

[Armine Ishkanian](#)

Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections

Website

Original citation:

Ishkanian, Armine (2008) *Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections*. *Open Democracy* (04 Mar 2008) Opinion Piece.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/42662/>

Originally available from [openDemocracy](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2012

© 2008 The Author

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.



Published on *openDemocracy* (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>)

[Home](#) > Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections

Democracy contested: Armenia's fifth presidential elections

Submitted by Anonymous on 04th March 2008

Subjects: [democracy & power](#) ^[1] [globalisation](#) ^[2] [caucasus: regional fractures](#) ^[3] [institutions & government](#) ^[4] [politics of protest](#) ^[5] [Armine Ishkanian](#) ^[6] [Creative Commons normal](#) ^[7]

A disputed election followed by mass protest has created a political crisis in another post-Soviet state. But the arrival of new technologies and a younger generation signal a new chapter rather than a rerun, says Armine Ishkanian.

About the author

Armine Ishkanian is a [lecturer](#) ^[8] in NGOs and development in the department of social policy, London School of Economic. Her books include *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia* ^[8] (Routledge, 2008)

Armenia's presidential election of 19 February 2008 appeared to deliver a clear victory to the candidate who had led in most opinion polls throughout the campaign, Serzh Sarkisian. Sarkisian, Armenia's current prime minister and close ally of President Robert Kocharian, was declared the victor on 24 February with (according to official results) 52% of the vote. But as so often in the [region](#) ^[9] - and in a pattern increasingly familiar around the world - the official results were bitterly disputed. The supporters of the leading defeated candidate (and former president) Levon Ter-Petrossian responded to the declared outcome by organising a continuous mass protests in the centre of the capital, Yerevan. In [confrontations](#) ^[10] between demonstrators and security forces, eight people have been killed.

Armine Ishkanian ^[11] is a lecturer at the Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics. She is the author of *Democracy-building and Civil Society in post-Soviet Armenia* ^[12] (Routledge, 2008)

Also by Armine Ishkanian on **openDemocracy**:

["Nashi: Russia's youth counter-movement"](#) ^[13] (30 August 2007)

The election crisis has thus become one of public order and [governance](#) ^[14]. But what is it "really" about, and where does it fit the pattern of Armenia's democratic development in the years since independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991?

Since achieving independence, Armenia has held five presidential elections (1991, 1996, 1998, 2003, and 2008). Of these only the 1991 election is considered to have been free and fair. All the others, the most recent one included, have followed a pattern that has unfortunately become all too familiar: a flawed process followed by boisterous protests by the opposition.

In the aftermath of the 19 February 2008 elections ^[15], demonstrations were convened in Yerevan's Liberty Square. The atmosphere at the tented encampment was celebratory rather than threatening, typified by protestors' singing and dancing around bonfires. Behind the display of public defiance, political manoeuvring also continued, as Serzh Sarkisian began reaching out to other opposition candidates (apart, that is, from his chief rival ^[16] Levon Ter-Petrossian) to seek collaborative deals. In quick succession, Artashes Geghamian ^[17] and Artur Baghdasarian ^[18] agreed to cooperate.

The post-election standoff remained tense ^[19]; across the ten days until 29 February there were a number of arrests and detentions of individual opposition party members, activists, and some state officials who had defected to the opposition camp. But few expected what happened in the early morning of Saturday 1 March, when interior-ministry security forces moved in and forcibly dispersed ^[20] the demonstration in the square using tear-gas, truncheons, and electric-shock equipment. In circumstances as disputed as the election itself, eight people lost their lives; it appears that excessive force was used against the demonstrators. The deaths have intensified the sense of emergency ^[21] in Armenia, adding urgency to efforts to resolve the crisis yet embittering an already difficult ^[22] situation still further.

The context

The irreconcilable positions of Serzh Sarkisian and Levon Ter-Petrossian ^[23] are rooted in Armenia's post-independence politics. Ter-Petrossian came to prominence in the late 1980s as the leader of the Karabakh Committee, which championed the interests and rights of the ethnic-Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh ^[24] (an enclave inside Armenia's neighbour Azerbaijan). He was elected Armenia's president in 1991 and was re-elected in 1996, but resigned from office in February 1998 as a result of a coup that brought Robert Kocharian ^[25] to power. Ter-Petrossian then withdrew from public life and effectively entered voluntary internal exile. It was only in September 2007 that he re-entered politics with a vitriolic attack on what he saw as the corruption ^[26] of his successor and of Armenia's system more generally; soon after, he announced his candidacy in the February 2008 elections (see Vicken Cheterian, "Armenia's election: the waiting game" ^[27] (19 February 2008)).

After his electoral effort ^[28] resulted in defeat (with the official results awarding him 21.4% of the vote), Ter-Petrossian said that massive voting irregularities and violations had made the declared outcome invalid. His next step was to appeal to the Constitutional Court to schedule new elections (another disappointed candidate, Tigran Karapetyan, has said he also intends to take this route). But after the break-up of the protests, there are reports that Ter-Petrossian has been placed under house-arrest.

A number of neutral local observers, and international organisations such as Human Rights Watch, has highlighted voting irregularities and intimidation at polling-stations across Armenia ^[29]. But the authorities insist the vote was fair and that Sarkisian was legitimately elected, and thus characterise the protests as part of an attempt to seize power by illegal means.

The Armenian government and Sarkisian's camp defend their stance by pointing out that a number of significant countries (including France, Russia, and Turkey) has recognised his victory, and that the finding of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) is that the vote met the required standards. The IEOM preliminary report ^[30] indeed declares that the election was "administered mostly in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards"; but it also says that further improvements are needed to address remaining problems, including "the absence of a clear separation between state and party functions, the lack of public confidence in the electoral process and ensuring equal treatment of election contestants". The report states: "The conduct of the count did not contribute to reducing an existing suspicion amongst election stakeholders".

Several Armenian NGOs have criticised ^[31] the IEOM report as being too cautious. They released a joint statement ^[32] arguing that "the apparent discrepancy between the actual findings of the assessment with the formative first two sentences of the report resulted in the government only referring to this paragraph in the international observers' assessment in order to legitimise the results of the election". Some demonstrators picketed near the OSCE offices in Yerevan, shouting "Shame!" to indicate their disappointment with the observers' report ^[33] and what they consider its lending credibility to a flawed electoral process.

The radically different interpretations of the election result have dominated political debate inside Armenia (as well as among the large Armenian diaspora). On 26 February, two days after Sarkisian's victory was announced, a rally by his supporters - ostensibly to "thank the voters" was organised in Yerevan's Republic Square. People were bussed into Yerevan from around the country, but many proceeded to abandon the Sarkisian rally and march up Northern Avenue to join the demonstrators in Liberty Square - to be met with chants of "Unity!"

The differences

I have observed and written about three of the four past Armenian presidential elections (1996, 1998, 2003). With this experience in mind, I find the 2008 elections and the post-election developments to be significantly different from previous ones - in three ways.

Also in **openDemocracy** about Armenia and Armenians:

Nouritza Matossian, "Disinterring the past ^[34]" (30 July 2001)

Sabine Freizer, "Armenia's emptying democracy ^[35]" (30 November 2005)

Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, "Hrant Dink: forging an Armenian identity in Turkey ^[36]" (7 February 2006)

Seda Muradyan, "A politics of myth ^[37]" (12 December 2006)

Shaun Walker & Daria Vaisman, "Nagorno-Karabakh's referendum ^[38]" (14 December 2006)

Sabine Freizer, "Nagorno-Karabakh: between vote and reality ^[39]" (14 December 2006)

Hratch Tchilingirian, "Hrant Dink and Armenians in Turkey ^[40]" (23 February 2007)

Vicken Cheterian, "Armenia's election: the waiting game ^[27]" (19 February 2008)

First, several officials, civil servants and diplomats have resigned or been sacked from their posts for expressing their support for (or for actively joining) the camp of Levon Ter-Petrossian. They include the deputy prosecutor-general Gagik Jahangirian (who along with his brother Vahan was arrested ^[41] on charges of illegal arms possession and assault on "state officials performing their duties"); a number of officials from the foreign ministry (including deputy foreign minister Armen Bayburtian, chief foreign-ministry spokesman Vladimir Karapetian, ambassadors Ruben Shugarian and Levon Khachatryan); and civil servants from the trade and economic-development ministries.

Several army generals have also backed Ter-Petrossian, including Manvel Grigorian (who heads the Yerkrapah ^[42] [Defenders of the Country] faction) and Gagik Melkonian; neither has been stripped of his post. Such an open breach ^[43] by senior figures was not a feature in past elections; then, individuals would switch sides only once the final outcome had been declared - and when they did so, they would move towards the ruling party rather than (as at present) the opposition.

Second, there has been a flourishing of new forms of media, communication, and information-sharing. During the election campaign and in the post-election standoff, Armenian television coverage was greatly skewed in favour of Serzh Sarkisian; opposition candidates were either ignored or (in the case of Ter-Petrossian) negatively portrayed.

The absence of independent television channels and the strict loyalty to the regime of the channels that survive - a situation that has lasted since the closure of the independent ^[44]television channel A1+ in 2002 - has meant that the reporting of the opposition protests has been scarce to non-existent. The broadcasts have not reflected the reality of what is happening in the streets and squares. This has led civil-society activists to send an open letter criticising the H1 public-television channel's biased presentation.

Such bias was a feature in previous elections as well. Armenians have responded by transmitting news in a familiar, more trusted and legitimate source: word of mouth. But in addition, what is different this time is that individuals have begun using new forms ^[45] of communication technology - mobile-phones, email, blogs, and video-sharing websites such as YouTube - to share and exchange information and opinions about the latest developments. These innovative means of sharing information, news, and comments have circumvented the official television and radio channels' information blockade, and created a "virtual public sphere" for debate and deliberation. You Tube in particular has added a new dimension by hosting all sorts of clips including demonstrations, arguments at polling stations, and discussions with people on the street.

Third, the election itself and especially the demonstrations in their aftermath have witnessed the emergence of a generation of young Armenians as an active political constituency. The festive atmosphere in Liberty Square has attracted increasing numbers of young people, despite threats of expulsion or suspension against them (allegedly) made by the deans and rectors of some universities. This, again, is a contrast with previous elections, particularly in 1998 and 2003, when protest rallies were composed mainly of older people whose nostalgia for the good old Soviet days led them to support former Armenian Communist Party leader Karen Demirchian ^[46] (1998) and his son Stepan Demirchian (2003).

There is a debate here between those who argue that many young people support Ter-Petrossian because they do not remember how difficult life was during the early years of his rule, and those who believe they are attracted by his charisma and message of democratic reform. But the fact of change in elite opinion, technology and generation is striking.

The outcome

After Armenia's first four presidential elections, protests either dwindled of their own accord or were violently suppressed by the authorities. The option of force has been used too after the fifth election, yet - so far - it does not appear that this is the end of the story.

Whatever happens next, it is clear - and encouraging - that these elections engendered heated public debate about Armenia's future, the past it has traversed since gaining independence in 1991, the nature of its leadership, and the country's political culture. However an increasingly tense situation is resolved, the early weeks of 2008 will have a significant impact on political developments and the future of democracy in Armenia.



This article is published by Armine Ishkanian, and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence ^[47]. You may republish it with attribution for non-commercial purposes following the CC guidelines. For other queries about reuse, click here ^[48]. Some articles on this

site are published under different terms. No images on the site or in articles may be re-used without permission unless specifically licensed under Creative Commons.

Source URL: http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/caucasus/armenia_elections
Created 03/04/2008 - 15:52

Links:

- [1] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy_and_power/index.jsp
- [2] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalisation/index.jsp>
- [3] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/debate.jsp>
- [4] http://www.opendemocracy.net/theme_7-institutions_government/debate.jsp
- [5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-protest/debate.jsp>
- [6] http://www.opendemocracy.net/authors/armine_ishkanian
- [7] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/copyright/creative-commons-normal>
- [8] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/http>
- [9] <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/nagorno-karabakh/large-map.php>
- [10] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ef0a24e4-e859-11dc-913a-0000779fd2ac.html>
- [11] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/who%27swho/ishkanian.htm>
- [12] http://www.routledge.com/shopping_cart/products/product_detail.asp?sku=&isbn=9780415436014&parent_id=5116&pc=/shopping_cart/categories/categories_products.asp?parent_id%253D5116
- [13] http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/politics_protest/russia_nashi
- [14] <http://www.electionguide.org/country.php?ID=12>
- [15] http://www.angus-reid.com/tracker/view/28627/armenia_2008_presidential
- [16] <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/02/7d2cb3ed-dd10-44f1-8c5a-223712121979.html>
- [17] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/gallery/artashes.shtml>
- [18] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/gallery/artur.shtml>
- [19] <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/02/1d78a652-b265-46be-827b-bcfc795d998e.html>
- [20] <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3163780,00.html>
- [21] <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=18716>
- [22] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7277451.stm>
- [23] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/gallery/levon.shtml>
- [24] <http://nagorno-karabakh/>
- [25] <http://www.president.am/president/eng/>
- [26] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/corruption/index.shtml>
- [27] http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/caucasus_fractures/armenia_election
- [28] <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/01/0033554b-e804-49a1-9b5a-540490767e19.html>
- [29] http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_hm/armenia.htm
- [30] <http://www.panarmenian.net/library/eng/?nid=162>
- [31] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/news/022708.shtml>
- [32] <http://www.a1plus.am/en/?page=issue&iid=58522>
- [33] http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hjIoddK2I45_KpFPz6JLhba9rHDgD8UU1PMO0
- [34] http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-caucasus/article_658.jsp
- [35] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/armenia_3075.jsp
- [36] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/dink_3246.jsp
- [37] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-resolution_1325/armenia_4176.jsp
- [38] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/Nagorno_Karabakh_4182.jsp
- [39] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/nagorno_reality_4184.jsp
- [40] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-turkey/dink_armenian_4378.jsp
- [41] <http://www.armenialiberty.am/armeniareport/report/en/2008/02/695658C2-64B9-41CC-9EB3-6972EB6DBED5.ASP>
- [42] <http://www.arka.am/eng/politics/2008/02/25/8250.html>
- [43] <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/news/022208.shtml>
- [44] http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/freedom_detail.html?country=/KW0001/KW0003/KW0047/&year=2003
- [45] <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/central-asia-caucasus/armenia/>
- [46] http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19991029/ai_n14261934
- [47] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>
- [48] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/about/syndication>