

# GOVERNANCE 101: PARLIAMENTARY VS PRESIDENTIAL FRAMEWORK

*Posted on October 7, 2015 by Keghart*



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Since Plato and Aristotle mankind has been in search of a just system of government. The below cursory note does not intend to explore all the various systems that have evolved throughout the centuries, nor it does claim to be exhaustive of the two that are presented here, namely the parliamentary and the presidential systems. It's a limited participation in the ongoing and sometimes heated discussion, generated by the proposed constitutional changes in Armenia.

In the parliamentary system (first pass) opposition votes tend to neutralize each other. Hence with a slight advantage, at times even with 1-2%, one of the parties can dominate and take over the reins of power. It's harder to unseat the incumbent. This phenomenon has been witnessed time and again in the UK, Canada and India, to name a few. Following the last Canadian federal election (2011) the Conservative Party formed a **majority** government with less than 40% of the popular votes. They've been in power for a decade under the same prime minister.

In contrast, within the framework of the presidential system, even if there are several contenders, one candidate tends to dominate in the end. The opposition parties that share several common grounds coalesce and have a better chance to defeat the incumbent.

The independence of the legislative branch gets relatively more compromised in the parliamentary system. In fact a symbiotic relationship evolves with the executive being more dominant. In contrast, the legislative branch may be populated by the opposition representing a party or parties other than that of the president in the presidential system. The theoretical and practical advantage is to keep the two levers of checks and balances independent from each other, in addition to independence of the judiciary. .

In mature parliamentary democracies (e.g. Canada) it does not matter much which party comes into power with respect to general--almost ingrained--values of the country and the socio-economic services extended to the citizens. No matter who comes into power universal Medicare, for example, and other socio-economic foundations of Canada will not change. Only some modifications can be made by the new government. This, however, is not possible in a country like Armenia where socio-economic measures to safeguard people against abuse are mostly non-existent, and not only the legislative body is compromised but the judiciary too. And since a party, i.e. the Republican Party of Armenia has numerical advantage, there exists the distinct potential that it would perpetuate itself via coalitions with insignificant fringe factions. Whereas there is a chance of minimizing the effect of this numerical advantage in a presidential system, because the neutralizing factor of competing factions tend to decrease.

In Armenia irrespective of which system is adopted, ultimately just governance depends on the socio-economic infrastructure and the earnest willingness of the president (or the Prime Minister) to uphold the constitution. Chapter 1 (Article 2) states, "In the Republic of Armenia the power belongs to

the people; The people exercise their power through free elections, referenda, as well as through state and local self-governing bodies and public officials as provided by the Constitution; usurpation of power by any organization or individual constitutes a crime." Let's ask ourselves, have these dicta been fulfilled so far in the past twenty years since they were enunciated (1995)? What assurances are there that the proposed "reforms" (whatever they are) will lead to the rule of law?

Ultimately, people, including presidents and prime ministers are judged by their track-record and not by their words.

