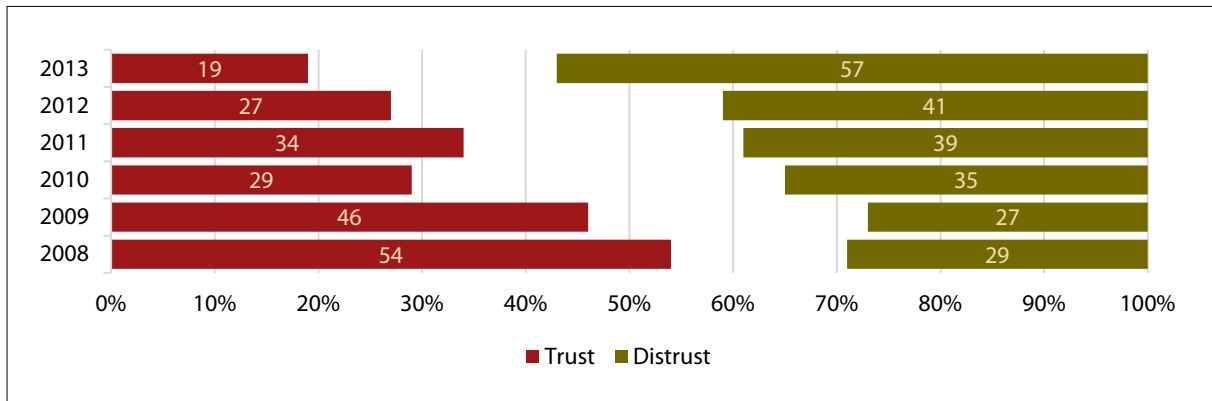
About the Author

Alexander Iskandaryan is a political scientist. Since 2005, he has been the director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute.

Figure 1: Representation of Political Parties in Armenia's National Parliament

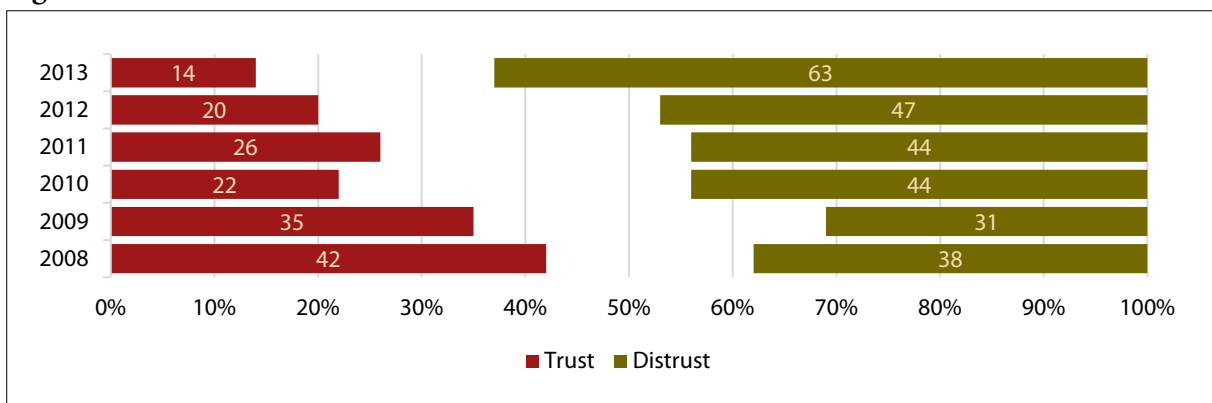


Source: Hrant Mikaelian, *Caucasus Institute, Social Sciences Department*

Figure 2: Public Trust Towards the President

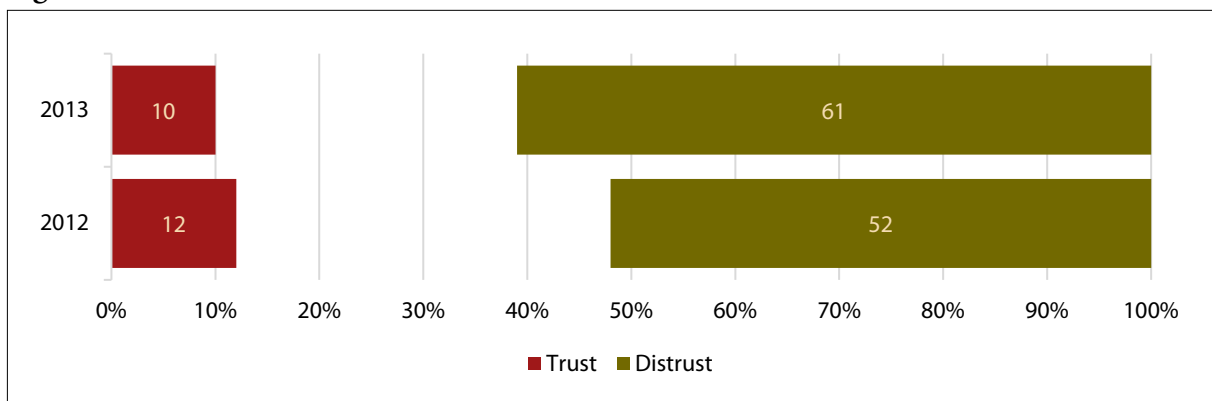
Note: The difference to 100 percent consists of do not know and no answers.

Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2008–2013

Figure 3: Public Trust Towards the Government

Note: The difference to 100 percent consists of do not know and no answers.

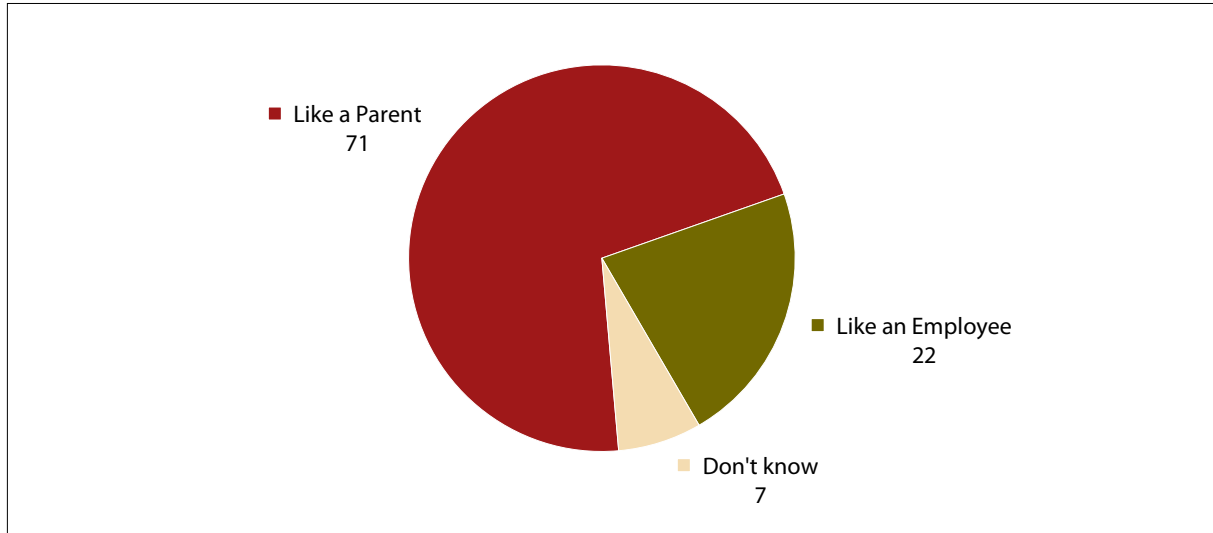
Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2008–2013

Figure 4: Public Trust Towards Political Parties

Note: The difference to 100 percent consists of do not know and no answers.

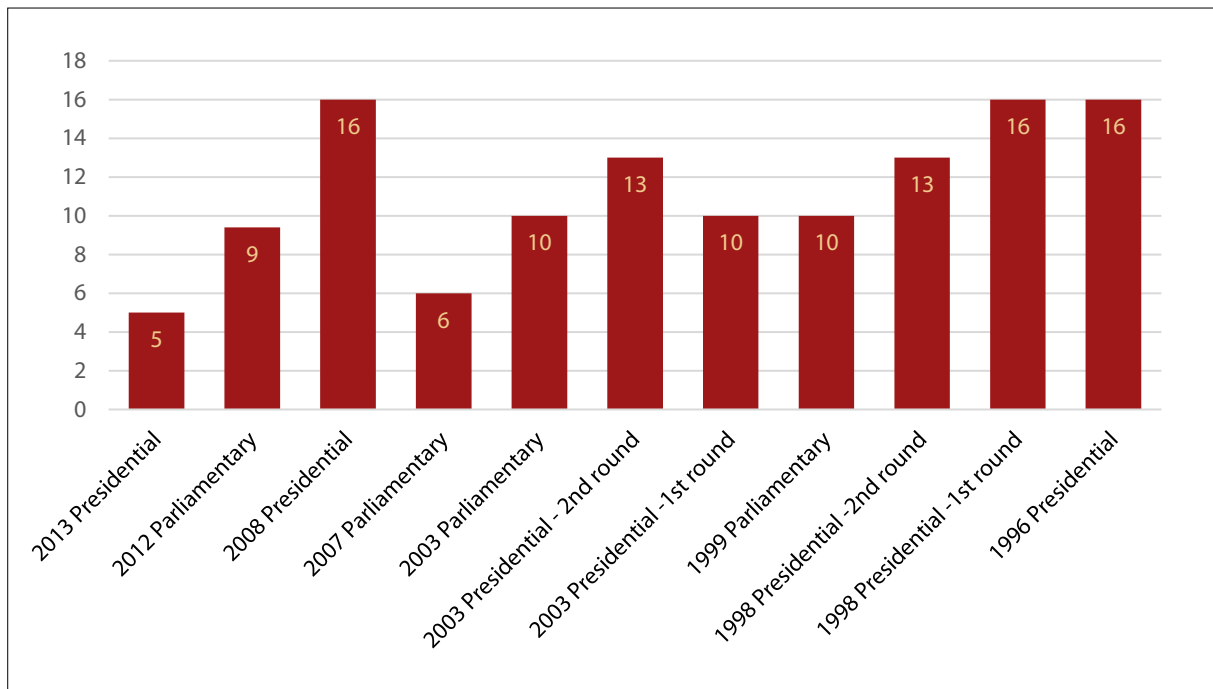
Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2008–2013

Figure 5: Paternalism in Armenia. The State Should Be ...



Source: CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2013

Figure 6: Share of Polling Stations Where the Election Process Was Accessed Negatively by OSCE/ODIHR International Observers



Source: <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia>>