
Eyewitness Account

Armenians fight for free, fair elections

by Hovhannes Galajian

Sept. 22, the day when Presidential elections in Armenia took place, was a day of many hopes and fears. It was preceded by an excellent election campaign of the unified opposition's candidate, Vazgen Manukian. Despite intensive "brainwashing" by television, meant to confuse and intimidate voters, the majority of them decided to cast their votes for Manukian. From early morning, several thousands of Manukian's poll-watchers arrived at voting places, to monitor the election process and prevent fraud.

It should be mentioned, that under current political conditions in Armenia, the position of a poll-watcher for an opposition candidate requires a lot of courage, because such election monitors may be arrested, severely beaten, or even killed. For example, in Bambakshat, a village in the Armavirsk region, a poll-watcher for the Communist Party candidate was hit with a log and both of his legs were broken.

During election day, many cases of incredible violations of election law were registered. Among them, the most common was violation of the secret ballot: forcing people to cast votes for the incumbent, Levon Ter-Petrosian; forcing the same military unit to vote repeatedly in different polling places; swapping ballots, etc. The use of force against Manukian's poll-watchers and election committee members from the opposition, was extensive.

Protests suppressed brutally

Nevertheless, according to the protocols of the district committees (and the opposition has in its hands copies of about 80% of those protocols), Manukian received 54% of the votes cast. According to independent experts, if it had not been for election fraud, this number would have reached over 70%. Because the fraud at the level of election districts did not produce the result which the authorities wished for, they continued to falsify the results at the higher levels of regional committees and the central election committee. Cases of fraud and coercion led to a great deal of resentment among the population, and since Sept. 23, the country has witnessed a wave of protest rallies and demonstrations. The biggest one, which drew 100,000 people, took place in Yerevan, the Armenian capital.

The government responded with a provocation on Sept. 25, when demonstrators were incited to storm the Parliament building. A group of city police agents in civilian clothes attacked and beat up the speaker and vice speaker of the Parliament. During the night of Sept. 25, a huge number of troops was moved into Yerevan, and rallies and demonstrations were banned. Gatherings of people were dispersed with gunfire. Almost all opposition deputies of the Parliament were arrested (except for communists), and the offices of opposition parties were sealed. The whole of Armenia witnessed a despicable scene, which was broadcast live on television, when opposition deputies were beaten up in the Parliament. That event, unworthy of a civilized society, occurred in the presence of the attorney general, and with the participation of the ruling party deputies as well as the justice minister, Marat Aleksanian.

Opposition is forced underground

Over 200 members of the opposition have been arrested, and as a result, the rest have been forced to go underground. According to reliable sources, those arrested were beaten and interrogated. Another source, close to the police, claims that one of the leaders of the opposition, Academician Aganovian, has suffered a spinal injury as a result of the beatings.

Television and radio, as well as government newspapers, are conducting an unprecedented campaign of disinformation and intimidation, reminiscent of the Stalinist propaganda of 1937. The opposition has been charged with a ridiculous accusation of attempting a coup against the state, and of treason and terrorism. Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian went so far as to announce that even if Manukian had gotten 100% of the vote of the population, the Army and the police would not have obeyed him. Independent press has described the events as an affront against the wishes of the electorate, and an illegal takeover of power on the part of Ter-Petrosian and his close circle, who lost the elections.

The same opinion was expressed by a group of observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, led by Simon Osborn, which recorded numerous serious violations of election law, and came to the conclusion that the official results of the Presidential elections in Armenia are dubious. One of the bases for this conclusion, was the fact that there was a discrepancy between the number of electoral ballots cast and the number of people who voted. The difference was estimated at over 22,000, while the number of votes which moved Ter-Petrosian above the 50% required threshold, was only 21,000.

Concerning the mood of Armenian population, one has to say, that only widespread military and police terror is restraining it from organizing protests and participating in civil disobedience. The Armenian government, which does not have any support from the society today and is dependent solely on military might, is behaving as if it were an occupying power in its own country.