



Pre-Election Promises of Political Parties

Elections to the Parliament of Armenia on May 6, 2012

Yerevan. May 2012

SUMMARY

The election campaign to parliament was highly competitive. In an effort to win votes, political parties employed a variety of strategies, including promises to make the lives of voters better. The Republican Party thus used the slogan *Believe In Order To Change*¹, sounding like a mirrored version of Barack Obama's *Changes We Believe In*, and quite unexpected for a party which had lead the ruling coalition for four years up to this election.

What exactly did the parties promise voters, how did the media cover these promises and how could they have affected the outcome of elections?

Our study has shown that voters received information about the parties' ideologies and plans which was rather limited and not very meaningful. As one observer put it, *"once an environment was created in which the parties and politicians could speak to society, it became clear that they have nothing to say really."*²

It is noteworthy that during the campaign, the politicians were barely ever asked about the implementation of their previous programs or about ways they planned to implement their new programs.

Neither print nor online media paid much attention to the content of the parties' electoral programs. Even in the - rather few - cases when party representatives spoke publicly about their plans and promises, the media published such statements in part or not at all.

¹ см.: Армен Аракелян. "Блеск" и нищета предвыборных лозунгов (в двух частях) / Hetq.am, 16-17 апреля 2012 г / см. [<http://hetq.am/rus/opinion/13127/%E2%80%9Cblesk%E2%80%9D-i-nishcheta-predvyborniykh-lozungov.html>]; [<http://hetq.am/rus/opinion/13189/%E2%80%9Cblesk%E2%80%9D-i-nishcheta-predvyborniykh-lozungov-2.html>]

² см. Выборы в Национальное собрание Республики Армения - 2012. Экспертное мнение / Кавказский Узел, 4 мая 2012 г / URL: [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/206079>]

ABOUT THE STUDY

The object of the study were the programs published by political parties which took part in the May 6, 2012 election to the Armenian parliament and the way they were reflected in statements made by representatives of the parties and in the coverage by the print and online media of Armenia. We analyzed the programs of all 9 parties that stood in the election (90 seats distributed via a proportional system) but not the programs of candidates who stood in single-mandate constituencies. Our goal was to assess whether the Armenian voter had the opportunity to make an informed choice in the election based on the parties' promises and their media coverage.

Making an informed choice based on expectations from a party is an important precondition for the emergence of a representative democracy in which various social groups can impact decisions and policy-making.

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METHODOLOGY

Monitoring and content-analysis data was broken up thematically; many themes were interlinked in the campaigning, and we grouped them up accordingly. For example, environment, energy, infrastructure and urban development were so strongly merged in the party platforms and campaigns that we put them all into one theme. We kept editing the list of themes throughout the study in accordance with the contents of the campaign.

We only focused on topics that domestic politics, ranging from state institutions to agriculture; the idea was to analyze those promises that are directly relevant to people's lives. For this reason, we excluded topics like the Armenian Genocide and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh³.

In order to assess the campaigns of the parties, we selected only concrete promises. General statements like "transparent personnel policies based on ability and experience" (ARFD) were ignored.

This is the final list of topics:

- State institutions (including the constitution, parliament, justice, administration, security)
- Human rights (including freedom of speech and media, the rights of convicts and minorities, gender equality, March 1, 2008 events)
- Economics (including combating corruption, medium and small business, taxation, jobs, customs, investment)
- Humanities (including science, education, culture, historical legacy, religion and language)
- Environment and infrastructure (including roads, transportation, energy, pipelines, environment, mining, urban development)

- Regional and rural development (including agriculture, land ownership, regional development, local government)
- Healthcare (including health insurance, access to medical care, pharmaceuticals)
- Social welfare (retirement and disability pensions, support to young families, maternity allowances, housing, family and children, accounts in the Savings Bank of the USSR).

The second part of the study involved monitoring of promises by political parties covered by print and online media during the campaign. We based our selection of media on three criteria: readership (print runs for print press and Circle.am ratings for online media), affiliation with political parties and active coverage of domestic politics.

The timeline for media monitoring was March 15 - May 4. We selected the following media:

- newspapers: *Haykakan Zhamanak, Golos Armenii, Hayots Ashkhar, Yerkir, Azg and Aravot*
- online media: News.am, Panorama.am, PanArmenian.net, 1in.am, Lragir.am, Hetq.am,
- international news media operating in Armenia: Caucasus Knot, newsarmenia.am (RIA-Novosti), Regnum.ru, Azatutyun (RFE/RL).

Below we refer to political parties by their commonly used acronyms or abbreviations:

- RPA, Republicans - Republican Party of Armenia
- PAP - Prosperous Armenia Party
- ANC - Armenian National Congress
- ARFD, Dashnaks - Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutyun
- ROL - Rule of Law Party
- CPA - Communist Party of Armenia
- DPA - Democratic Party of Armenia
- UAP - United Armenians Party
- Heritage - Heritage Party.

³ Стоит отметить, что позиции партий в отношении этих проблем и в целом внешнеполитической повестки на этот раз практически не отличались и были представлены незначительно, за исключением отвергавшей евроинтеграцию Коммунистической партии, к тому же не прошедшей в парламент.

PARTY PROGRAMS AND THE 2012 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Party programs in print and online media

The parties that have never been in the parliament and did not make it this time barely used the Internet. The UAP website was not informative; KPA and DPA had none but KPA had a rather active page on Facebook.

The websites of parties that got elected⁴ were updated for the campaign, with improved design and architecture, but information was often scarce. The PPA website only had the party's 2007 program; Heritage and ROL only published their programs online a week after the official start of the campaign. ARFD was also late with publishing its program, and only put it on the special website it set up for the 2012 election but never on its main site.

As to the RPA website, they posted daily news about the campaign but never published their program at all. They set up an election website and put the program there after the campaign began.

Until the last week of April, i.e. until two weeks before voting day, the contents of the party programs were barely covered by the media because the parties themselves seldom mentioned them; the discourse was about potential and the chance to win votes. Even when representatives of political parties did speak about their programs, this was usually lost in the media coverage. Only starting in late April did party representatives (mostly leaders) start voicing campaign promises, and media began to cover them more.

Two newspapers, *Aravot* and to some extent also *Hayots Ashkhar* published excerpts from the parties' electoral platforms and offered some analysis. Partisan media were very biased during the

⁴ RPA: hhk.am, hhk2012.am ; PPA: bhk.am; ANC: anc.am; Heritage: heritage.am; ROL: oek.am; ARFD: arfd.info, arf2012.am.

campaign, especially in terms of covering competitor parties in a negative light.

Ideological differences?

Ideology is not quite absent from Armenian politics but certainly rudimentary, simplistic and subject to variations depending on the situation⁵. The policy discourse is not so much based on ideological differences as on positioning in domestic politics, which was one of the tools for attracting votes. The positioning was based on a number of dichotomies.

The parties thus stress the fact that they belong to the establishment or the opposition; that they are "pro-national" or "liberal"; "pro-Russian," "pro-complimentarity" or "pro-Western." However, in the run-up to this election, all these factors lost actuality. On foreign policy issues, the parties were close to a consensus; nationalist or liberal rhetoric was seldom used, and most parties adopted a tone of "moderate conservatism"⁶, coming across as "catch-all" parties in the final analysis.

The agenda of party programs

The programs were overall declarative and very similar across the range. In the economic sphere, not a single concrete promise was made; meanwhile, the parties were generously handing out promises in the sphere of social welfare and prosperity without specifying the means by which they plan to achieve it. This said, the 2012 programs were still more

⁵ E.g. when the 1995 Treaty on the Russian military base was being signed, the RPA accused the then ruling Armenian National Movement (ANM) of jeopardizing the country's sovereignty. The very same accusations were made by ANM against the then ruling RPA when the treaty was extended in 2010.

⁶ Several months before the election, RPA, PPA and ROL applied to the European People's Party; PPA was rejected but the other two parties were accepted in February 2012 [http://tert.am/ru/news/2012/02/09/epp/]

specific than the ones circulated during previous campaigns, and more focused on domestic issues.

Social topics were the most widely covered in the programs, mostly in the form of promises of material support to particular groups. Promises made in the domains of healthcare and education also had a bias towards social welfare. Another realm covered by all parties was agriculture. The fact that some promises coincided could guarantee the resolution of some of the country's problems *provided the programs will actually be implemented*.

E.g. most of the parties that made it to parliament in 2012⁷ included progressive income tax in their list of proposed reforms; some of them also advocated this reform during previous campaigns but never actually made the move in parliament.

Several parties - ANC, ARFD and Heritage - were more ideological and had more specific promises in their programs than the rest; however, their results were modest, and the big winners were the parties whose programs were vague and not specific. This may imply that election promises were far from being the decisive factor in the voting. Moreover, the fact that many of the promises made by parties were even theoretically impossible to implement indicates that the parties themselves did not attach much importance to their programs either.⁸

The programs of all parties except RPA and PAP have a strong socialist bent; the programs of Heritage and ANC have a bizarre mix of leftist and rightist provisions.

The ANC did not come forward with one program, instead they offered voters to read their earlier program documents⁹. Contrastingly, the program of the leading party in coalition, RPA, was formulated in

the most basic terms and contained very few concrete promises, focusing on projects already under way or proposed in previous years (such as the establishment of an oncology center).

The program of the PAP was also quite basic, with promises chiefly in the spheres of social welfare and agriculture. The programs of the ROL and ARFD contain promises in the area of social welfare that are hardly realistic. E.g. according to the program of the ROL, a young couple that does not work but has five babies over the span of ten years is eligible to receive 203 000 USD dollars' worth of welfare plus an apartment.

ARFD and ANC also propose a dramatic increase of the social welfare section of the state budget. ARFD intends to allocate 2 billion US dollars to pensions, social healthcare and social support to families with young children. The ANC's project is more modest, with just 900 million USD allocated to pensions and child support.

Other parties have not shown figures that could be used to calculate the potential cost of their social promises.

⁷ RPA, PPA, ROL, ARFD and Heritage were elected to parliament on May 12, 2007.

⁸ See final protocol of the 2012 parliamentary election [<http://res.elections.am/images/doc/060512v.pdf>]

⁹ Their program had 11 appendices, including a 100-step program of social and economic reform, and separate programs published in 2010-2012 on healthcare, social welfare, education, culture etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To political parties and candidates standing in elections, we recommend that they:

- Base their political programs on ideological rather than populist principles; elaborate and systematize their approaches to statebuilding and politics in various areas;
- Formulate their promises and goals in a way that can be understood by the voters, with focus on the needs and concerns of the voters;
- Keep the voters abreast of the implementation of their electoral promises, and the issues and challenges faced in the process.

2. To news media covering elections and the activities of administrative bodies and political parties between elections, we recommend that they:

- Take the accent off the 'power game' (i.e. which players have more resources and more supporters) and concentrate on the players' approaches to handling concrete problems of concern to the voters, ranging from health insurance and taxation to urban planning and mining;
- Stop following the agenda of the political players by covering press conferences, declarations and rallies, and create an agenda of their own which should be based on the voters' needs and concerns. This implies asking political players concrete questions about reforms in concrete spheres, and inviting them to debate these issues;
- Follow-up the implementation of promises made by political players, comparing bills and initiatives to the promises made during election campaigns.

3. To national and international civil society organizations, we recommend that they:

- Raise important societal concerns during election campaigns, focusing on concerns that lie within the scope of their activities and are not covered in the programs or campaigns of political players (such as human rights or environmental issues), and cooperate with the media in encouraging political players to formulate and publicize their approaches to dealing with these concerns;
- Follow-up on the political players' implementation of promises made in the spheres that the NGO specialize in, and disseminate follow-up data via their networks and the media;
- Conduct educational activities and public advocacy aimed at building the political culture of society, including the culture of informed voting and the expression of political opinion by voters, and of the representation of political interests by political players.

APPENDIX

PROMISES MADE BY PARTIES THAT MADE IT TO PARLIAMENT

The main promises voiced by parties that made it to parliament are listed below under eight themes: State Institutions, Human Rights, Economics, Education and Culture, Infrastructure and Environment, Regional Development, Healthcare, Social Welfare.

State Institutions

Several parties proposed structural changes that would affect the role and authority of the parliament. ANC, ARFD and Heritage proposed a switchover to an electoral system of proportional representation, which implies annulling majority seats in constituencies. ARFD believes Armenia should become a parliamentary rather than a presidential republic; it also proposed reducing the number of seats in parliament. Heritage proposed increasing the role played by the parliament, which should have the authority to appoint the prime minister in the event that it rejects two candidacies proposed by the president. The program of Heritage also includes a procedure for revoking MP mandates, and an increased role of the opposition, which Heritage believe should appoint one of the vice-speakers of parliament, the leadership of the Control Chamber, the Ombudsperson, and one of the deputies of the Prosecutor General.

The programs of the ROL and ARFD describe reforms of the military sphere: ROL wants to increase financing of military industry, and ARFD, that of the army in general. According to the ROL, residents of border regions should be allowed to do their military service near their place of residence.

Two coalition parties, RPA and ROL, make most of their focus on the list continuation of current projects, such as online and single-window public service delivery. The ROL envisages the establishment of public service centers; the RPA promised to tighten supervision of the incomes of

public servants, to introduce biometric passports and ID cards, and to outsource some public services to private companies. Heritage also proposed tightening control over public servants' economic activities, insisting they should be banned from engaging in business and required to declare their incomes.

ANC and Heritage have both come up with projects to reform the judiciary. The project of the ANC includes appointment of judges by the parliament, and shared authorities of local and regional courts. In Heritage's projects, all judges except members of the Constitutional and Cassation Courts are elected, there is a procedure for rescinding a judge, and the prosecution is separated from the judiciary system; instead, prosecutors are appointed by the parliament and supervised by a special independent body.

Human Rights

Many parties had nothing concrete to say about human rights, and merely stated their commitment to the Constitution, human rights, freedoms and equal opportunities.

Among the few concrete provisions in the area of human rights, one can mention the introduction of a criminal probation system proposed by the ROL, the allocation of state funds for support of the culture of ethnic minorities proposed by ANC and ROL, compensations to the victims of March 1, 2008 unrests proposed by ANC, and some promises made by Heritage in the sphere of the media, including making media VAT-exempt and establishing a standing media committee at the parliament.

Economics

The common provision in economic sphere is the introduction of the progressive tax. It was promised by RPA, PPA, ARDF and ROL in one form or another. The parties propose its introduction as a measure of supporting small and medium business.

ANC, ARDF, ROL and Heritage propose the policy of protectionism as well as supporting local manufacturers and exporters. RPA does not specify

its standing on the issue; PPA speaks of equal conditions for local and international manufacturers.

Another popular suggestion, the creation of venture funds for supporting high-risk business start-ups, is offered by PPA and ANC.

On declarative level all parties propose the struggle against monopolies and support of industry. For instance, "Heritage" and PPA propose to create industrial clusters and connect them with science, making the science self-sufficient.

Education and culture

In the sphere of education the promises of parties are very similar – the support of higher education system from state budget. If RPA proposes to leave the school education free of charge and make the higher education free only for the poor, setting all-time high price for higher education, ARDF proposes to make the whole educational system free. ROL considers it necessary to give the best students, handicaps and their children an opportunity of getting free education. Heritage offers favorable condition for poor and rural citizens applying for universities, while PPA and ROL propose student loans. Rule of law also offers to introduce discount system on transportation, etc. for students.

Oppositional parties – ANC, ARDF and Heritage - offer to raise the salaries of teachers and lecturers working in the educational system. In respect to the Academy of Sciences the viewpoints differ; ROL offers to increase the funding of the Academy, ANC is going to reorganize it into a public organization.

Other proposals in the fields of education, science and culture are diverse. RPA offers to complete the introduction of e-learning system and the continuation of state support of Armenian Apostolic Church. PPA offers implementation of sports into education and subsidies for science. ANC proposes the abolition of the Unified State Exam, while creating an opportunity to transfer from one department to another. They also vouch for private foundation of education and science, while preserving partial state financing of this sector.

Infrastructure and Environment

The most common proposal in this area was a complete or partial ban on construction in the center of Yerevan. RPA and ARF offer a complete ban, ANC a partial one (construction in Yerevan can be allowed only with the permission of residents of neighboring houses). The problem of emergency buildings is in the center of attention of Rule of Law: the party promises an inventory of damaged houses and measures for their strengthening.

RPA and ANC suggest creating a territorial system of environmental protection; ANC also offers the creation of "ecological cadastre."

ANC and ROL propose the introduction of waste management and encouragement of low-waste enterprises. ROL promises to create recycling enterprises.

Energy agenda can be found in RPA, ANC and «Heritage» programs, however their provisions differ significantly. Thus, RPA only promises to carry on ongoing projects including the construction of Armenia-Iran, Armenia-Georgia power lines and the Armenia-Iran oil pipeline. ANC promises to increase the tax on mineral resources development to 50-70%, "Heritage" proposes to completely abandon nuclear power use and build a set of small hydroelectric power plants instead of the nuclear plant. The party proposes to make the environment a major factor when development planning.

Regional Development

Problems of regional development unlike the human rights issues were in the center of attention of all parties' election programs.

The main theme of campaign promises in the area of regional development was agriculture, with a number of promises resembling those in the field of social policy. For example, the "Rule of Law" promised additional subsidies for remote villages and other vulnerable groups in the regions, while "Heritage" promised to repeatedly increase transfers to the community budgets, up to 25-35% of the total budget. PPA, ROL and ANC promised farmers soft

loans and subsidies. PPA and Rule of Law promised insurance of agricultural risks: from crop failure, weather, etc. Another theme in the promises to farmers was the assistance in product realization, since nowadays speculators are buying products from farmers at very low prices (usually ranging at 15-20% of market prices). Creation of markets was promised by PPA and ANC, with the PPA promising to create 10 large farmers markets across the country, and the ANC promising to issue permission to trade in any urban backyard. PPA and "Heritage" promised to create tractor stations. Thus, almost all the regional programs of ANC, PPA and "Rule of Law" were an agricultural. «Heritage» and ARDF offered more structural changes: implementation of direct and indirect governor elections. ARDF also offered to change the territorial administrative division, but did not specify the nature if the changes. «Heritage» also offered to create municipal police.

RPA offered to continue the current policy: the development of regional infrastructure, installment of anti-hail stations, implementation of cultural and economic projects in the fields, and so forth. Along with "Heritage" they also propose the enlargement of communities.

Healthcare

All six parties stated the importance of medical insurance. ANC proposes to introduce mandatory health insurance, 30% of which will be covered by the state. ARDF offers corporate health insurance and increase of free medical services. RPA offers to fund health insurance for poor, while «Heritage» offers the same for retired citizens.

ANC also offers an introduction of certificates on medical services and state subsidies for drug prices. According to the Congress, the state should subsidize 10% of medicine cost. The suggestion of "Heritage" on developing traditional medicine is also noteworthy.

RPA proposals in this area more practical and relate to projects that are in the process of implementation - construction of a new hospitals and oncology center.

Social Welfare

Preferential mortgage has been the focus of the social programs of almost all parties; it was offered by RPA, PPA, ARDF and «Heritage» - i.e. everybody except ANC. However, it should be noted that the Rule of Law and ARDF offered housing for families with 5 children (in case of ARDF for families with five or more children, ROL offers to cover mortgage for young families and those with 5 children).

Childbirth subsidies are the second most popular theme. Republican party offers to increase subsidies for third child, while «Heritage», «Rule of Law», ARDF and ANC offer to do the same starting from the first child. For instance, Armenian National Congress offers to pay 500.000 drams as a subsidy for the first child, 1 mln for the second and 1.5 mln for the third and beyond.

Pensions are another popular subject. RPA and ANC offer to create pension funds. On top of that ANC proposes to make them private. Other parties simply offer to increase pensions. ARDF states a specific sum - up to 63 000 drams (in contrast to the current 26 thousands).

Three parties offer to influence the utility prices. Heritage calls it "optimizing prices in the spheres of natural monopolies," ARDF promises to freeze current prices on utilities for 5 years, and the PPA even promises to reduce prices.

Another noteworthy promise is to refund deposits from the USSR Sberbank (Saving Accounts). The majority of parties promise to compensate the sums in one way or another or even return the full deposit. However, only «Heritage» party specifies the compensation mechanism. «Heritage» came up with another unique proposal - «oblige teachers, lawyers and doctors to work two-three years in the villages providing them with everything they require».

Social promises of the parties are so vast that sometimes look unfeasible: you can find the estimate budget of promised benefits on page 5.



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