

Ashot Manucharyan: No 'Apricot Revolution' in Armenia

The Armenian parliamentary elections of May 12, 2007, and their impact on the security situation in the Caucasus

At the moment, the Caucasus is affected not only by purely regional conflicts but also, and even more so, by global crises which influence the geopolitical situation of Armenia. Specifically, these crises include the missile defence dispute between the USA and Russia, the power struggle between the USA, the European Union (EU), and Russia about free access to the Caspian region, the 'pipeline war' which revolves around new routes for transporting energy carriers out of the region, the conflict between the international community of states and Iran over its nuclear programme, and the uncertain future of the trouble spot of Iraq.

Another problem is the fact that Christian Armenia borders on the Islamic Republic of Iran and on Turkey. Relations with Ankara are regarded as especially strained, for Turkey has refused to enter into diplomatic relations with Armenia ever since the USSR disintegrated in December 1991. Moreover, Turkey has been blockading the Armenian border since 1993, resulting in Armenia's economic and political rapprochement with Russia and Iran. Furthermore, the generally unstable situation in the region and the lack of security guarantees forced Yerevan to enter into a military union with Moscow. Due to its military cooperation with Russia, the general public likes to brand the ancient Christian country as 'anti-western'. Part of the political opposition in Armenia instrumentalised this label in the elections to the National Assembly on May 12, 2007, to bring about a change of government. In this, it was allegedly supported by the USA and Europe. This article sheds some light on what lies behind the failure of the 'revolution' in Armenia, showing clearly that neither the USA nor NATO are interested in organising a 'revolution' in Armenia, as some Armenian opposition politicians pretended only to present themselves as 'representatives of the West' in front of their home crowd. During the 'coloured' revolutions in Georgia ('Rose Revolution'), Ukraine ('Orange Revolution'), and Kyrgyzstan ('Pink' or 'Tulip Revolution'), the opposition took advantage of fraudulent parliamentary or presidential elections to mobilise the people. In Georgia and Ukraine, the revolution was accompanied by a reorganisation of the security policy in favour of NATO. It may justifiably be doubted whether it would be possible to carry out a 'revolution' of this kind in Armenia. An adequate name – analogous to the three revolutions that have already taken place in the post-Soviet region – would be easy to find: 'Apricot Revolution', for among botanists, this fruit is known as *Prunus armeniaca*.

23 political parties and alliances registered for the National Assembly elections of May 12, 2007, competing for the 90 seats that are allotted on the basis of party lists. To be able to enter parliament, parties must jump the five-percent hurdle imposed by the constitution. Next to the allotment by party lists, 41 MPs are elected directly in the constituencies. According to an analysis of the Yerevan Press Club, all parties admitted for election were able to present their party and election programmes to the electorate unhampered. No party was deprived of the legally-allowed airtime for advertising on TV and radio. As in previous election campaigns, the contest once again concentrated solely on persons, not party programmes. Almost all well-known Armenian entrepreneurs applied for a mandate. While this was practiced by all parties, it became evident most strikingly in the struggle for direct mandates. One reason why entrepreneurs are endeavouring to obtain a seat in parliament is that this enables them to defend their own interests, there being no lobby organisations or associations.

In 2007, the elections took a much more democratic course than four years ago. The turnout amounted to 59.9 percent, and the parliamentary seats were distributed as follows: The Republican Party received 64 seats, the 'Bargavač Hajastan' 25, the 'ARF/Dašnakzutjun' 16, the 'Orinac erkir' 9, and the 'Žarangutjun' 7 seats, while 10 seats went to independent MPs. Armenia was pleased

with the positive reaction of the international organisations to the outcome of the elections. The OSCE called it a further step towards consolidating democracy in Armenia. And the declaration of the observer mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council says that Armenia's government had 'demonstrated political willpower' as it had succeeded in preventing election fraud. 'The Armenian people has demonstrated its political wisdom', Javier Solana, the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, complimented the parliamentary elections which were conducted according to 'international standards', saying that they 'will play a major role in the future relations between the European Union and Armenia'.

On June 6, 2007, the Republican Party and the 'Bargavač Hajastan' signed a coalition agreement. The 'ARF/Dašnakzutjun' joined this alliance only for one year, as it intends to take part in the 2008 presidential elections with its own candidate. As expected, the parliament elected Serzh Sargsyan, (Republican Party) prime minister.

While foreign and security policy was not the predominant issue of the election campaign, it did play a role in the public discussion. The unsettled future of Nagorni Karabakh still is one of the most important determinants of Armenia's domestic policy. As long as Nagorni Karabakh is excluded from taking part in the negotiations as an equal partner, there will be no long-term solution of the conflict. In June 2007, Armenia's government made one thing unmistakably plain: 'As long as no decision has been made about the political status of Nagorni Karabakh, its right to self-determination, and a secure corridor between the Republic of Armenia and Nagorni Karabakh, Armenia will not be willing to negotiate about other issues.' As presidential elections will be held in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2008, a swift solution of the Nagorni Karabakh conflict can be ruled out.

The Russian military bases in Armenia were established at the country's request. However, its close military and political cooperation with Russia does not mean that Armenia is following some model of continuing political integration. Besides, the Caucasian republic has been a member of the new Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) since 2003.

Armenia quite rightly considers itself part of Europe. Yerevan is striving for a close partnership with the EU as it would promote cooperation in the region and stabilise and accelerate domestic reform processes. Membership in NATO does not appear on Armenia's agenda.

The debate about a potential reorientation of its security policy was revived in Armenia only when Russia doubled its gas prices. Among the political class in Yerevan, Vladimir Putin's 'pragmatic policy' was received with utter astonishment, for he remitted the debts of other countries but not those of Armenia, his military ally. This time, Russia was criticised fiercely not only by representatives of the 'western parties' but also by influential pro-Russian politicians. Once again, the question arises whether the Russian military bases really do guarantee security for Armenia. Since Russia is not proving a 'real ally', this sceptical mood is growing in Armenia's society. Armenia's concern is justified because its protector controls 80 percent of Armenia's energy industry. At the same time, those who support close relations with Russia fear that the two pro-Western opposition parties which have been elected to the National Assembly might slowly but surely 'westernise' Armenia's foreign policy. Therefore, the head of government, Serzh Sargsyan, emphasises whenever an opportunity offers that Armenian-Russian relations and CSTO membership are of great importance to Yerevan.