Bridging the Gaps in Armenia's Political Space: the Political Party System after the 'Velvet Revolution'

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Abstract

Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' further underlined the inherent flaws in Armenia's political space. Political parties had lost touch with their voter base and had broadly failed to fulfil their functions. Consolidation was reached not in the political, but in the public field. The civic activist base played a crucial role in the revolution, raising further questions as to the relevance of political parties. However, with a switch to a parliamentary system of governance, the role of the parliament—and the political parties—has become crucial. For the parliamentary democracy system to gain traction, political parties will need to adapt and develop institutionally—both separately and as a whole—in the process and work closely with civil society more broadly.

The Context

The Velvet Revolution swept through Armenia at a time when the country had just switched into a parliamentary system of governance. The new revolutionary government carries the promise of building a more democratic, liberal and just Armenia. Snap parliamentary elections held in December 2018 have created a truly representative parliament through free and fair elections—something Armenia had long lacked. The vote brought a landslide victory to Pashinyan's 'My Step' alliance. The alliance received 70.4% of the votes, while the Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia parties received 8.3% and 6.4% of the votes, respectively. The two former ruling coalition partners, the Republican Party of Armenia and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun, failed to overcome the 5% threshold that parties need to enter the Parliament.

In addition to the plethora of challenges that need to be approached, the political system will also need to navigate a new form of governance. Now that the executive power has moved from the president to the prime minister, the role of the parliament will naturally increase. However, the new parliamentary system arguably lacks the most crucial component necessary for a functioning democracy: a stable and institutionalised party system. Armenia's political parties are not attuned to parliamentarianism. Most of the parties remain under-institutionalised, hierarchical, personalistic or clientelistic entities that have broadly failed to fulfil their political functions. Many lack distinct ideological bases and fail to offer viable electoral programmes. The parties have lost touch with the wider public and have squandered the trust of their constituencies. For a long time, the political field in Armenia was monop-

olised, fragmented and polarised, and it is still far from having a stable and coherent party system in place.

The revolution has further underlined these inherent flaws. The political field failed to consolidate prior to the events that snowballed into a huge wave of public protests. As public dissatisfaction with the political system had been brewing for a long time, Armenia has developed a viable tradition of street protests as the only remaining alternative to the electoral system that has not been trusted for over two decades. When they decided to launch a 'street struggle' against the move of former president Serzh Sargsyan into the office of prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party were not even able to garner the support of their partner parties across the Yelq parliamentary alliance, let alone reach a broader consolidation across the opposition spectrum. Instead, Pashinyan managed to generate convergence across the civil society and public fields, including with circles that mistrusted him. The civic activist base has played a crucial role in the revolution, acting in a remarkably de-centralised fashion. In contrast, major political parties were absent from the process.[1] Parliamentary parties tuned in only after president-turned-prime-minister Sargsyan had resigned and the protesting crowd had swelled into unprecedented numbers in what rather looked like an attempt to save face and remain relevant.

However, while the revolution has questioned the relevance of political parties, the parties remain irreplaceable in terms of the functions they need to carry out in order for a democratic regime to be consolidated in Armenia.

The Political Party System

Armenia's political parties have been lost in transition, similar to most other institutions in the country.

1　Representatives of several political parties were involved at the individual level, while a few parties expressed support of the protesters but never threw full political support behind the process.

A number of factors have affected the parties' evolution. For one, informing the evolution of political parties was the former semi-presidential form of governance. The role of political parties in a presidential system is usually limited in scope. The parties tend to serve as electoral parties or electoral machines that seek to occupy the highest number of political offices and provide political support for the executive—the president. Accordingly, presidential systems, especially in young democracies[2] and non-democratic regimes, tend to incentivise the emergence of political parties that are loosely structured, personalistic and clientelistic in nature and have a low level of institutionalisation. This gives the political field the flexibility to restructure parties or change party affiliations based on the call of the day. Because presidential systems generate a 'winner-takes-all' approach, the political field also tends to be more polarised in the presidential system (Croissant and Merkel, 2004).

These deficiencies are all applicable to the party system currently in place in Armenia. The political context also matters. Armenia's pre-revolutionary hybrid regime and under-developed political party system had been reinforcing each other. Clearly, a lack of free and fair elections is not conducive to the institutionalisation of parties, as the rules of the game favour other factors, such as access to money and administrative resources, to succeed in the competition for power.

The political system developing in Armenia prior to the revolution can be framed as a one-party rule under the veneer of a multi-party system. The coalition government in place was a pretence at democratic governance rather than a genuine power-sharing exercise, as the ruling Republican Party of Armenia had the absolute majority of votes in the parliament. Even though the Armenian parliament has always had multi-party representation,[3] because of deep mistrust towards electoral processes in Armenia among both the wider public and the expert community, the parliament could not be said to have been truly representative. The switch from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of governance stipulated by Constitutional changes in 2015 was broadly viewed as an attempt by the ruling elite to perpetuate their power while formally remaining within the confines of the law—something that eventually backfired.

It was in this context that Armenia's political parties were operating. The ruling party and parties that had formed a coalition with the ruling party at various points lost touch with reality and failed to see the deepening rift between the public and themselves. As for the opposition in Armenia, it had long been marginalised—'divided and ruled'. Parties in opposition to the government had failed to consolidate and funnel accumulated public grievances to generate political change. Fragmented and polarised, they would end up fighting each other more than challenging the incumbents and would normally fail to support a united opposition candidate in the presidential elections (with the exception of 2008) or form pre-electoral alliances and garner a weighty share of votes at parliamentary polls. Most street protests led by political forces would soon falter, leading to public disappointment and alienation from political parties. These deficiencies point to the weak institutionalisation of not only individual political parties but also the political party system as a whole. It is no wonder, then, that the disillusionment with the political elite led to the emergence of a vibrant civic activist movement.

Clash of the Political and the Civic

The opposition political parties in Armenia managed to build up and lead street protests of various strengths until 2013, and they depleted all political capital to consolidate the street after that. Since 2010, as a sign of disgruntlement from dysfunctional political parties, various grassroots civic movements began to emerge. Groups of civic activists engaged in ad hoc struggles for environmental and social issues, ranging from the preservation of green spaces to marching against electricity price hikes. In most cases, the groups managed to attract scores of citizens and recorded successful results, with the authorities having to cave in to their demands. With these activities happening in the context of accelerating civic movements worldwide, these groups gained traction as the dominant engine of change in Armenia. This has made many speak of the civil society groups filling the void of political space in Armenia.

However, these movements avoided politicisation by distancing themselves from political parties (which they mistrusted) and choosing not to raise systemic and political demands. However, most of the social and environmental issues addressed by the movements had deeper roots in the oligarchic economy and constrained political space and were political in nature. The ad hoc protests were fighting symptoms while the causes remained unchallenged.

This explains the limits of civic activism, not only in Armenia but also elsewhere. Most civic movements are based on anti-institutional networks.[4] This is perhaps

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2   It is important to note that the political party system is underdeveloped in young democracies regardless of the system of governance.

3   The minimum number of parties/blocs represented in the parliament had previously been four.

4   In the Armenian context, it would be accurate to differentiate between the civic movements and institutionalised NGO groups. While there is some overlap between the two, the above-mentioned movements have also well distanced themselves from bigger organisations that comprise the so-called NGO-cracy.

where the inherent contradiction between the civic and the political stems from. To achieve political change, the system that a civic movement dismantles should be replaced by another. However, civic movements have neither the willingness nor the capacity to undertake political functions. As Ivan Krastev put it, "you can tweet a revolution, but you cannot tweet a government" (Krastev, 2015).

However, Armenia's Velvet Revolution seems to have reconciled this contradiction. It was the fusion of *the political* and *the civic* that made the revolution possible: a political leadership—however small its initial support base—that initiated and led the process and was ready to take political responsibility for the aftermath and a civic activist base that tapped into its accumulated experience to dismantle the old system.

What Next?

The political elite more broadly will still need to re-establish themselves in the political space and regain their representative function. While Pashinyan and his immediate team enjoy unprecedented popularity and support at the moment, it is largely the effect of the revolution and is unlikely to be sustained forever, and public trust in other political parties still remains low. Given that he has political ambition, Pashinyan will have to deal with the empowerment of his own hitherto small party, which, among other things, lacks political cadres. While it is true that parliamentary systems incentivise the development of more programmatic, well-structured and well-institutionalised political parties, a switch to a parliamentary system per se does not guarantee such change. Many other factors affect party system evolution, and path dependence will be difficult to eliminate. The new political system in Armenia will therefore need to tackle the challenge of the sustainability of the new form of governance. It is not enough for individual political parties to be well institutionalised; the party system should also be institutionalised. Armenian political parties still need to learn to function in a multi-party environment and be attuned to coalition building and power-sharing practices.

Although the December elections were competitive, free and fair due to the political will of the interim government, there is still a need to carry out a number of reforms that will also institutionalise such a level playing field for free and fair elections in the future. These include reforming the country's electoral code[5] and the law on political parties. Improving the way elections are won and the way parties operate will also positively affect the evolution of the party system in Armenia. For example, installing an all-proportional representation and removing the so-called 'rating system' (a form of majoritarian

system) will favour the development of a stable and programmatic party system over a personalistic one. The way party financing is organised can also contribute to the institutionalisation of parties. With very little public funding and a small membership base, the existing system makes parties dependent on private donations. In the past, this has rewarded the merger of business and politics in Armenia, giving bigger political parties with oligarchic ties advantages over smaller political parties of the opposition that have no influential donors. Creating mechanisms for the increased public funding of political parties can level the playing field, contribute to a competitive party system and fuel institutional and programmatic parties with professional party cadres.

In the longer term, the new Armenian leadership might need to review the current Constitution. Although it is meant to produce a parliamentary system, the way the Constitution stipulates that the parliamentary majority be formed is against the spirit of parliamentary pluralism. More specifically, it requires that elections produce an absolute majority force in the parliament, thereby presuming a one-party rule. This stipulation is meant to help avoid a government formation crisis in a country with external threats to its security in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but it can also be exploited by a ruling party in a non-consolidated democracy.

In the shorter term, the civil society/activist base of the revolution can contribute to the new political system, especially in the process of reforming the country. Following the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, scores of civil society representatives entered politics, running for the parliament or taking up key positions –to help facilitate reforms. Although there can be certain reservations regarding such practices, this would also be logical for Armenia, given that the old system has depleted itself and the new political forces that have come into power lack human resources and professional cadres. In considering gender parity as a cross-cutting issue, the new government should also increase the momentum of using the huge potential that women can bring to good governance in Armenia.

Becoming attuned to a new system of governance will take some time. It will take political will and responsible collaboration for the political parties in Armenia to turn into functional actors of a parliamentary democracy. In the meantime, the civil society/activist base has a role to play, both as contributors to the fruition of a new, more democratic system and as government watchdogs. Armenia still needs the fusion of the political and the civic to sustain the momentum of the Velvet Revolution.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and references.

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5   An attempt to do this prior to the December vote was thwarted by the old guard in the Parliament.

About the Author

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Results of Armenia's Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 December 2018
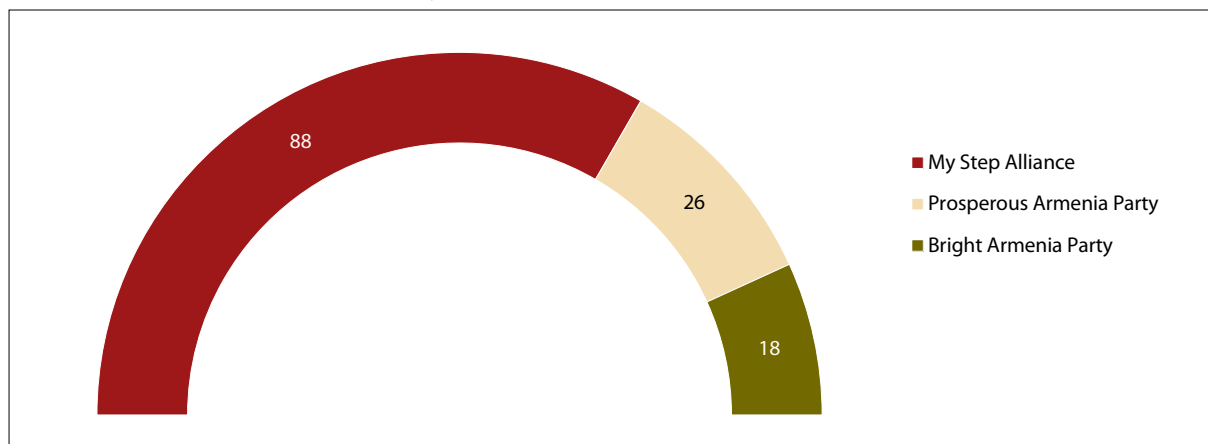
Figure 1:   Official Election Result
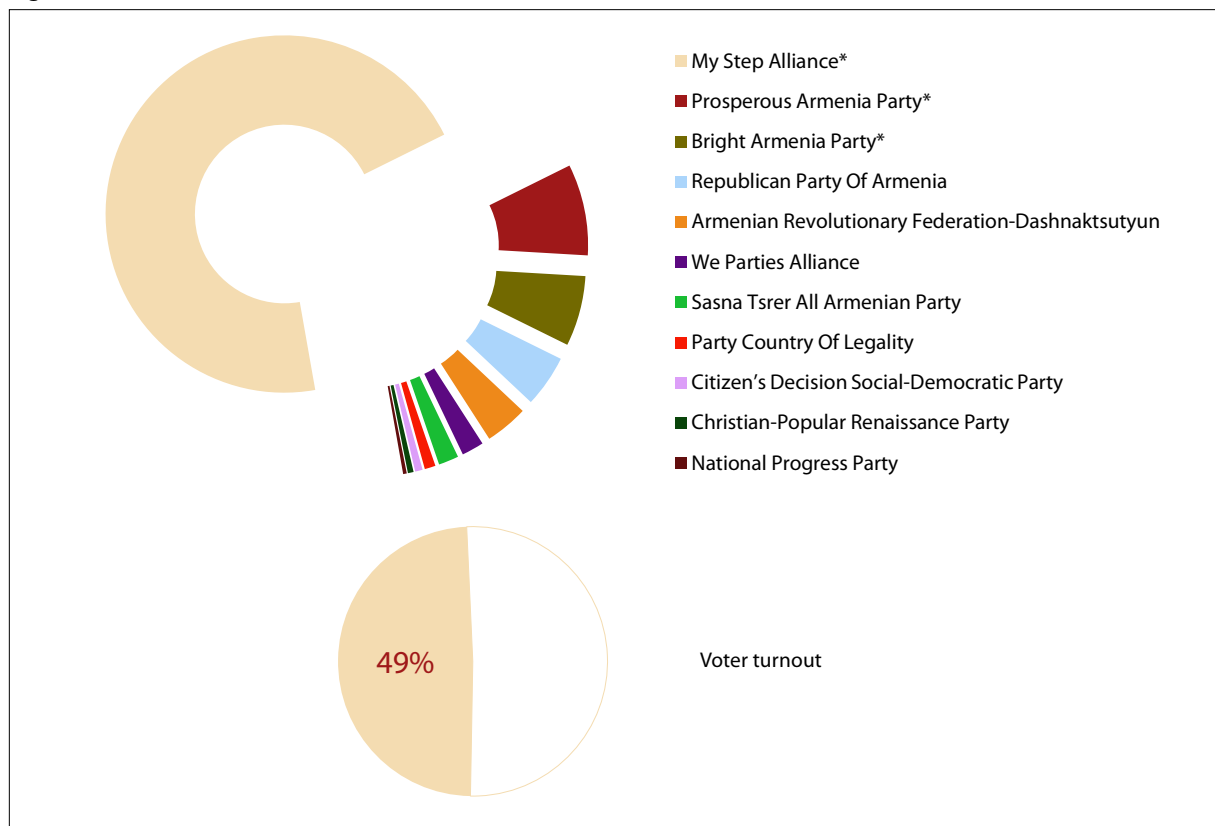
* Parties which received the minimum number of votes necessary in order to exceed the electoral threshold (5% for parties and 7% for multi-party alliances) required to gain seats in parliament.

Please see overleaf for exact figures.

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/

Figure 2:   Distribution of Parliamentary Seats

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/

Table 1:   Official Election Result

Party	Number of Votes	% Share
My Step Alliance*	884.864	70.4%
Prosperous Armenia Party*	103.801	8.3%
Bright Armenia Party*	80.047	6.4%
Republican Party Of Armenia	59.083	4.7%
Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun	48.816	3.9%
We Parties Alliance	25.176	2.0%
Sasna Tsrer All Armenian Party	22.868	1.8%
Party Country Of Legality	12.393	1.0%
Citizen's Decision Social-Democratic Party	8.514	0.7%
Christian-Popular Renaissance Party	6.458	0.5%
National Progress Party	4.121	0.3%
Voter turnout:		**49%**

Source: Central Election Commission of Armenia, https://www.elections.am/parliamentary/