

## ARMENIA: PRE-ELECTION POLITICAL OVERVIEW

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**Summary:** Since the onset of a serious post-election crisis that culminated in a violent confrontation between the Armenian authorities and the opposition on 1 March 2008, Armenia remains plagued by lingering political tension exacerbated by profound political polarization and mounting economic disparities. The Armenian authorities are also hindered by a lack of legitimacy and a “crisis of confidence” that undermines its political mandate and impedes its reform program.

While the Armenian government remains fairly unpopular and unable to fully overcome these challenges, neither the authorities nor the opposition have been able to resolve the political crisis or to reach any constructive compromise. Over the past several months, however, there has been a steady erosion of political activism and civic engagement that first emerged during the initial stage of the post-election crisis of early 2008. That initial period was marked by a sudden and fairly unexpected “re-awakening” of the population, seemingly no longer content with its previous apathy and disengagement from politics.

But as Armenia faces an important municipal election that will result in the election of the mayor of the capital Yerevan on 31 May, the upcoming contest represents a significant milestone, as the first open political contest between the authorities and the opposition since the onset of the 2008 crisis. But as the authorities hold advantages of both incumbency and resources, the real burden for political change rests on the country’s opposition, which has yet to demonstrate any clear tactical initiative or strategic vision for instituting genuine democratization and reform. Thus, this local election is not simply about control of the capital, however, but stands as a crucial metric for assessing the state of democracy in Armenia.

## Armenia's Approaching Municipal Elections

The unresolved confrontation between the authorities and the opposition Armenian National Congress, a coalition of some 18 political parties and groups led by former President Levon Ter-Petrosian, is now set for a new political clash over municipal elections set for 31 May 2009. The Yerevan election, which stands as the first test of Armenian democracy since the tainted February 2008 presidential election,<sup>1</sup> will allow voters to directly elect some 65 political party-affiliated aldermen, or "Council of Elders," to govern the capital. Although six political parties and one political bloc are contesting the election for the municipal assembly,<sup>2</sup> the contest poses an important test for the opposition, which sees this election as a new opportunity to directly challenge the authorities before the Armenian electorate.

In order for a candidate to be elected to the municipal assembly, the candidate's party must garner at least 7 percent of the vote, or 9 percent, if the candidate is running on the ticket of a political bloc. The proportional election, which replaces the previous system of presidentially-appointed mayors, is based on reforms stemming from the amendments to the Armenian constitution adopted in 2005, as part of Armenia's obligations as a member of the Council of Europe. Yet although the adoption of the new constitution was accompanied by specific reforms to the election code, expectations of practical improvements to the conduct of the election tend to be offset by the fact that since 1999, although the election code has been amended nine times, none of the subsequent elections have ever been hailed as "free and fair" contests.<sup>3</sup>

According to the terms of the new law, the 65 aldermen will have the power to elect the mayor, but only if any single political party or bloc fails to garner more than 50 percent of the vote. Making the process unnecessarily complicated, however, the adoption of a new amendment to the Law on Local Self-Government in January 2009 added a provision stating that if any one political party or bloc garners more than 40 percent (but less than a majority) of the 65 seats, it will be "automatically allocated the extra seats" needed to "appoint their nominee" for mayor.<sup>4</sup>

With over 1 million residents, the Armenian capital is home to nearly one-half of the roughly 2.3 million total population of the country, making the position of Yerevan mayor inherently powerful, especially as it is also endowed with a broad network of

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<sup>1</sup> The 19 February 2008 presidential election was widely criticized for being "neither free nor fair" and triggered a violent clash between the authorities and the opposition that culminated in an attack by the police and security forces which left ten people dead and many more wounded. For more on the post-election crisis, see the February 2009 Human Rights Watch Report, "Democracy on Rocky Ground. Armenia's Disputed 2008 Presidential Election, Post-Election Violence, and the One-Sided Pursuit of Accountability," available at: [www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/02/25/democracy-rocky-ground](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/02/25/democracy-rocky-ground)

<sup>2</sup> The country's sole opposition party within the parliament, the Heritage (Zharangutiun) Party, is not standing in the local election and has instead called on its followers to support the opposition.

<sup>3</sup> Abrahamyan, Gayane, "The Constitution and the Code: How will amended laws shape the next administration?" *ArmeniaNow*, 4 May 2007.

[www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=2165&CID=2234&IID=&lng=eng](http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=2165&CID=2234&IID=&lng=eng)

<sup>4</sup> Krikorian, Onnik. "Concerns emerging over May municipal election," *Frontline Club* blog, posted on 28 February 2009. <http://frontlineclub.com/blogs/onnikkrikorian/2009/02>

patronage positions. The position of Yerevan mayor is also one of the country's most visible political positions, potentially serving as an important springboard to higher office.

### **Election Observation & Monitoring**

Due to the local nature of the election, the Armenian authorities issued a limited number of invitations for international monitors. In an announcement on 20 May, the Council of Europe confirmed the dispatch of a 12-member delegation from the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, headed by Nigel Mermagen and tasked with observing the municipal elections for a period from 27 May through 1 June, 2009.<sup>5</sup> The decision to deploy the delegation follows an earlier pre-electoral mission conducted from 3-6 May and, as part of the standing cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU), the delegation will also include three members of the EU's Committee of the Regions (CoR).

Unlike national elections, there will be no monitoring role for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which is traditionally the lead election monitor but normally only for parliamentary or presidential elections. That decision, however, was criticized by some analysts, arguing that the OSCE monitored local elections in both Albania and Moldova in 2007. Nevertheless, according to Ambassador Sergey Kapinos, the head of the OSCE Office in Yerevan, the local staff of the OSCE intends to carry out "monitoring which we carried out during recent local elections in Armenia."<sup>6</sup> Ambassador Kapinos further added that the conduct of the municipal election is "very important" for the OSCE and the international community, adding that he hoped that "the elections will take place in accordance with the letter of the law, that there will be no violations."<sup>7</sup>

### **Informal and Innovative Election Monitoring: The Role of "Blogs"**

One of the more innovative mechanisms of election monitoring in Armenia centers on the so-called "fifth estate" of Internet blogs, which are set to offer their own informal observations and unfiltered commentary.<sup>8</sup> Although the use of Internet web sites in Armenian politics is a fairly recent development, as blogs and web pages administered by Armenian political parties became active only in 2007, these political sites offer an abundance of informal information, commentary and campaign-related positions.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the roughly 200-300 active Armenia-based blogs offer an important alternative

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.coe.int/congress](http://www.coe.int/congress) and "Congress observes municipal elections," *Panorama*, 21 May 2009. [www.panorama.am/en/politics/2009/05/21/congress/](http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2009/05/21/congress/)

<sup>6</sup> "OSCE Not To Monitor Yerevan Polls," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 8 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1604896.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1604896.html)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Khojoyan, Sara, "Fifth Estate: Armenian bloggers get ready for political campaign," *ArmeniaNow*, 15 May 2009. [www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3728&CID=3593&IID=1235&lng=eng](http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3728&CID=3593&IID=1235&lng=eng)

<sup>9</sup> The most notable of these political websites include the opposition Armenian National Congress, which maintains an active site ([www.blog.payqar.net](http://www.blog.payqar.net)) and ruling coalition member the Prosperous Armenia Party (<http://bham.wordpress.com/> and [www.youtube.com/user/bargavach](http://www.youtube.com/user/bargavach)); see Khojoyan (2009).

view of politics, most evident by their prominent online role during the 20-day media blackout as part of the state of emergency that was imposed at the onset of the March 2008 post-election crisis.

Such online activity is widely expected to increase with the 31 May election, according to IREX mass media expert Leah Kohlenberg, who initiated blog-based coverage of the Armenian election on 11 May (at [www.caucasusreports.wordpress.com](http://www.caucasusreports.wordpress.com)) and explained that primarily, she “will be looking for violations on election day,” as well as “in the weeks prior to the elections,” and adding that she “will be posting information on candidate platforms, voting rights, and other stories.....both before the elections and afterwards.”<sup>10</sup>

For Armenia, where the state exercises far too much influence over the media, such alternative and uncensored information provides a valuable service to the population, although its potential is inherently limited by the country’s small number of Internet users, revealing the problem of Armenia’s “digital divide” over access to online information and electronic new coverage.

### **The Pre-Election Mood**

Reflecting the unresolved political tension and sharp polarization in the country, the pre-election mood remains tense and prone to sporadic incidents of politically-related violence and intimidation.<sup>11</sup> The increased occurrence and severity of such acts of violence stem from an overall “climate of impunity” that is reinforced by the public perception of an “arrogance of power” among the authorities. And with an already apparent “crisis of confidence” in the state and its institutions, the general population has little trust in the authorities’ capacity or willingness to ensure a free and fair election.

Moreover, in the wake of the violence of the March 2008 confrontation, the lack of any real accountability for the abuses and excessive force by the police and security forces, as well as the dubious judicial process and questionable investigations subsequently conducted by the authorities, have only exacerbated a climate of fear among the public. This “climate of fear” has only been compounded by the fact that more than 40 opposition supporters and activists have been detained and later convicted on the questionable charge of organizing “mass disturbances” related to the March 2008 clashes. Further disturbingly, most verdicts were based on incriminating testimony given by police officers or witnesses who later recanted their testimony on the grounds that they were coerced or coached by police and prosecutors into making false allegations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Khojoyan (15 May 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Meloyan, Ruben, “Opposition Youths Hospitalized After New Attacks,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 30 April 2009.  
<http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1619087.html>

<sup>12</sup> Martirosian, Anush, “Trial Witness ‘Tortured’ To Incriminate Opposition Leader,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 6 May 2009.  
[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1622952.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1622952.html)

While such shortcomings in the rule of law stem from more fundamental problems plaguing the Armenian judicial process, ranging from the lack of an independent and competent judiciary to the legacy of the Soviet legal system and legal procedures, there were several glaring deficiencies throughout the trial record of cases pertaining to the post-election crisis of March 2008. Most notably, the trials were overly politicized, marked by an open effort by prosecutors to specifically target opposition members and their supporters, as well as widespread instances of witness intimidation, evidence tampering and violations of civil liberties. Such politicization is demonstrated by the fact that more than fifty opposition activists and supporters remain imprisoned in cases that both international organizations and prominent human rights groups have denounced as based on political and not criminal charges, while the authorities have consistently rejected any reference to the detainees as “political prisoners.”

But even more distressing was the possible use of torture by police in extracting false testimony from witnesses. More specifically, in one such case, Yasha Melkonian, a witness against opposition figure Sasun Mikaelian, a member of parliament until his mandate and parliamentary immunity was revoked last year, charged police with coercing him to sign a false pre-trial affidavit and forcing him to offer incriminating testimony against the defendant. During a court session on 6 May in the town of Abovian, the witness abruptly and unexpectedly recanted, explaining that his statements and trial testimony were made under duress. Melkonian, who himself received a suspended two-year sentence for “resisting arrest” during the post-election protests, accused local police in his hometown of Hrazdan of severely beating him until he agreed to cooperate.<sup>13</sup>

The flagrantly inappropriate conduct of the police and the prosecutors well beyond legal standards and judicial parameters was further affirmed in a second such case, involving another allegation of “torture and coercion” by a witness. In this second case, Henrik Artenian, a resident of the town of Ashtarak, retracted his pre-trial testimony before a 19 May session of a Yerevan court, arguing that his statements were extracted by police who beat him while in custody and adding that “an investigator” warned him, “if you want to stay alive you must write what we will tell you.”<sup>14</sup> One of several witnesses for the prosecution, Artenian initially provided pre-trial evidence supporting the prosecution’s charge that Miasnik Malkhasian helped to organize and incite opposition protesters to “attack” police and security forces during the confrontation on 1 March 2008, in what the prosecutors defined as “mass disturbances aimed at usurping power.”

In response to the witness accusations and embarrassing retractions, the Office of the Prosecutor-General issued written instructions on 22 May to “protect” trial witnesses after nearly a dozen witnesses requested the protection of law-enforcement and courts from what the prosecutor’s office defined as a threat from “some individuals, who have familiarized themselves with pre-trial testimonies given by witnesses, (and) are trying to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lazarian, Tatevik, “Another Opposition Trial Witness Claims Police Torture,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 19 May 2009.  
[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1735164.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1735164.html)

obstruct (the) execution of justice and compelling witnesses to give false testimonies.”<sup>15</sup> Those instructions were accompanied by a set of new criminal charges brought against unidentified individuals accused of witness tampering and intimidation. But the situation has tended to only strengthen opposition claims of abuse and misconduct by police and officers of the court that has become virtual “state terrorism,” in the words of opposition leader David Shahnazaryan, himself a former minister for national security.<sup>16</sup>

### **An “Atmosphere of Fear”**

In light of this virtual “atmosphere of fear,” which has also tended to inhibit any vocal or visible support for the opposition, there are generally low expectations that the 31 May election will represent or reflect any significant progress over past elections.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the pre-election atmosphere of fear and intimidation has only worsened in recent months, as confirmed by the Armenian state human rights ombudsman, Armen Harutiunian, who was compelled in late April to publicly criticize the police for forcibly dispersing public gatherings of small groups of opposition supporters in the public area of Northern Avenue in central Yerevan, a traditional gathering place for the opposition. Ironically, the opposition’s selection of the Northern Avenue venue came in response to an earlier move by the authorities to ban them from using the more traditional Opera Square as a main area for congregating. The ombudsman noted that the dispersal of pedestrians in the area and the interference with such peaceful public gatherings by police were in direct violation of Armenian law and, in a written statement, he argued that “once again we are seeing that law-enforcement bodies interpret a legal provision too broadly and to the detriment of civil rights.”<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the past few months, the police response to episodes involving opposition supporters and activists attempting to exercise their right to assembly has been marked by a pattern of excessive displays of force and occasional abuse by police officers. Their over-reaction to even the smallest peaceful gatherings by opposition activists and supporters have increased dramatically over the last two months, most notably as police have systematically sought to disperse and deter gatherings in the Northern Avenue area. During the first week of April, for example, police cleared the Northern Avenue area and, citing “complaints” from local businesses, imposed a heavy and constant police presence, at times even impeding pedestrians from walking freely in the area. On several occasions during the police operation, several elderly opposition supporters were forcibly dispersed by police without regard for their age or physical frailty, to the disdain of distressed

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<sup>15</sup> Hovannisian, Irina, “Prosecutors Move To ‘Protect’ Opposition Trial Witnesses,” 22 May 2009. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 19 May 2009.

<sup>16</sup> “David Shahnazaryan: Kidnapping witnesses and pressing them is state terrorism,” *Noyan Tapan* News Service, 21 May 2009. <http://noyan-tapan.am/>

<sup>17</sup> Further, Armenia’s electoral record remains seriously flawed, despite the implementation of some important reforms, and is confirmed by the fact that the country’s first “free and fair” election was its last such commendable contest.

<sup>18</sup> Harutiunian, Lilit, “Ombudsman Slams Police Crackdown on Opposition Strolls,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 21 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1613165.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1613165.html)



onlookers. On 8 April, police units openly scuffled with a group of opposition activists, resulting in the arrest of ten of them, including Levon Zurabian, a senior member of the opposition Armenian National Congress. During that incident, photojournalist David Jalalian was assaulted by the police after he refused to stop filming the incident and was later hospitalized for his injuries, incurred for merely doing his job.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the over-reaction of the police, opposition activists faced new threats, from unknown assailants. In the second, but most serious of several seemingly isolated attacks targeting opposition activists, three women were injured, and subsequently hospitalized, on 11 May after being assaulted while campaigning for the opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK) in the northern Yerevan district of Avan. The attack, carried out by a small group of about a dozen young men, followed a similar incident the day before, when several young female opposition supporters were chased through the streets of the same district in broad daylight. Witnesses to each attack complained that local police were slow to respond and even less responsive in interviewing them as part of the investigation.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the attacks targeting opposition supporters and activists, there has also been a steep rise in the level of criminal assaults and incidents of a political nature, with most incidents occurring between rival pro-government groups and with some even involving the use of firearms. Faced with such tension, even the authorities were compelled to issue a statement distancing themselves from a rise in politically-related violence. In early April, for example, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) denied “any political motives” for a deadly shootout between two individuals included on the party’s list of candidates for the Yerevan election. That shooting incident resulted in the death of Karen Hakobian, and the surrender to police of a second man, Artur Sedrakian. Republican Party spokesman Eduard Sharmazanov claimed that “the incident had no political subtext” and had “nothing to do with activities and the electoral slate of the Republican Party.”<sup>21</sup>

For the Armenian authorities, the taint of such violence eventually prompted President Serzh Sarkisian to weigh in on the issue. In a meeting with senior law enforcement personnel marking the national “Police Day” holiday on 16 April, the president admitted that the “public is legitimately concerned” over the violence and reiterated his earlier vow to “drastically toughen our reaction to such incidents,” made during a press conference two days before when he also threatened that “if a son or a relative of an official is involved in a crime, we will take strict measures.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Police Patrol ‘Opposition’ Street in Yerevan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 9 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1605724.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1605724.html)

<sup>20</sup> Hovannisian, Irina, “Opposition Campaigners Again Attacked In Yerevan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 11 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1683540.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1683540.html)

<sup>21</sup> “Ruling Party Denies Political Reasons For Deadly Shooting,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 6 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1603311.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1603311.html)

<sup>22</sup> Danielyan, Emil and Anush Martirosian, “Sarkisian Tells Police to End High-Profile Shootings,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 16 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1610115.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1610115.html)

President Sarkisian's warning was also a veiled message to other powerful political officials, including Parliamentary Chairman Hovik Abrahamian, whose son and a nephew were implicated by press reports in an early April incident involving their alleged use of automatic weapons in the shooting of the home of a local businessman in the town of Artashat, on the outskirts of Yerevan. The same nephew was also accused of disrupting opposition rallies in the same area during the presidential campaign, at one point being photographed by journalists as he led a rock-throwing attack against opposition leaders.<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately for the president, only a few weeks later, his warning was followed by some visible progress by police in reigning in such behavior when police in Yerevan detained several bodyguards for two controversial pro-government parliamentarians and impounded some of their cars following an incident personally witnessed by the national police chief, Major General Alik Sargsian. According to the police chief, the bodyguards were employed by Republican Party deputies Ashot Aghababian and Levon Sargsian (no relation to the police chief), although neither deputy was actually physically present. The police official added that the bodyguards were arrested after speeding through a busy intersection in central Yerevan in three expensive SUVs, ignoring all traffic lights and endangering pedestrians and other drivers.<sup>24</sup>

In an apparent confirmation of the spate of such violence, the same police official only days later reported a sharp rise in crime, citing a new statistical report that revealed a 57 percent spike in "criminal offenses" committed in 2008. He also cited a corresponding surge in violent assaults, armed robberies, thefts and "hooligan acts" for the same period.<sup>25</sup>

### **Journalism: Armenia's Most Dangerous Profession**

Although apparently not directly related to the rise in politically-inspired violence, there has also been a renewed trend of violence and assaults against journalists in Armenia over the past several months. For Armenian journalists, who have been subject to several periods of harassment and physical attacks over several years, this latest trend of assaults have tended to make journalism one of the most dangerous professions in Armenia. Such an atmosphere of intimidation and outright attacks on journalists have also fostered a degree of "self-censorship," whereby the normal course of investigative journalism has become especially dangerous and inhibited by the potential danger of physical injury.

In late April, for example, several armed assailants attacked Argishti Kivirian, the editor of the independent "Armenia Today" news agency ([www.armtoday.net](http://www.armtoday.net)), resulting in his hospitalization after he sustained serious head injuries. The assault was strongly condemned by more than a dozen Armenian non-governmental organizations involved in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hovannisian, Irina, "Bodyguards of Armenian MPs Held Over Traffic Offense," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 22 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1613921.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1613921.html)

<sup>25</sup> Smbatian, Hasmik, "Armenian Police Report Sharp Rise in Crime," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 28 April 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1617778.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1617778.html)



media freedom and human rights advocacy, arguing that such an attack was only encouraged by the authorities' failure to punish the perpetrators of past attacks on journalists.<sup>26</sup>

Although the specific motives for the attack were unclear, the victim's wife, Lusine Sahakian, was a prominent defense attorney for former Deputy Prosecutor-General Gagik Jahangirian, a supporter of opposition leader Ter-Petrosian.<sup>27</sup> But that theory was dismissed by Ruben Sahakian, a prominent lawyer heading Armenia's bar association, who argued that "government agents" would have no problem attacking her, "because I don't think that those people have enough integrity not to attack a woman."<sup>28</sup>

The trend of physical attacks targeting journalists has also prompted international reaction, as the London-based "ARTICLE 19" non-governmental organization issued a statement on 15 May 2009 warning that it was "becoming increasingly concerned" over "acts of violence against journalists" in Armenia.<sup>29</sup> Although the announcement also pointed to a similar trend in both Azerbaijan and Georgia, ARTICLE 19 noted the most recent assault on a journalist, which took place on 6 May, when Nver Mnatsakanian, a prominent television anchor for Armenia's Shant TV, was attacked and beaten by unknown assailants outside his home in Yerevan.<sup>30</sup> The group also called on "the Armenian authorities to condemn any attacks on journalists" and urged the government to "fully investigate all violent incidents, thereby sending a clear message that such abuses will not be tolerated.....in order to prevent other attacks."<sup>31</sup>

The reaction of Armenian officials to the recent rise in attacks against journalists was not as sophisticated, however, as even a senior Armenian police official seemed to dismiss the severity of such crimes. For example, in comments during a press conference in Yerevan on 8 May, Colonel Hovannes Tamamian, the head of the police force's Directorate General of Criminal Investigations, contended that although law-enforcement authorities are "doing their best" to counter attacks on local journalists, but in response to a female journalist's question on how to solve the problem, he recommended that journalists should be armed, explaining that it is best to "let a criminal know that a girl like you has a gun that she can take out and fire from."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hovannisian, Irina, "Another Armenian Journalist Beaten Up," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 30 April 2009. <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1619084.html>

<sup>27</sup> Jahangirian was arrested shortly after openly joining the opposition in February 2008 and was subsequently sentenced to a three-year prison term in March 2009 after his conviction for "disobeying police orders" and assaulting a police officer. The sentence was later upheld by the Court of Appeals in a decision issued on 20 May 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Aslanian, Karlen, "Top Lawyer Slams Police Probe of Journalist's Beating," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 5 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1622139.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1622139.html)

<sup>29</sup> See [www.article19.org](http://www.article19.org).

<sup>30</sup> Grigoryan, Armine, "Another attack: Popular TV show anchor in Armenia ambushed and beaten," ArmeniaNow, 7 May 2009. [www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3706](http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3706)

<sup>31</sup> See [www.article19.org](http://www.article19.org).

<sup>32</sup> Shoghikian, Hovannes, "Armenian Police Vow to End Attacks on Journalists," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 8 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1624458.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1624458.html)

This pattern of violence against journalists is not a recent development, however, as the Armenian media has long been vulnerable to such attacks and intimidation. In November 2008, for example, one of the country's leading investigative journalists, Edik Baghdasaryan, the chairman of the "Investigative Journalists" non-governmental organization (NGO) and the editor-in-chief of the "Hetq Online" electronic media outlet, was brutally assaulted by unknown assailants as he left his office one evening.<sup>33</sup> Although the victim was visited in the hospital by Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian and presidential spokesman Samvel Farmanian condemned the violence and reported that the president ordered "law-enforcement bodies to find and bring to account those responsible for the attack," no arrests have even been made and the case remains one of many such unsolved attacks on journalists in Armenia.

Armenian Human Rights Ombudsman Armen Harutiunian responded to the attacks by warning of the broader context of a media under threat, adding that "taking into account the fact that almost all cases of violence against journalists committed in the past have not been disclosed and the atmosphere of impunity leads to new violence" and calling on the police "to take all necessary measures in order to identify those responsible for this violence."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, local media organizations have also noted the rise in the number of violent attacks against journalists and stressed that the very nature of journalism in Armenia has become a "dangerous profession."<sup>35</sup> And such fear is confirmed by statistics, as several reports have documented the dangers of journalism in Armenia.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Contest for Yerevan Mayor**

The formal campaign for Yerevan's municipal election opened on 2 May 2009, with six political parties and one political bloc offering a slate of party-list candidates to stand in the proportional contest. The political parties putting forth candidates include the three main parties of the ruling government coalition: the Republican Party of Armenia, the Prosperous Armenia ("Bargavach Hayastan") party and the "Orinats Yerkir" (Country of Law) party, as well as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or "Dashnakstutian") which recently withdrew from the coalition. Two lesser parties, the People's Party and the Labor Socialist Party of Armenia are also standing in the election, while the opposition Armenian National Congress is running as a political bloc.

The Heritage (Zharangutian) Party, the sole opposition party represented in the Armenian parliament, opted to refrain from participating in the election, although it called on its supporters to back the opposition. Commenting on the decision of his Heritage Party to not take part in the election, prominent opposition leader Raffi Hovannisian noted that although he personally wanted the party to participate in the contest, he respected the

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<sup>33</sup> Khojoyan, Sara, "Ambushed: Investigative journalist becomes victim of violent attack," *ArmeniaNow*, 14 November 2008. [www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3387](http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3387)

<sup>34</sup> Grigoryan, Armine, "Ambushed: Attack on journalist raises concerns over safety of profession in Armenia," *ArmeniaNow*, 1 May 2009. [www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3698](http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=3698)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the overall state of the Armenian media, see the chapter on Armenia in the IREX report, "Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Europe and Eurasia 2009. The Development of Sustainable Media in Europe and Eurasia." [www.irex.org/programs/MSI\\_EUR/](http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/)

decision and stressed that it was an affirmation of the democratic credentials of the party.<sup>37</sup> Hovannisian, who founded the party in 2002 and is its most prominent leader, added that although the party did not adopt his recommendation and he “did not impose his will” on the board, the move only proved his and his party’s “commitment to democratic principles.”<sup>38</sup>

The decision by the party’s governing board was taken in late March after talks with the opposition Armenian National Congress concerning the possible formation of a joint electoral alliance broke down in disagreement over the composition of the party list. After the vote, the party explained that it would rather abstain from the contest than to split the opposition and called on its supporters to back the Armenian National Congress. As the sole opposition party in the parliament, Heritage has long played an important role as a critical, yet constructive opposition force and legally holds one of the nine seats in Armenia’s election commission.

The opposition Armenian National Congress bloc, led by former President Levon Ter-Petrosian who is also running as their leading candidate, launched their campaign immediately after a long-planned rally on 1 May. The bloc held a follow-up political rally on 15 May, followed by several smaller campaign events in different districts of the capital. The bloc also plans to hold a closing rally on 29 May.

But most local analysts see the real contest to be between four main forces: the ruling Republican Party of Armenia, the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC), the Prosperous Armenia party, and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). The analysis is generally confirmed by the level of election financing of each party, which according to data obtained from the Armenian Central Election Commission and Central Bank,<sup>39</sup> revealed that at the 15 May mid-point of the campaign, the Prosperous Armenia party was endowed with the largest campaign war chest (34.86 million *drams* or about \$93,458), followed by the Republican Party (30.75 million *drams* or about \$82,439), the “Orinats Yerkir” (Country of Law) party (16.5 million *drams* or roughly \$44,235), the opposition Armenian National Congress (6.93 million *drams* or about \$18,579), and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (6 million *drams* or roughly \$16,085).<sup>40</sup>

Notably, the People’s Party was the only party failing to disclose its campaign funds and the marginal Labor Socialist Party had no election financing whatsoever. Both parties have issued odd, but quite revealing explanations defending their unique campaign strategies, with People’s Party leader Tigran Karapetian explaining that “there is no need to work hard during this campaign to get votes,” while Movses Shahverdyan, the head of

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<sup>37</sup> Avetisian, Tigran, “Opposition Leader Reveals Objections to Election Pullout,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 17 April 2009.

[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1610910.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1610910.html)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Campaign finance data obtained Armenia’s Central Electoral Commission and Central Bank, as well as “As of May 15, 5 out of 7 political forces running for Yerevan council of elders elections make expenditures,” *Noyan Tapan* News Agency, 21 May 2009. <http://noyan-tapan.am/>

<sup>40</sup> According to Armenia law, each political party or bloc is limited to a 60 million dram (about \$160,000) limit for campaign funds.

the Labor Socialist Party, asserted that “we need no money for the election campaign” because “we do not give pre-election promises, we simply want to give an opportunity to electors to make an ideological choice.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Divisions within the Ranks**

But most significantly, each party within the ruling coalition has put forth their own party list of candidates for the Yerevan election. Specifically, although current Yerevan Mayor Gagik Beglarian is the leading candidate for the Republican Party, the second most powerful party of the coalition, Prosperous Armenia, has put forth current Minister of Health Harutiun Kushkryan as the head of their own party list. And as the junior partner in the coalition, the “Orinats Yerkir” (Country of Law) party is also running their own field of candidates, led by female parliamentarian Yeghine Bisharyan. In addition to this open split within the ruling coalition, there is also a deeper, potentially more serious division within the main Republican Party itself, stemming from two serious factors.

The first factor contributing to an internal division within the Republican Party is rooted in the degree of lingering discontent among the party rank and file over the selection of Beglarian as the party’s main candidate, reflecting the fact that the choice of Gagik Beglarian as the standard bearer for the party was neither a certainty nor a unanimous choice. But President Serzh Sarkisian chose to avoid a costly and disruptive fight within his own party by “forcing” former Yerevan Mayor Yervand Zakarian to retire in March 2009 and appointing Beglarian in his place, thereby bolstering Beglarian’s chances as the party’s leading candidate and putting the “administrative resources” of the office at Beglarian’s disposal as the new incumbent.<sup>42</sup> Although prior to his appointment as mayor, Beglarian served for six years as the elected chief executive of Yerevan’s central Kentron district, an important post in its own right, he never had the degree of stature or political standing within his party to secure the candidacy on his own. And for the president to boldly appoint him as mayor less than three months prior to the election, it only confirmed suspicions that the Republican Party is determined to ensure its complete control over the contest, sparking suspicion and fueling mistrust among the other parties.

Secondly, the split over Beglarian is also reflected by the deeper divide within the party itself. That deeper divide, involving the very nature of the party and its ideology, first arose in the period following the sudden death of former Prime Minister Andranik Markarian, the then party head, in March 2007.<sup>43</sup> As Armenia’s longest-serving premier, having held the post for nearly seven years, Markarian was instrumental in building the Republican Party into the dominant force in Armenian politics it is today and played a key role, together with party official Mushegh Lalayan, in crafting the party’s ideology and political platform since helping to found the party in 1989.

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<sup>41</sup> “Tigran Karapetian: No Need to Work hard to Gain Votes,” Armenian Pubic Radio, 19 May 2009, [www.armradio.am](http://www.armradio.am) and Gyurjyan, Marianna, “Armenian Labor Socialist Party Needs No Money for the Campaign,” RadioLur, 19 May 2009.

<sup>42</sup> “Sarkisian Changes Yerevan Mayor,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 4 March 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1600187.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1600187.html)

<sup>43</sup> Meloyan, Ruben and Emil Danielyan, “Armenian Prime Minister Dies,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 25 March 2007. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1587391.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1587391.html)

At the time of Markarian's death, current President Serzh Sarkisian was then serving as defense minister and was only nominally the number two official of the Republican Party. But with Markarian's death, Sarkisian moved quickly to consolidate his control over the party and assumed its leadership in April 2007. He was then able to emerge as the party's nominee for prime minister and was duly appointed by then-President Robert Kocharian later that same month. Although forced to relinquish control over the ministry of defense, which he headed for almost seven years, by assuming the premiership, Sarkisian became better positioned to maximize his chances of being elected as the chosen successor to outgoing President Kocharian in the February 2008 elections.

But for many Markarian loyalists within the Republican Party, Sarkisian was not easily accepted as an heir to their late leader and many resented his bid to assume the Markarian legacy. If many of the ordinary rank and file within the party were unhappy with Sarkisian's virtual "hijacking" of the party for his own personal presidential ambitions, they were later joined by more senior officials within the party leadership after Sarkisian moved against the most powerful Markarian loyalist, former parliamentary speaker Tigran Torosian. After replacing "Orinats Yerkir" party leader Artur Baghdasarian as parliamentary speaker, whose failed bid for the presidency led to an open rupture with President Kocharian, Torosian, named as the new parliamentary chairman in June 2006, was viewed as the "old guard" of the party, informally leading a group of party members and functionaries personally devoted to Markarian. Thus, once Sarkisian forced Torosian, who was the party's deputy chairman from 1998-2005, to resign in September 2008, he succeeded in removing the most powerful holdover from the Markarian era.<sup>44</sup>

While the forced removal of Torosian deepened the inherent resentment among Markarian loyalists within the party toward Sarkisian, it also stripped them of their only remaining patron of any power or authority. For Sarkisian, the sidelining of Torosian cleared the field for his consolidation of power within the party. But with the appointment of the widely unpopular Hovik Abarahmian as his replacement as speaker, it drove Torosian to not only leave the party and become an "independent" deputy, but to also refuse offers of other "senior government positions," including a promised ambassadorial post in Paris or the newly created "diaspora minister," and to side most often with the opposition Heritage (Zharangutiun) Party during the majority of votes in parliament, virtually becoming an opposition deputy in everything but name.

The emergence of Abrahamian as the new parliamentary chairman, although somewhat unexpected, did raise concerns over his questionable background. Abrahamian, who served as a deputy prime minister and chief of staff for President Sarkisian and had been the Republican Party's official "campaign manager" during the May 2007 parliamentary election, has long been tainted by allegations of corruption and criminal activity related to his extensive business interests. Most disturbingly, his election as parliamentary chairman in September 2008 came only one month after his first-ever election as a

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<sup>44</sup> Bedevian, Astghik and Hovannes Shoghikian, "Armenian Speaker Formally Submits Resignation," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 19 September 2008. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1597416.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1597416.html)



deputy, when he assumed the mandate for his home constituency that was previously held by his brother.<sup>45</sup>

There are also signs that the more recent divide within the Republican Party may pave the way for a resurrection of the deeper divisions, sparked by the mistreatment of Torosian, the elevation of Abrahamian as speaker, and the marginalization of Markarian loyalists. The one figure best positioned to exploit this opportunity may be the son of the late prime minister himself, the 31-year old Taron Markarian, a popular young prefect of the Avan district of Yerevan and the number two candidate on the party list for the local election.

As a natural heir to his father's legacy, the younger Markarian may be able to forge his own political center around his Avan district, where he won a second three-year term in office in May 2008, winning with more than 95 percent of the vote.<sup>46</sup> And the young Markarian may also utilize the experience and standing of Torosian and other disaffected Republicans to mount a fresh challenge from within the party, which is one of the most vulnerable aspects of President Sarkisian's political power base and against which the traditional instruments of power of the state, such as the police, army and security services, are both ineffective and inappropriate.

In addition to the internal division within the government bloc, the authorities also face a lesser challenge from the margins, which although minor, is more serious for the Republican Party than the other parties, as it only diverts and dilutes the resources of the incumbent candidate and further fragments the field. Moreover, the threat from the margins, from the small People's Party, led by Tigran Karapetian, the wealthy owner of one of the country's seven major Television channels, only exacerbates the more serious challenge from the opposition, especially given the high-profile candidacy of former President Levon Ter-Petrosian as a mayoral candidate. With such a "split ticket" among the ruling authorities, the Yerevan electorate is presented with a somewhat confusing array of candidates, not to mention a muddied campaign message from the government.

The opposition may also further capitalize on this division due to its tactical selection of a second prominent face for the opposition ticket, that of Stepan Demirchian, the son of the late parliamentary chairman Karen Demirchian, who also served as the Armenian Communist Party first secretary from 1974 to 1988.<sup>47</sup> The inclusion of Stepan Demirchian as the second candidate on the 167-person opposition party list is significant for two reasons. First, seen by many Armenians as the rightful winner of the disputed 2003 presidential election, in which Robert Kocharian officially won in a ballot roundly criticized for voting irregularities and other violations, Demirchian brings his own personal prestige to the ticket, as well as his own group of supporters to Ter-Petrosian's

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<sup>45</sup> Bedevian, Astghik, "Armenian Parliament Elects New Speaker," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 29 September 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1597547.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1597547.html)

<sup>46</sup> Meloyan, Ruben, "Republicans Sweep Yerevan Polls Boycotted By Opposition," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 19 May 2008. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1595187.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1595187.html)

<sup>47</sup> Former parliamentary chairman Karen Demirchian was one of the victims of the October 1999 attack on the Armenian parliament, which also resulted in the killings of his deputy Yuri Bakshian, Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian and several other officials.



Armenian National Congress movement. Second, Demirchian's acceptance of a secondary role to Ter-Petrosian highlights the unity of the opposition, an accomplishment that has eluded Armenia's normally fractured opposition over the past several years.

### **An Un-Level Playing Field**

As with most elections in Armenia, the powerful advantage inherent in the "administrative resources" of incumbency poses a formidable challenge to any opposing candidate or party. The use of such administrative resources, such as pressuring civil servants, teachers and government officials to support the authorities' preferred candidate, has evolved into a more sophisticated and even innovative strategy, including the use of road police to block or impede travel into Yerevan during elections or opposition rallies, with highways and major arteries closed and mass transportation often inexplicably unavailable on such crucial days.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the authorities, and the Republican Party in particular, have also become quite adept at organizing their own free public transportation for their voters, reflecting the excessive and inappropriate use of state resources for their own "get out the vote" effort during elections. Against this backdrop, elections and political contests in Armenia have become stunted and democracy deformed, and can now be defined more as an "un-level playing field" that offers voters neither a fair chance nor a free choice during elections. In this way, change in Armenian politics is more a process of selection rather than election, with the vast majority of the electorate reduced to a secondary role as spectators, rather than as primary actors in the country's political life.

The nature of this "un-level playing field" of Armenian politics and the impact of the use of administrative resources by incumbents was also raised during this campaign by a then-member of the ruling coalition itself. Artsvik Minasian, the main candidate from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or "Dashnakstutium"), at that point still a junior member of the ruling coalition, issued a statement on 1 April urging President Serzh Sarkisian to "publicly promise" that his Republican Party "will not use its extensive government levers" in the election.<sup>49</sup> The unusually bold statement by a party within the coalition came in the wake of several reports in the Armenian media detailing such abuses by the Republican Party candidate, incumbent Mayor Gagik Beglarian, accusing him of pressuring public sector employees and the heads of several public schools in Yerevan to "submit lists of their employees, their family members and other individuals pledging to vote for the Republicans."<sup>50</sup>

Such concern over the unfair advantage of the resources of incumbent officials was directed against the Republican Party for more than the simple fact that their leading candidate was only recently appointed to the mayoral post. Rather, of all parties

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<sup>48</sup> Ghalechian, Narine, Karine Simonian, and Satenik Vantsian, "Yerevan Roads Blocked Ahead Of Opposition Rally," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 1 May 2009.

[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1619995.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1619995.html)

<sup>49</sup> Martirosian, Anush, "Dashnaks Urge Sarkisian To Ensure Clean Polls In Yerevan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 1 April 2009.

[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1600681.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1600681.html)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

contesting the election, the Republican Party is the most flagrant abuser of this advantage, with its 180 party list candidates for the 65 municipal council seats including the mayors of all of Yerevan's ten administrative districts, as well as at least 60 other local government officials and leading civil servants.<sup>51</sup>

At least partially offsetting the inherent imbalance in the political system favoring the authorities, the Armenian Constitutional Court issued a significant ruling in early May, overturning a decision by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) that was seen as illegally bolstering pro-government voter rolls. The court's decision held that the CEC acted inappropriately and illegally when it implemented a provision allowing electoral officials to register new voters for the local election without abiding by a separate provision stipulating a minimum one-year residency requirement for the registration of new Yerevan voters.<sup>52</sup> Declaring the first provision illegal, the court determined that the CEC was in violation of the law when it allowed district administrators and police officials in Yerevan to include all city residents on the voter registry, regardless of the duration of their residence in the capital. The ruling was in favor of a legal challenge to the provision lodged by the opposition Armenian National Congress, which uncovered evidence, based on official police data, that as many as 11,000 new voters had been registered on Yerevan city rolls since the February 2008 presidential election without proper determination of the length of their residency. While the court ruling effectively ended the practice, the lack of any legal order to reexamine or invalidate the earlier registrations seriously questioned the overall efficacy of the decision, however.

### **Local Elections, but National Issues**

The election campaign formally opened on 2 May, after the Central Election Commission (CEC) officially registered the six political parties and one bloc participating in the contest. The Prosperous Armenia and "Orinats Yerkir" parties each held a public rally on the first day of the campaign, followed by similar events organized by the Republican Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation two days later. For Yerevan voters, such local campaigning was a first, given the fact that the mayor of the capital has long been a position personally appointed by the country's president. The novelty of the campaign was matched by an odd and often inappropriate approach by the candidates, however, as most were more accustomed to stressing national issues than to appealing to local Yerevan concerns. Yerevan residents were also unaccustomed to raising local concerns, especially as the mayoral candidates were all presenting party-based platforms that were rooted more in national issues than reflecting any local message.

Most prominent in focusing on the presentation of a national agenda for the local election, the opposition Armenian National Congress crafted a strong message that sought to draw Yerevan voters into a broader struggle, vowing to use the municipal election as a "second round" of the disputed February 2008 presidential election. Although such a strategy of transforming the contest into a vote of confidence in the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lazarian, Tatevik, "Court Rules against New Voter Registration in Yerevan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 8 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1624452.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1624452.html)

authorities reflects the fact that the election presents the first political battle between the government and opposition, it is a rather risky gamble that depends on the Yerevan electorate's willingness to forgo more local concerns and presupposes the population's desire to revisit the post-election confrontation of last year.

The one exception to this failure to adopt a local agenda was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which held its first campaign rally at Yerevan's largest cinema just a week after it withdrew from the ruling coalition in late April, in protest over the government's policy toward Turkey, citing "insurmountable fundamental disagreements" with President Sarkisian over the issue.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the ARF candidate, Artsvik Minasian, pledged to overturn serious restrictions on public gatherings and opposition rallies in Yerevan that went into effect in the wake of last year's post-election crisis.

The dominance of national issues for local elections is also reflected in the significance of foreign policy in the campaign. During a mid-May election rally, for example, opposition mayoral candidate and former President Levon Ter-Petrosian lashed out at the government for failing to secure the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border "even in exchange for a repudiation of the Armenian genocide."<sup>54</sup> In a speech before several thousands of his supporters, Ter-Petrosian argued that the Armenian government was "far too conciliatory and weak" in dealing with Turkey, adding that "no other head of state has found himself in such a miserable position."<sup>55</sup>

The former president also reiterated his stress on the local election as an opportunity to vote against the authorities, promising voters that their victory in the Yerevan election would "allow us to create a powerful counterweight to the existing kleptocratic system, thanks to which it would be possible to somehow restrain the latter and forestall its further crimes." He then warned indecisive voters that "those who will prefer to step aside and keep silent, those who will sell their votes, those who will vote for government candidates, and finally those who will display indifference and won't take part in the elections, will not only deprive their children of an opportunity to live in a normal, civilized and secure country but will become accomplices of the malevolent authorities that have stepped onto the path of national treason."<sup>56</sup>

The elevation of foreign policy issues as a prominent feature of a campaign that would normally be centered on a more limited agenda of concerns to Yerevan voters was even more obvious in the campaign of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). Although the ARF decided in late April to pull out of the ruling coalition over its dispute with the government's handling of its diplomatic negotiations with Turkey, in a move seemingly unrelated to the election, the party's stance on foreign policy still defines its

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<sup>53</sup> Danielyan, Emil and Anush Martirosian, "Dashnaks Quit Armenia's Ruling Coalition," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 27 April 2009.  
[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1616799.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1616799.html)

<sup>54</sup> Danielyan, Emil, "Ter-Petrosian Again Slams Armenia's 'Failed' Foreign Policy," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 15 May 2009.  
[www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1732726.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1732726.html)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

political platform as a strongly nationalist party within Armenian politics. The timing of the ARF decision, which many saw as a belated move that the party should have made years before, provided the party with an important, although last-minute way to differentiate itself from its much larger and more powerful former coalition partners.

But the move to withdraw from the coalition also sparked an intense behind the scenes jockeying for power among the remaining coalition partners. The departure of the ARF effectively revoked the March 2008 power-sharing deal between the party and the government, thereby offering the pro-government parties an opportunity to fill three ministerial positions and several deputy minister posts,<sup>57</sup> to name a deputy chair of parliament, and to appoint several key committee chairs in parliament, including the parliamentary committees on foreign relations and defense. More importantly, the efficacy of a role for the ARF as a party outside the government remains to be seen, and the ARF will need to find its new political footing soon, especially as the ruling Republican Party still controls a comfortable majority of seats in parliament.

### **Campaign Violence**

In part reflecting the deeper trend of political violence and attacks on journalists that marred the pre-election period, the formal campaign season was similarly disrupted by a string of violent clashes between supporters and activists of rival parties. Unlike the earlier clashes between the police and the opposition, however, the campaign-related violence was limited to within the pro-government camp. In the first of a series of related attacks, young activists from the two largest pro-government parties clashed on 12 May in the Kanaker-Zeytun district of Yerevan, prompting scores of city police to respond in force to break up the violent clash. Police officials confirmed that the violence took place at a local Republican Party election campaign office and erupted after an attack on the office by a large group of young activists from the rival Prosperous Armenia party.<sup>58</sup>

Less than a week later, another clash between the two rival parties erupted in the Silikian suburb of Yerevan's western Achapnyak district. According to witnesses, several dozen activists fought after Achapnyak district prefect Ruben Hovsepian arrived in the neighborhood with his deputy Armen Baghdasarian, both prominent local Republican Party figures. The incident was diffused after the intervention of Armenian Prosecutor-General Aghvan Hovsepian, the brother of the Achapnyak prefect, and Garik Tsarukian, the leader of the Prosperous Armenia party.<sup>59</sup> Although the official response was to downplay the violence, with Republican Party spokesman Eduard Sharmazanov asserted that "we have to understand that the atmosphere escalates in the run-up to elections" and people "may have personal or social issues that become more acute during elections."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The three ministerial positions relinquished by the ARF include the agriculture, labor and social affairs, and science, education and youth affairs portfolios.

<sup>58</sup> Simonian, Karine, "Government Loyalists Clash In Yerevan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 13 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1731149.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1731149.html)

<sup>59</sup> Hovannisian, Irina and Ruben Meloyan, "Ruling Parties In Fresh Pre-Election Clash," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenia Report, 19 May 2009. [www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1734945.html](http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/1734945.html)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the approaching municipal election for the Armenian capital Yerevan on 31 May represents a watershed event in Armenian politics, for three main reasons. First, the election offers *the first opportunity for the opposition to openly and politically challenge the authorities* since the deadly post-election crisis of March 2008. Such a political confrontation between the authorities and the opposition is particularly momentous now, as Armenia remains plagued by the unresolved political crisis of last year and the authorities continue to be hindered by an inherent lack of legitimacy and a crisis of confidence that have combined to undermine its political mandate and impede its reform program. But such a confrontation is made even more difficult in the face of the authorities' advantages of both incumbency and resources.

For the opposition, however, the election will offer more than a chance to face off against the government, but will also present a challenge to the opposition to articulate and defend its own platform, and to no longer rely on simply offering alternative personalities over alternative policies. Thus, the real burden for political change rests on the opposition, which has yet to demonstrate a coherent tactical campaign or clear strategic vision for instituting genuine democratization and reform.

The second factor making this election even more important than past contests is the fact that this ballot will *pose a new and serious test of Armenia's democratic credentials*, offering the country a chance to move beyond the tainted presidential election of February 2008 that triggered such a serious and violent domestic crisis. In this way, the local election is not simply for control of the capital, but stands as a crucial metric for assessing the state of democracy in Armenia. But the election is also a measure of the population, revealing whether the ordinary Yerevan resident has returned to the political slumber and disengagement that have come to define the state of political apathy in Armenia up until last year's post-election crisis. This test is also crucial to either reaffirm or refute the apparent erosion of political activism and civic engagement of the population since the sudden and fairly unexpected "re-awakening" of the population during the initial stage of last year's post-election.

Third, this election is inherently significant, as it will result in the *election of the municipal government of the capital, the center of all political and economic power* in the country, with implications for the possible broader alignment of political parties and leaders amid an already sharply polarized society and in the face of a worsening economic crisis. And the position of Yerevan mayor is also one of the country's most visible political positions, potentially serving as an important springboard to higher office, and is inherently powerful, endowed with a broad network of patronage positions and governing nearly half of Armenia's total population.

In addition to the overall significance of Armenia's coming election, there are also six important considerations:

### **1. Election Flaws**

Despite the obvious improvement in replacing the previous system of presidentially-appointed mayors, the proportional nature of the municipal election relies on an inappropriate party-based system of choosing and fielding candidates. The local nature of the election questions the relevance and value of relying on such a proportional system, especially given the poor state of Armenia's political parties and record of party-related electoral irregularities in past elections. In addition, despite the intent of reforms adopted through the 2005 amendments to the constitution, and enacted to comply with Armenia's obligations as a member of the Council of Europe, the mayor is elected through an overly complicated indirect election, by the 65-seat "Council of Elders," whose benefits from a direct election are offset by the party-based proportional system.

### **2. Pre-Election Polarization and an "Atmosphere of Fear"**

Reflecting the unresolved political tension and sharp polarization in the country, the pre-election mood remains tense and prone to sporadic incidents of politically-related violence and intimidation. The rise of such acts of violence stems from an overall "climate of impunity" that is reinforced by the public perception of an "arrogance of power" among the authorities. Against the backdrop of an already apparent "crisis of confidence" in the state and its institutions, the general population has little trust in the authorities' capacity or willingness to ensure a free and fair election. Moreover, in the wake of the violence of the March 2008 confrontation, the lack of any real accountability for the abuses and excessive force by the police and security forces, as well as the dubious judicial process and questionable investigation into the events of last March by the authorities, have only exacerbated an "atmosphere of fear" among the general population. This has also been compounded by the fact that opposition supporters and activists have been detained and later convicted on the questionable charge of organizing "mass disturbances" related to the March 2008 clashes.

### **3. Journalism: Armenia's Most Dangerous Profession**

Although not apparently directly related to the politically-inspired violence, there has also been a renewed trend of violence and assaults against journalists in Armenia over the past several months. For Armenian journalists, who have been subject to several periods of harassment, intimidation and physical attacks in the country over many years, this latest trend of assaults have tended to make journalism one of the most dangerous professions in Armenia. Such an atmosphere of intimidation and outright attacks have fostered a degree of "self-censorship," whereby the normal course of investigative journalism has become especially dangerous and inhibited by the threat of coercion and abuse.



#### **4. An Un-Level Playing Field**

As with most elections in Armenia, the powerful advantage inherent in the “administrative resources” of incumbency poses a formidable challenge to any opposing candidate or party. The use of such administrative resources, such as pressuring civil servants and public sector employees to support the authorities’ preferred candidates, has been supplemented by the adoption of a set of rather sophisticated measures, including the use of police to block or impede travel into Yerevan during elections or opposition rallies, with the closure of highways and roads and the disruption of mass transportation at critical periods, often timed to coincide with elections or opposition demonstrations. Against this backdrop, elections and political contests in Armenia have become rigidly enforced and democracy deformed into an “un-level playing field” that offers voters neither a fair chance nor a free choice during elections. In this way, change in Armenian politics is more a process of selection rather than election, with the vast majority of the Armenian electorate reduced to a secondary role as spectators, rather than as primary actors in the country’s political and civic life.

#### **5. Divisions within the Ranks & Campaign Violence**

Significantly, each party within the ruling coalition has put forth their own party list of candidates for the Yerevan election. In addition to this open split among the ruling coalition, there is also a deeper, potentially more serious division within the dominant Republican Party itself, which may usher in deeper shifts in the broader Armenian political landscape. In addition, partly reflecting the deeper trend of political violence and attacks on journalists that marred this pre-election period, the formal campaign season was similarly disrupted by a series of violent clashes. Unlike the earlier clashes between the police and the opposition, however, this campaign-related violence was limited to within the pro-government camp, with violent clashes between the young activists and supporters of the rival Republican and Prosperous Armenia parties.

#### **6. Local Elections, but National Issues**

On a broader level, the election campaign is defined by an oddly contradictory stress on national issues for a local election. For Yerevan voters, such local campaigning was a first, given the fact that the mayor of the capital has long been a position personally appointed by the country’s president. The novelty of the campaign was matched by an odd and often inappropriate approach by the candidates, however, as most were more accustomed to stressing national issues than to appealing to local Yerevan concerns. Most prominent in presenting a national agenda for the local election, the opposition Armenian National Congress crafted a message that sought to draw Yerevan voters into a broader struggle, vowing to use the municipal election as a “second round” of last year’s presidential election. Although such a strategy of transforming the contest into a vote of confidence in the authorities reflects the fact that the election presents the first political battle between the government and opposition, it is a gamble that is conditional on the Yerevan electorate’s willingness to forego more local concerns and presupposes a popular desire to revisit the post-election confrontation of last year.