

ARMENIA ELECTIONS 2018: AN INSIDER'S VIEW

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By **Areg Gharabegian**, Yerevan, January 2019

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ARF pamphlets were short and to the point, we were using one that had bullet points of what we will do and what we will not do. Then we had a 10-page long detailed handout for people who wanted more information. We had created three campaign video clips that were basically presenting Artsvik Minasyan but also providing information about ARF. One of these video clips which was about 3-

minute long was prepared by a professional film director and it was considered by many as the best video clip of the campaign. Our candidates, especially Artsvik Minasyan were giving TV and web interviews and they were visiting different villages where they were presenting their and ARF's proposals to the voters. Each of our candidates had organized a meet and greet event with candidate.

ARF youth were also actively involved in the day to day campaign. Every day members of our youth organization were walking in cities and villages where they were passing out fliers and engaging with potential voters. They were walking as pairs with dark blue overcoat that had ARF logo on it, wearing a white hat with ARF logo, and a red arm banner again with ARF logo. Other groups were also doing similar work in a much smaller scale but were not as well organized and well presented as ours. Our youth also did a bikathon in City of Etchmiadzin which received wide exposure.

During the last week of the campaign we had dedicated teams that were actively working on Facebook and other social media platforms where they were countering baseless attacks on our candidates and ARF in general. Our teams were effective against real and numerous "fake" users. Responses of our teams were strong and as a result most of these attackers were not able to counter anymore as our teams were responding with facts and logic. It was clear that there were well financed "fake" users in Facebook who were attacking ARF as now most of those fake ones are not active anymore.

Election results were much less than what was expected for ARF. In Armavir marz we gathered only 4,000 votes in comparison to 12,000 votes that we received last year. We had emphasized accomplishments of Artsvik Minasyan when he was deputy minister, parliament member for nine years, and minister for two years, but he received only 1,500 votes.

There was a young fellow on the ballots in Etchmiadzin with no relevant experience who received 13,000 votes and another young guy in City of Armavir, again with no relevant experience per se who received 10,000 votes. It is interesting to mention that the latter received only 200 votes when he was a candidate for the city council last year. It is amazing that this young guy's popularity had increased 50 folds in less than a year by doing nothing. It is clear from this picture that it did not matter what were the qualifications of a candidate, the only requirement for wining was to be on My Step's list.



Every day when our youth were returning from distributing pamphlets and speaking to voters, we were having debriefings. According to them, most people had a positive attitude and were making comments about how much they liked our candidates, especially Artsvik Minasyan. However, there were few who would say they do not like ARF and will not vote for it.


Some people with whom I or others spoke to, were basically blaming ARF for two things – "ARF has

been part of Serg's corrupt regime" and "on October 2nd ARF voted against revolution in the parliament". When I was asking these people if they knew what ARF had done while in the government, they had no idea. Then I was asking if they knew who were our ministers and what they had accomplished, again they were clueless, and finally when I was asking if they even knew which ministries were under ARF's control, they were looking to me with blank eyes, this is despite the fact that our ministers were giving interviews and making weekly announcements in the media about different activities. It is clear to me that these people were told that ARF is bad for those two reasons but they were not given any details, so they were not able to get into a meaningful argument.

ARF got into the government based on a decision made in the ARF World Congress in 2015 to work from within the government to do good for the people of Armenia. This was a prudent strategy and ARF was able to accomplish a lot. As far as the vote on October 2nd, again it had a simple explanation but it was completely misrepresented to the public for a power grab reason. According to the Armenian law, if parliament is not able to have quorum for two weeks, it will automatically dissolve. Some parliament members had a concern that there was a plan brewing to prevent parliament members to get into the parliament building to force it to dissolve. Therefore, they proposed an amendment whereas if parliament is in session and for any reason (*force majeure*) members cannot get into the parliament building, it is considered the session is going on and parliament is not dissolved.

This was a logical amendment and ARF, Republican, and Bargavach Hayastan parliament members voted for the amendment and it passed. The concerns proved to be right, as powers to be had surrounded the parliament building with a large crowd and were preventing members to get into the building. This vote was used to take away ministerial and governor positions from ARF and Bargavach Hayastan in preparation for the upcoming elections so they will not be able to use their resources and gather votes. The plan was that the new government must have a super majority and the existence of a real opposition such as ARF in the parliament was not considered desirable for people who wanted to have free hand in governing the way they pleased.

As always, ARF participated in December snap elections with its ideas and a well-qualified list of candidates. Our campaign was not based on a one person or a "leader" as all other so-called parties were. In each marz ARF had its candidates and they were running based on the local issues and needs, contrary to the others where one person representing a group was crisscrossing the country to do the campaigning.

Unfortunately, the population in Armenia is person centric and is looking for a leader to follow. This is a typical phenomenon in developing countries where democratic procedures and political parties are not yet completely matured. In such a scenario, ARF will be in a disadvantage by its nature as it has collective leadership and it operates under its ideological basis and not personalities. 

It is clear that besides ARF there is no other real political party in Armenia. Numerous so-called parties are groupings of people around one person who have similar interests or business-related issues or they are hoping to improve their livelihood or finding a job in the government by belonging to that group. Ideology has no place in these groupings even though they all have some nice words printed on a piece of paper. Experience of the past 30 years has shown that as soon as the head person is not there anymore or there are some difficult times, that so-called party dissolves and disappears.

It is interesting to mention that some of the Republicans active members are now part of the "new" government and even some of their parliament members got elected again but this time under My Step's banner. In other words, there is no loyalty or belief in an ideology which is the corner stone of any real political party.

Some people, especially in Diaspora advocate that ARF must concentrate its efforts in helping people and improving their lives instead of getting involved in elections and governing. In my opinion this is a misguided idea, as like any other political party, ARF must strive to be a majority party and govern Armenia based on its ideology. ARF in Diaspora has a different mission where *hayabahnoom* is in its foundation and ARF has no plans in becoming head of the government in any foreign country.

Going forward ARF can choose the "easy route" or the "right route." The easy route will be electing a young and charismatic "leader" who will be a populist and will promise the people pie in the sky if ARF gets control of the government. Then ARF will denounce claims to Western Armenia, will abandon the Genocide recognition and reparations efforts worldwide. Will go to bed with international powers that work against national interests of Armenia and will make alliance with everyone in the country who will promise to help with vote gathering. If we take this route, I am certain that after the next election ARF will be a major force in the parliament if not the majority.

The right route will be to work in increasing party's membership especially with qualified youth who will be believers of the party's ideology. Actively presenting our values and plans for the flourishing of Armenia to the general population. Use our resources, especially from the Diaspora to renovate and rebrand our centers in different cities and make them places where the intellectuals and activists will gather regularly to discuss various social and economic issues and to come up with feasible and viable solutions. ARF will also put its emphasis on electing its members or supporters to the head of various villages and city councils. It has become clear to me during the last two elections that the head of a village (*gughabed*) is instrumental in how people of a village vote. When the head of a village promises that so many people will vote for a certain party or group, then that party or group gets that number of votes. People living in the village typically look at the head of the village for directions as how to vote so it will be the best for their village. Taking the right route, most probably ARF will not become a major force or take the control of the government soon, but eventually it will.

Personally, I will choose the "right route" and ARF members that I know will also be choosing the right route. I am certain that this will be the choice for almost all ARF members worldwide. Now that I am in Armenia, I have the privilege and honor to meet local ARF members as well as ARF members from different countries who are visiting Armenia and discuss various issues with them. I have not come across anyone who will choose the easy route.

ARF will go forward after the defeat during the last elections with firm steps and programs. It will start taking control of the lowest elected administrative positions in the cities and villages and move up from there. Equipped with its national and social stands in accordance to its ideology, it will eventually succeed to take control of the government and move the nation forward to a glorious future.

