

Report on Long-Term Monitoring of the 2003 Presidential Elections
Republic of Armenia
Prepared by
It's Your Choice (IYC)

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Introduction

In December 2002, IYC continued to conduct long-term monitoring of the 2003 Presidential Elections. IYC is a domestic, non-partisan NGO that has branch offices in every marz of Armenia and every district of Yerevan.

IYC's central office staff, marz and Yerevan coordinators observed the candidate nomination process by the political parties, party coalitions and initiative groups that independently nominate candidates. (The official candidate registration process will start on January 1 and end on January 21, 2003.) IYC also monitored polling results publicized by the mass media and pre-election media coverage in general.

Political Atmosphere

Armenians will have several candidates to consider in the 2003 presidential elections. As of December 31, 2002, there were twelve nominated candidates: the incumbent, R. Kocharian and R. Avagyan, V. Darbinyan, S. Demirchyan, A. Geghamyan, A. Harutyunyan, R. Hovannisian, A. Karapetyan, G. Margaryan, V. Manukyan, A. G. Sargsyan and A. Z. Sargsyan.

Official campaigning begins on January 21, 2003. The political atmosphere in December was charged with fear and intripidation, felt by candidates and the public. The head of public television station H1, Tigran Naghdalyan, was shot and subsequently died on December 27, dramatically increasing tension about the elections. Pro-government mass media organizations (H1, "Armenia" and ALM) and state officials hastened to blame the opposition for this assassination. Only pro-government representatives were given access to public television to comment on the tragedy. The newly formed non-governmental Election Oversight Committee, chaired by Ruben Torosian, stated that it is both dangerous and too early to lay blame because the investigation is incomplete.

Related to the above incident, presidential candidate Petros Maqeyan of the Democratic Fatherland Party, during his party's December meeting, terminated his candidacy because of "the atmosphere of fear and intolerance created after T. Naghdalyan's assassination."

Such incidents of violence and inappropriate statements create a dismal atmosphere for voters, questioning the potential for free and fair elections.

IYC's Long Term Monitoring Observations

The following are documented concerns:

- Involvement of state executives in electoral processes
- Violations during petition signature collection process
- Publication of deliberately fraudulent polling results
- Biased government-funded mass media that disallows alternative views

Involvement of state executives in electoral processes

Frequent speeches and statements by state executives endorsing the incumbent created unfair campaign conditions:

- Minister of Territorial Management H. Abrahamyan stated in a speech broadcast by H1 public television station that the president will win and a runoff election will not be necessary.
- Deputy Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport I. Zaqaryan made the same statement as H. Abrahamyan, also in a speech broadcast on H1 public television station.
- Minister of Transportation A. Manukyan made the same declaration on ALM TV. Moreover, A. Manukyan stated that 63-67% of the electorate would vote for R. Kocharyan.
- Defense Minister Serj Sargsyan took a two-month-long sabbatical leave to direct the president's campaign. Citizens believe that he will continue to impose significant pressure on the military to reelect the president.

State and local institutions and staffs were utilized for the incumbent's campaign:

- Serj Sargsyan, former Minister of Defense and the incumbent's campaign manager, created campaign offices in every marz and major city, employing people working in government-funded institutions, such as mayoral offices, schools, tax inspection offices, cultural institutions, etc.
- These same government employees were illegally instructed to collect petition signatures for the president's campaign during regular working hours and were threatened with punishment or dismissal for noncompliance. This phenomenon was also described this month in the Armenian Times and Aravot newspapers.

Violations during signature collection process

IYC observed violations during the signature collection process in cities of several marzs (Gyumri, Shirak; Vanadzor, Lori; Ijevan, Tavush; Kapan, Syunik; and Gavar, Gegharqunik) and Yerevan city districts (Shengavit, Arabkir, Nor Norq, Kanaker-Zeytun and Kentron).

- Petition signature collectors purposely misinformed citizens, stating they were collecting signatures either for Stephan Demirchyan, Raffi Hovhannisyanyan or Artashes Geghamayan, while citizens were in reality signing petitions either for the incumbent or for Aram Harutunyan.
- Faculty of the Pedagogical University of Yerevan, Yerevan State University and Medical College bribed students to acquire signatures, asking for 50 signatures in exchange for a grade.
- Armenian Times reported that the administrative heads of these same higher education government funded institutions and government administrative marz and Yerevan city offices (specified above) collected employees' and students' passport data, subsequently forcing them to sign the incumbent's petition. Employees refusing to sign the incumbent's petition were often threatened with punishment.
- Petition signers were misinformed about the law, stating that if they signed a petition for a candidate they were required to vote for the same candidate. (Armenian Times, Dec. 24, 2002)
- People who witnessed the above-described violations refused to provide written records and their names due to concerns of being punished and dismissed from their jobs.

Publication of deliberately fraudulent polling results

- Pro-governmental public H1 television station publicized polling results, stating the incumbent had the highest rating and was 30-35% ahead of the next highest ranked candidate. Youth Center for Sociological and Psychological Analysis, a non-political organization, analyzed recent polls. The specialists of the Center stated in an article in December 1, 2002, Armenian Times that they strongly doubted the accuracy of the polling results publicized by the pro-governmental H1 TV station. They stated the polling results lacked objectivity and professionalism.
- Statements that the incumbent is ahead of other candidates by 20-30% occurred in polls reported by H1 and Prometevs TV stations and Newspaper Republic of Armenia. However, not a single polling organization admits to the atmosphere of fear that creates biased results.

Biased government-funded mass media

- Not a single government-funded broadcast TV organization provided equal coverage for candidates. Those who attempted to provide coverage of candidates other than the incumbent were punished. A political analyst S. Poghosyan, was fired by State Public Radio station, a government funded radio station, stating that his dismissal was based on his attempt to provide balanced reporting.

Recommendations

- Prosecute state and local government employees who campaign with state resources.
- Amend the law that addresses use of administrative resources by state executives by expanding the time period, beginning the day election dates are announced several months in advance of elections. (Currently the law specifies that no governmental employees can be associated with campaigns during the official campaign period, beginning approximately a month in advance of the election.)
- Strengthen the law by adding that state employees cannot collect signatures while working as government officials.
- Prosecute those deliberately misinforming and influencing people during the signature collecting process.
- Demand government funded media organizations provide balanced reporting, including reporting of polling results.