YEREVAN'S 2009 MAY MUNICIPAL ELECTION: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The analysis presented below is based on preliminary data of the Central Election Commission of Armenia (CEC) on the Yerevan municipal election held on May 31, 2009.1 The objective of this report is to examine the statistical properties of the data—including by comparison with 2008 and 2007 election data, where relevant—to reveal any anomalies and irregularities. It is important to note from the outset that certain types of election fraud would not create statistical anomalies and hence could not be detected by statistical analysis such as the one presented below. Examples of these types of fraudulent activities include, but are not limited to, across-the board (i.e., uniform or sufficiently widespread) bribes in exchange for votes or the use of coercion to obtain votes.
The focus here is on indications of fraud that can be detected by statistical inference: ballot stuffing and vote stealing (i.e., artificial augmentation of vote counts). The methodology used in this report was originally developed by Sobianin and Sukhovolskiy (1993) and Sobianin, Gelman, and Kaiunov, (1994) in application to Russia's 1993 constitutional referendum and later developed in a series of published papers by Michael Myagkov (University of Oregon), Peter Ordeshook (California Institute of Technology), as well as in the context of Armenia's 2008 presidential election by Policy Forum Armenia (see PFA, 2008). Below we focus on four measures that have been identified in the ensuing empirical literature as potential indicators of election fraud: (1) distribution of voter turnout (2) distribution of individual parties' votes, (3) relationship between the parties' votes and voter turnout, and (4) distribution of invalid ballots.

Conclusion

The results presented above do not prove election fraud. They offer indications of fraud that should be taken into serious consideration. Similar to PFA's assessment of the 2008 presidential election, all four empirical tests utilized above offer evidence of fraud and irregularities, including but not limited to ballot stuffing and stealing of opponents' votes during the vote count.
More specifically, the analysis above suggests the following likely strategy for fraudulent activities during the election:

- Voter turnout was artificially inflated in some polling stations presumably to reach a particular target for voter participation;
- In polling stations where the true turnout was too low, ballots were stuffed in favor of both the establishment party and, to a lesser extent, another friendly party, to avoid generating implausibly high percentages for the establishment party;
- In polling stations where true turnout was relatively high thus requiring less ballot stuffing, the dominant mode of fraud was vote stealing—augmenting the final vote count in favor of the main establishment party.

Given the consistency and strength of evidence, the above analysis casts serious doubt on the trustworthiness of yet another election outcome in Armenia. Evidence collected by various observers on election day points to widespread irregularities and fraud, consistent with the findings reported above. Indeed, the United States Mission to the OSCE (2009) reported the following:

Based on reports by election observers from our embassy in Yerevan and on our discussions with other local and international observers, we could only conclude that the voting process on Election Day was marred by widespread fraud and intimidation. We observed incidents of ballot-stuffing, multiple voting, falsified vote counts, intimidation of party proxies and observers, and the illegal presence of unauthorized and unidentified individuals in polling stations. These clear violations of OSCE commitments—and of the Armenian Election Code—were especially egregious in Yerevan's Malatia-Sebastia district, but were observed in other electoral districts as well. They unfortunately repeated a disturbing pattern of similar violations witnessed in previous elections in Armenia.

Much of the evidence collected by independent local observers and media (e.g., Hetq Online, Lragir and A1Plus) points in the same direction. While some legal cases have been brought against the perpetrators to address the blatant falsifications found in districts 7 and 8, some would argue that—given how the process is handled—it will do little, if anything, to return confidence to the citizens of Armenia in their country's electoral process.
The outcome of May 31 demonstrates that election results in Armenia do not follow any established patterns, at least not similar to those in democratic countries. A recent study published in the Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics (Leigh, 2009), using data from 268 democratic elections held between 1978 and 1999, stresses the importance of both "luck" (economic conditions world-wide), and "competence" (ability of the incumbents to deliver better growth than that in the rest of the world) in election outcomes. The paper also shows that voters are more likely to reward competence in countries that have higher average income and education levels.

According to the official results of the May 31 election, however, this does not appear to be the case in Armenia. The ruling party candidate was declared a winner in 2009 despite: (1) a global crisis of epic proportions, (2) a domestic economic recession that far outpaces the declining global output trends, and (3) an ongoing internal political crisis with still unresolved events of March 1-2, 2008.

Could it be that—consistent with Leigh (2009), if only in reverse—falling income and educational standards in Armenia make the rest of the world's regress irrelevant and reward incompetence of local politicians? Unlikely, we would say, and would instead point to the direction of the integrity of the election process/data and the inability of the opposition to put its act together and show a plausible way out.

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The outcome of the May 31, 2009 municipal election in Yerevan did not produce any surprises. This was a result of a process that has been long in the making, perhaps since 1996. A small minority—the country's top political leadership and oligarchs—has grown disproportionately wealthy and increasingly less aware of the aspirations of the majority of country's citizens. As a result, elections have become largely irrelevant and should perhaps be reevaluated by the disenfranchised majority as a means of participating in the governance of the country. Sadly, Armenia's patchy economic performance of recent years—so highly praised by international financial institutions—may have contributed to this outcome by making this small minority powerful enough to prevent any meaningful reform. It remains to be seen whether Armenia's opposition—itself not a stranger to questionable election conduct and otherwise unable to innovate—could break this vicious cycle and prevent the country's slide down this kakistocratic path. The alternative, we are afraid, will have irreversible consequences going forward.

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