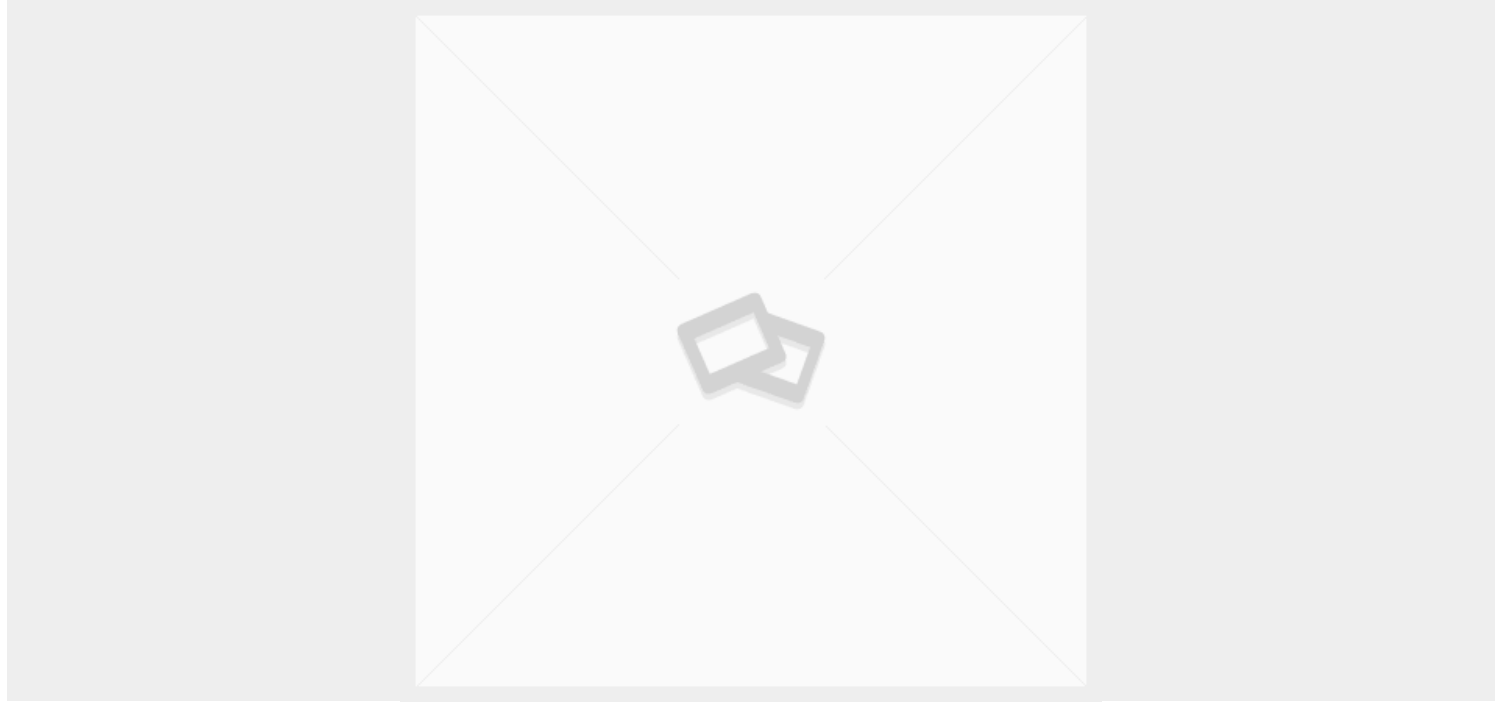


RULING PARTY SWEEPS VICTORY IN FLAWED YEREVAN ELECTION

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By [Asbarez](#) Staff, 1 June 2009

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YEREVAN (Combined Sources) — President Serzh Sarkisian's Republican Party of Armenia has swept to a landslide victory in municipal elections in Yerevan, which the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and other opposition groups have denounced as flawed.

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation Supreme Council of Armenia issued an announcement Monday calling the elections "deeply flawed" and said it would not recognize the results. "We considered the Yerevan municipal elections as an opportunity for strengthening the political structure, creating a new government model in the capital, overcoming the enmity and divisiveness that resulted from the 2008 presidential elections and establishing unity," said the announcement.

"We also believed that fair elections would strengthen the foundations of democracy in the country and we could prove that we are able to make progress. Unfortunately, that did not happen," added the announcement.

"Once again, what happened was more of the same. Again, local and oligarchic clout, bribery and the use of the administrative apparatus played a role in the elections," asserted the party, adding that unfortunately, administrative pressure from the authorities, vote bribes and demagoguery still plague the election process in Armenia.

As such the ARF Supreme Council of Armenia said it would not sign the final results and urged the authorities to declare the elections invalid in the precincts that more visibly violated voting procedures.

The Results

The Central Election Commission announced early on June 1 that with all of the ballots counted, the Republican's won 47.4 percent of the vote, enough to reinstall its top candidate, Gagik Beglarian, as Yerevan's mayor. The Prosperous Armenia Party, one of the Republican Party's two junior partners in the ruling coalition, came in a distant second with 22.7 percent.

Trailing Prosperous Armenia was the opposition Armenian National Congress, which the official results showed getting 17.4 percent of the vote, well below its expectations.

County of Law, the third party represented in Sarkisian's government, finished fourth with only 5.2 percent. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which was also part of the governing coalition until recently received about 4.7 percent, according to the commission.

With the vote threshold for single parties seeking to gain seats in Yerevan's Council of Elders set at 7 percent, this means that neither County of Law nor the ARF will be represented in the new municipal assembly.

The Central Election Commission put voter turnout at over 53 percent. The highest turnout, more than 65 percent, was registered in the city's Malatia-Sebastia district, scene of the largest number of voting irregularities reported by the Armenian opposition, media, and independent observers.

The first vote results showing a Republican victory were released at around midnight following opposition allegations of widespread fraud during the May 31 voting.

Opposition Complains

Former President Levon Ter-Petrosian's Armenian National Congress complained of systemic fraud, vote rigging, and intimidation after the closure of the polls and announced late Monday that they will refuse their seats won in the newly elected City Council, effectively dropping the 65 member City Council to 52 members.

This assessment of the election administration was shared by the opposition Heritage party as well, which did not contest the vote but closely monitored its conduct.

"Our assessment is highly negative," Armen Martirosian, Heritage's parliamentary leader, told RFE/RL. "We have botched the first election of the Yerevan council in a disgraceful fashion."

Martirosian decried "widespread" bussing of allegedly bribed voters by the two main governing parties. He said Heritage has also registered "many instances of violence" and ballot-box stuffing. "I think the police performance today was a disaster," he added.

Republicans Say 'Free and Fair'

For its part, the Republican Party described the polls as largely free and fair. "Yes, there were some shortcomings, but by and large ballot stuffing, multiple voting, and other problems that existed in the electoral process were essentially absent today," said Eduard Sharmazanov, the Republican spokesman.

This view was echoed by the election commission, which is dominated by government loyalists. Speaking on state television, its chairman, Garegin Azarian, said the commission has investigated the opposition allegations and most of them proved false.

The Prosecutor-General's Office similarly said it has looked into some of the vote-buying claims and found them baseless.

President Hails Outcome

President Sarkisian, meanwhile, welcomed the course and official results of the weekend elections, saying that they marked a "serious step forward" in the elimination of Armenia's culture of electoral

fraud.

In a written address to the nation, Sarkisian congratulated the governing Republican and Prosperous Armenia parties as well as the opposition Armenian National Congress on gaining seats in Yerevan's new municipal council. He also paid tribute to four other parties that failed to win representation in the council despite conducting what he described as "quality election campaigns."

"The May 31 elections and the entire pre-election period demonstrated that we have managed to solve a considerable part of long-standing problems existing in electoral processes and moved forward in solving others," said Sarkisian. "As a result, these elections were a truly serious step forward."

The president further acknowledged violations in "some polling stations" and said he will seek to ensure that "all the guilty are identified and strictly punished."

In what may have been a related development, Armenia's Office of the Prosecutor-General urged the Central Election Commission (CEC) to order vote recounts in eight precincts in Yerevan's Malatia-Sebastia district, scene of the largest number of fraud instances reported on election day.

A spokeswoman for the law-enforcement agency, Sona Truzian, told RFE/RL that the recommendation stems from media reports of ballot box stuffing reported from the area. "Also, the prosecutor-general instructed the launch of a criminal case in connection with media reports on ballot stuffing and violence against journalists and observers in various Malatia-Sebastia precincts," she said.

Truzian said the moves came despite the absence of any written election-related complaints lodged with the prosecutors. Opposition leaders say such complaints are meaningless because of what they see as law-enforcement bodies' complicity in vote rigging.

That there were serious problems in Malatia-Sebastia was acknowledged on Monday by Abram Bakhchagulian, a member of the CEC affiliates with the ruling Republican Party. But he said it is too early to say whether they had a serious impact on overall vote results.

Council of Europe Praises

International observers, meanwhile, said the election met European standards although there were some problems.

"This election was a step forward in comparison with elections held in September 2008," Nigel Mermagen, head of the Council of Europe observation mission, told a news conference, Reuters reported.

"Some shortcomings were recorded," he said, adding, however, that "the overall organization of the elections has been broadly carried out in compliance with European standards.

The Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) deployed the largest international mission, consisting of 12 members, to monitor the polls. They claimed to have visited about half of more than 400 polling stations across Yerevan on election day.

Mermagen did not elaborate on irregularities witnessed by members of his team, saying that they will be detailed in a final election report to be submitted to the CLRAE by October. More importantly, he made clear that the Europeans believe those irregularities did not call into question the legitimacy of the official vote results that gave a landslide victory to the Republicans.

"They had some influence on the final results but not to the extent that the legitimacy of the final results was prejudiced, as far as we could see at this moment in time," said the Council of Europe official.

Major Armenian elections have traditionally been monitored by hundreds of observers deployed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The OSCE and its Warsaw-based Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) did not observe the Yerevan polls, citing a lack of a formal invitation from the Armenian authorities.

Local Monitors Cry Foul

The initial findings of the Council of Europe's observer mission were in sharp contrast to widespread vote buying and other fraud reported by opposition representatives, mass media and Armenian civic groups that monitored the vote. "I have a single word for what we experienced yesterday: shock," said Amalia Kostanian of the Center for Regional Development (CRD), the Armenian affiliate of the Berlin-based Transparency International. "We are shocked. And we are people who have long monitored elections."

The CRD and the Vanadzor branch of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly jointly deployed 60 observers in Yerevan's Malatia-Sebastia district, one of the main trouble spots during Sunday's voting. Kostanian said their detailed election report will be released soon.

As Mermagen presented the largely positive findings of the Council of Europe observer mission, he was subjected to angry questionings by some of the journalists present at his news conference. One of them pointed out that the May 31 elections saw a record-high number of reported attacks on journalists.

Another journalist, who was reportedly assaulted by government loyalists at a Malatia-Sebastia polling station visited by Mermagen, accused the observer mission chief of being "indifferent" to fraud and violence reports and avoiding conversations with opposition proxies. She even suggested that the observers prejudged the authorities' handling of the elections even before election day.

