

RSC BLOG

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Emerging Powers in the Armenian Political Arena *Satenik Baghdasaryan*

Despite the fact that Armenia will not hold its next election until 2017, in some ways, it seems that the pre-election campaign is already well underway. The country’s older, traditional political parties have started repositioning themselves in the field. At the same time, however, there are new “emerging powers” which will also try to ensure their place in the next parliament. The emergence of new political parties has not always been a positive phenomenon in Armenian political life. It has been sometimes associated with the creation of more artificial, non-functioning one-man parties, which did not have the strategy or the capacity for governance, and also lacked a willingness to fight for power or votes.

Although this seems to be a paradox, it is a sad commentary that many of the country’s official political parties have failed to demonstrate any real differences, in most cases, with little ideology and even offering even less policy choices. In this way, most of the existing political parties could never be considered as stand-alone political forces.

But in light of recent developments, the emergence of new political parties in Armenia has been a welcome development, and has mostly been seen as a positive change. Among these newly emerging political forces and parties, the most notable and active include the “Civil Contract” and “Bright Armenia” parties, as well as the “New Armenia Public Salvation Front” (NAPSF) and the “Armenian Renaissance Association” (HVM).

The Return of Ideologies and Clear Positions

The catch-all parties which dominated the Armenian political landscape through much of the past decade are now largely in the past. The new political parties are now seeking to attach themselves to certain ideologies or at least to publicize and promote their positions on a number of political, social and economic issues.

And this new combination of more specific party ideology and greater clarity in political positions also offers more diversity and greater choice for the Armenian voters. For example, while the “Bright Armenia” party has staked out a clear position as a pro-European liberal party, the “Armenian Renaissance Association” (HVM), in contrast, stands for closer cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. More specifically, “Bright Armenia” states that it is necessary to lead the country towards European integration, have closer ties with European institutions while also advocating a perspective for Armenia’s eventual membership in the European Union.



In contrast to that pro-European party mantle, the recently revamped “Armenian Renaissance Association” (HVM), which is actually an attempt to update the older, rather marginalized “Country of Law” (*Orinats Yerkir*) party, claims that Armenia should garner greater benefits from the opportunities created as a result of Armenia’s membership in both the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).



A Bottom-Up Approach

In Armenian politics, the common practice was that parties were usually created around a dominant public figure. This feature meant that the parties lacked any grassroots, bottom-up approach, thereby contributing to a situation where the parties were recruiting people not for their ideology or strategy but as a result of the charisma, popularity, reputation, wealth or other characteristics of the personality of the individual party leader.

One of the clearest examples of a stark break from this “tradition” is the “Civil Contract” party, which was first created as a public initiative that then became a more formal political party. Offering a fresh degree of diversity in leadership, this new party was based more on democratic procedures than on the personal traditions of other Armenian parties, including the formulation of concrete party policies and political positions spanning a wide range of critical and relevant issues.



Another example is the “New Armenia Public Salvation Front” (NAPSF), which although is not a mainstream political party, is a political grouping that unites smaller, more fragmented opposition parties such as the “Heritage” party and the more radical “Founding Parliament” political movement, among others.

From Observing to Shaping Agendas: Society as a Part of Policy

Not long ago, it was common in Armenia for parties to present their political programs to the public only during a pre-election campaign or to detail party policy priorities only after an election. Similarly, public meetings and open political discussions were not a part of the usual activities of parties and were organized during the pre-election campaigns only.

But a recent development has been for political parties to at least attempt to shape their policy agendas based on a consideration of public opinion and civic demands. And recently, both the “Civil Contract” and “Bright Armenia” parties have not only organized a regular series of public meetings, but have also raised their points in every public event in which they participate. This gives them a chance to discuss their set of initial ideas and to solicit public reaction in order to incorporate feedback as they design their policies taking into account the needs and expectations of the wider public and society.

The new parties are also introducing other new qualities to the pre-election campaign. These qualities are reflected in the timing and scope of the campaign. For example, these parties have started to focus on the “other Armenia,” organizing political meetings and activities in the rural areas of the country well beyond the capital Yerevan. This also offers a new opportunity for Armenian towns and villages to become more directly engaged in the political process and to become more empowered and better informed voters.

Moreover, these two new parties have also launched their pre-election campaigns quite early, well in advance of elections and in stark contrast to earlier campaigns that only began with the official announcement of an election day. In this way, ordinary citizens of Armenia are now much more involved in the policy development process and are no longer limited to a role as mere silent observers of the political process.

More Accountability and Transparency

At the same time, the new parties are actively committed to becoming much more accountable and more transparent in their activities and party financing. This is also evident in their public fundraising events, and bolstered by their routine practice of publicly posting monthly reports or short descriptions of their daily activities online, made available for all interested stakeholders and potential supporters. This tends to make the parties more credible and trustworthy before the electorate and more responsible in front of voters.

A second element of this effort for more accountability and greater transparency includes the effective use of social media tools and an emphasis on the leveraging websites in order to bridge the “digital divide” of a state-dominated media and to overcome barriers between them and the wider public. This has been particularly noteworthy in the practices of the “Civil Contract” and “Bright Armenia” parties so far.

Creativity in Politics

The new parties have also started using new methods to fight against apathy within society, but also to gain more supporters and recruit new members. This has replaced the reliance on old-style public demonstrations and rallies which have proven to be rather stale and outdated.



For example, during the so-called “Electric Yerevan” demonstrations in the summer months of 2015, many public figures and leaders from these new parties stood in between the police and the demonstrators. The initiative was interesting as it showed that it is possible to restore the missing cooperation links between the political parties and civil society.

In addition, it was a way to show that the political parties and the civil society actually share common goals.

Another example of such creativity in politics was seen in the “V6000” initiative of the “Civil Contract” party, aimed at recruiting 6000 observers and proxies for the parliamentary election in 2017. Although this initiative is challenged by the lack of capacity of any single party in Armenia to recruit, train and monitor the work of this many observers, the idea is interesting and innovative and may succeed in leveraging both the dynamism of the “Electric Yerevan” activists and the greatly improved record of election observation by civil society organizations in Armenia.



NGOs and Public Movements in Politics

Some of the new political forces, such as the “New Armenia Public Salvation Front” (NAPSF) and the “Armenian Renaissance Association” (HVM), have united many social, economic movements, parties and also NGOs. But such cooperation with NGOs is not always viewed as positive, especially in the case of NGOs aligned with the HVM, for several reasons. First, NGOs and political parties have different roles in society and it is not only about the legal status but also the goals, objectives, means, methods and tools of work. Second, it is not clear if these politicized NGOs are stopping their activities as NGOs or act both as an NGO and also as a part of a party. And third, having many NGOs, parties and movements with different aims and fields of work under one umbrella makes the cooperation and the coordination of their work significantly complicated, if not impossible.

Conclusion

As each of these new political parties and forces have announced their participation in the coming election and have started their preparations, they have also adopted some different approaches. The “Civil Contract” party, for example, has already excluded the possibility of creating or joining any alliances with other opposition forces. The “Bright Armenia” party, on the other hand, has expressed its willingness to such alliances, however. For its part, the “Armenian Renaissance Association” has not talked about the possibility yet, while the “New Armenia Public Salvation Front” is committed to its self-declared goal of fighting for an early extraordinary election instead.

Moreover, another key difference lies in strategy, as some of these political forces strongly advocate a non-violent approach to change, such as the “Civil Contract” party, while others urge public disobedience, as with the “New Armenia Public Salvation Front” (NAPSF), as a way to reach force change if electoral means are not sufficient.



Nevertheless, these political parties will be opposing the ruling authorities in the coming election and will not only seek to create a more open competition, but will also try to be the guarantors of a better, more free and fair election. The new clarity in positions, the fresh examples of creativity, transparency, accountability, the promotion of public participation and the new degree of political innovation and organization are the main factors that will ensure not only an improved electoral competition but will also help to ensure a better election.

Thus, the coming election will be a test not only for these emerging political parties and forces, but also a test of their new political tactics, fresh campaign strategies and unique approaches.

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