Before the Voting Day: The Impact of Patron-Client Relations and Related Violations on Elections in Armenia

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Introduction by the Special Editor

Parliamentary elections have become the central event in Armenia's political life as the constitutional referendum of 2015 transformed the country into a parliamentary republic. The first parliamentary elections after the referendum were held on April 2, 2017; they were soon followed by municipal elections in Armenia's capital on May 14, 2017. During the national elections several Armenian NGOs organized an unprecedentedly comprehensive observation mission, by jointly having observers in about 87% of the republic's polling stations, while the oppositional Yelk alliance claims to have been able to send proxies to all of Yerevan's polling stations during the municipal elections. However, the public discourse in Armenia holds that the core of violations took place outside the polling stations.

This interdisciplinary issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest looks at some of the most common pre-election violations, civil society's observation missions, and challenges related to the electoral system of the Republic of Armenia. The first contribution by sociologist and anthropologist Milena Baghdasaryan analyzes the workings of patron–client networks and some of the most pervasive violations that took place prior to the elections, including the abuse of administrative and economic power, putting pressure on voters' free will, vote-buying and pre-election charity. Based on anonymized interviews it also discusses citizens' reasons for collaboration as members of such networks.

The contribution by political analyst Armen Grigoryan examines the development of civil society's observation missions in Armenia since 2010 and their results and effectiveness during the parliamentary elections of 2017. It also covers the abuse of state resources by the ruling political party and its impact on the election results.

Finally, the contribution by lawyer Tigran Yegoryan discusses the activities of the electoral administration bodies, the impact of the law enforcement practice on changes in the electoral law and vice-versa, and some of the problems and risks which have become apparent in the electoral processes. The author discusses the efficiency of the existing legislation in terms of preventing and revealing electoral violations, conducting effective examination, and effectively defending electoral rights.

Milena Baghdasaryan

Before the Voting Day: The Impact of Patron–Client Relations and Related Violations on Elections in Armenia

By Milena Baghdasaryan

Abstract

This article analyses how political forces recruit voters on a large scale using patron–client relations in organizations and residential neighbourhoods in Armenia and outlines the electoral violations often caused by such relations. The contribution also discusses cases of vote-buying not based on long-term ties and outlines citizens' reasons for collaboration. Even if some argue that certain forms of clientelism may have benefits, in this case, authoritarian patron–client relations are detrimental to democracy: citizens who vote from a position of subordination and insecurity or in exchange for particularistic benefits are unable to hold political elites vertically accountable and elect genuine representatives.

These elections were based on 100 percent confirmed lists [of votes for specific parties].
A school teacher referring to parliamentary elections 2017

Introduction

On one afternoon, soon after the parliamentary elections in 2017, as I sat with a teacher for an interview, she explained why she voted for a party she did not favour. 'A pre-election meeting was held at our school', she began, 'we were told that we are free to make our choice. However, we were reminded that our government is Republican, that it's thanks to the Republican Party that we have jobs today, that we should always remember that, be thankful and that it would be better if we voted for this party'. 'Could you not vote as you preferred?'

I asked, and she responded that a certain number of votes was previously agreed upon in the village and as she entered the polling station she was given a green pen and asked to mark the ballot with it. To my question whether she would be fired in case of non-compliance, she responded that she feared being put on the 'black list' and her life being turned into a nightmare: people in the village depended on maintaining good relationships with their superiors. She added that employees were also approached individually and promised a sum of money per vote, but the money never reached them; 'it was probably appropriated by those who were supposed to distribute it'.

Instances in which people spoke of having been offered bribes or compelled to vote for certain parties/candidates by their superiors at work (with or without material inducements) are countless. Materials published by civil society organisations and the media as well as my fieldwork suggest that the recruitment of voters through patron–client networks was systemic and occurred with the involvement of the state bureaucratic apparatus. In particular, three political forces out of four currently represented in the parliament were referred to in this context: the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA, which gained 49.17% of the vote), the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP, part of Tsarukyan Alliance, 27.35%), and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, 6.58%).

This article investigates the wide-scale recruitment of voters using patron–client relations in organizations and residential neighbourhoods in Armenia and outlines electoral violations often caused by such relations, including pressuring citizens with the threat of negative consequences, promising or distributing rewards, using prohibited forms of propaganda, e.g., by state officials while on duty or in educational institutions during working hours, and so forth. It also discusses cases of vote-buying not based on long-term relations and outlines citizens' reasons for cooperation. Given that the discussed practices bear the legacy of the Soviet past, this article may prove relevant for other post-Soviet countries. It contributes to the literature on the role of patron–client relations for the maintenance of political power in authoritarian settings.

The article is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in an urban setting during a former round of parliamentary elections (including such methods as a quantitative survey, semi-structured interviews and participant observation), and on anonymous semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017 in five rural and urban settlements in Armenia. For reasons of anonymity, I conceal my informants' and field sites' names.

Patron–Client Relations and Corruption in Post-Soviet Armenia

The patron–client relationship is classically defined by James Scott (1972, p. 92) as '*a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron*'. In the case of large political machines, patrons are typically connected to their clientele via middlemen. As noted by Luis Roniger (1994, p. 4), patron–client relations combine inequality and solidarity, and even if declared to be voluntary they imply potential or actual coercion. Jonathan Fox (1994) proposes that clientelism may take different forms including authoritarian clientelism, which relies predominantly on coercion, and semi-clientelism, which instead threatens with the withdrawal of client benefits. In the case of Armenia, patron–client relations take different forms and usually draw both on distributions of benefits and coercive means.

The prominence of patron–client relations in the internal politics of most post-Soviet states, including Armenia, is a legacy of the Soviet past. As Christoph Stefes (2006, p. 1) notes, corruption in Soviet republics was systemic and centralized, parallel to the formal bureaucratic apparatus there existed a hierarchy of corrupt patron–client networks 'that linked higher to lower officials, officials to citizens, and officials in various party and state units to each other'. The highest party officials controlled these networks (p. 2). Lower officials had to pay bribes to get hired, be loyal to their superiors and share illicit gains with them, while their superiors provided them with protection from prosecution (pp. 67–71). Soviet citizens who regularly dealt with corrupt officials had little choice but to engage in illicit activities, including bribery, themselves (p. 74). As a result of this, they 'developed over time what Simis (1982, p. 289) called "two separate systems of morality." On one hand, citizens trusted their friends and relatives, and usually abstained from betraying or stealing from them. On the other, Soviet citizens gave bribes to state officials with little moral concerns' (Stefes, 2006, p. 74). While in some post-Soviet republics corrupt networks were mostly eradicated or became decentralized, in others, including Armenia, the post-Soviet elites maintained centralized control over the networks (Stefes, 2006). Stefes (2006, pp. 2–5) proposes that centralization helps reduce the extent of corruption; he also notes that control over centralized corrupt networks is not only extremely profitable, but may serve as a means for maintaining political power.

Freedom House (2017) defines Armenia as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime with the electoral process scoring a 6 on a scale from 1 (most democratic) to 7 (least democratic). The branches of government are not independent from each other and political and economic power are tightly intertwined (Stefes 2006, Payaslian 2011). Similar to certain other powerful parties in post-Soviet countries, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia has at times been referred to as a 'party of power', 'mainly comprising senior government officials, civil servants, and wealthy business people dependent on government connections' (The Economist 2007; also see Isaacs 2011).

Clientelist Recruitment and Propaganda in Organizations and Residential Neighbourhoods

Over the course of the years, many of my interviewees talked of the wide-spread abuse of administrative and economic resources by the political and business elites in order to assure favourable election outcomes. In particular, state, public and private organizations have been utilized as sites for massive voter recruitment, with directors and state officials acting as middlemen between politicians and citizens. Themselves clients of a political force, the middlemen have been using their power to assure the political support of their subordinates during elections.

In a typical scenario, directors or managers held pre-election meetings in their organizations, during which it was made clear to employees or students that they should be voting for the party that their directors supported. Sometimes, subordinates were also requested to join a political party or even assure that their family members and friends also voted for it. In some cases, e.g., in certain private enterprises owned by party candidates, employees were blatantly threatened that they would be fired if they did not cooperate. In other cases, such requests were often represented as 'asking for a favour', or asking for assistance or loyalty in response to achievements or good treatment by their directors. However, people often understood that not being loyal to their directors would put their long-term relations at risk and that various negative consequences could ensue. Some employees said that even missing a pre-election meeting or a political rally would result in getting fired.

Such requests were usually accompanied by heavy party propaganda with middlemen speaking of the accomplishments of party leaders and giving promises, trying to convince their subordinates to make this choice willingly. It should be mentioned that according to the law, state and local self-government bodies, state and community servants (except members of parliament), and workers of educational institutions are prohibited to engage in pre-election party propaganda while fulfilling their duties. However, materials published by civil society organisations suggest that educational institutions in particular became sites for party propaganda. In some organizations, these practices created an ideological atmosphere of fake consensus, somewhat similar to the Soviet past, as some commented: employees were expected to demonstrate loyalty and could hardly express a critical stance towards the respective party.

It should be stressed that for many employees, such propaganda was indeed convincing, and they voted according to their own will. Many did so out of genuine respect for their directors, or influenced by the charisma of certain leaders, e.g., the recently appointed Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan, in the case of the Republican Party. Furthermore, at times, the employees/students were also promised financial rewards or promotion, and some candidates' campaigns were supported by highly appreciated though illicit pre-election charity. Therefore, many responded to the call to support certain parties with eagerness; since patron–client relationships implied long-term reciprocity, many found it in their own interests to support their superiors and certain powerful parties.

Thus, while conducting fieldwork in the province of Kotayk during a previous cycle of elections, I found myself in the midst of a massive recruitment campaign (Baghdasaryan, 2017). This region is the power base of the Prosperous Armenia party headed by the oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan. Given that the party's campaigns rely strongly on the oligarch's image as a benefactor and on long-term charity, including illicit pre-election distributions, many informants who received assets joined and voted for this party eagerly. Many did so both to reciprocate and based on the genuine assumption that the oligarch would be a good leader, since some of his charity benefitted the community and resembled state welfare provisions. At the same time, however, numerous officials and directors of public and private organizations actively engaged in the campaign and the recruitment process. For instance, according to my informants, free lottery tickets for a pre-election concert were distributed to an entire town's residents with the help of a municipality. Directors and managers invited their subordinates to support the party, and many found themselves unable to refuse such requests.

In the case of the Republican Party, my interviewees considered it common knowledge that people working or serving in state administration, power structures, public institutions or private organizations whose directors are affiliated with the ruling elite are expected/compelled to vote for it or its coalition members (particularly

the ARF). Some talked of this in general terms; others spoke of themselves or of their relatives and friends. In conditions where political culture requires conformity (Payaslian, 2011, p. 290), not supporting the ruling party would imply disloyalty to one's government and superior officials. For instance, according to legal adviser Heriknaz Tigranyan (Transparency International Anticorruption Center, personal communication on 30.03.2017), in 2017 approximately 7000 people joined the RPA on the same day, mostly workers of two large organizations in the gas and electrical network industries. Even if it is highly improbable for employees of an organization to unanimously support one party, this case never became subject to investigation since no employee testified that they were compelled to join/support the party by their managers. It goes without saying that some informants identified with or appreciated certain achievements of this party and supported it genuinely.

A record of a pre-election meeting with workers of a supermarket chain, published soon after the parliamentary elections in 2017, provides a vivid illustration of clientelist recruitment. It reveals that in exchange for money, all employees were requested to secure the votes of their relatives and acquaintances for the enterprise owner (a candidate of the RPA). The request is disguised as a 'favour' which employees are asked for 'only once in five years'; a man on the record tells the employees to treat the election of their chief as their personal issue, a matter of pride, rather than a question of which party wins. He appeals to their sense of gratitude by stressing that if they work in this organization they, to a certain extent, make use of its benefits, and finding a job is not an easy matter. 'Do you know that you have to bring votes?' he asks a woman with an intimidating tone while she tries to justify herself. While reading the employees' names, he reprimands those who 'brought' few votes or managers who could not assure massive recruitment in their departments and threatens them with dismissal if they do not improve their performance. He also orders the dismissal of those who missed the meeting. At the same time, he praises those who 'brought' more than a dozen votes and promises promotion, managerial positions or a trip to Paris to the most active ones. He says that supportive employees can approach their superiors and ask for support in the future: 'people who support us forever stay our friends'. The record was made publicly available, and a criminal case was initiated on the 19th of April. However, on the 8th of September, the case was closed with reference to the absence of criminal content; the official representatives did not provide further details concerning the investigation (Azatutyun, 2017).

In 2017, my interviewees also talked of the pervasive compilation of lists of voters who confirmed in advance that they would be voting for a specific party at specific polling stations. Some said that the organizers only wished to put trusted people on the list and even collected people's passport numbers to make the process seem more formal. 'Could people not vote as they wished anyway?' I asked my interviewees. Some of them expressed fears that party representatives could find out how people voted, for instance through the use of video cameras, mirrors, special pens, and so forth. Interviewees also shared stories of people being punished for not complying. Thus, one informant told a story she heard in which during a former election a senior official checked the ballot of a young soldier, who was later treated worse for not voting as requested. Another interviewee told of a municipal worker being fired for not voting in the election. Furthermore, given that in many cases promised benefits, e.g., jobs, would only be available if a candidate gained a certain number of votes, the clients themselves became genuinely interested in the candidate's victory. Many were unaware of the unprecedented observation mission organized by local NGOs which strived to prevent such violations.

To prove that the RPA abused administrative resources and that state authorities and public organizations were systematically engaged in voter recruitment, members of the Union of Informed Citizens NGO called the directors of 136 organizations (public schools and kindergartens randomly chosen across the entire republic). Pretending to be representatives of the RPA election headquarters, they made enquiries concerning voter lists (Sut.am, 2017a). Indeed, the directors of 84 schools and 30 kindergartens spoke of the lists they compiled, which mainly included pupils' parents; moreover, many directors mentioned that they had handed the lists to the RPA election headquarters or to state executive authorities, including regional governments or municipalities (Sut.am, 2017a). In fact, references were made to all regional governments except where the governor is appointed by the ARF and to all administrative districts of the capital Yerevan and to numerous municipalities (Sut.am, 2017a). On one of the records, a school director talks about having compiled a list of 1700 names, working with people for a month and 'frightening them in the worst ways' in order for them to vote for the RPA (Mkrtchyan, 2017, author's translation). However, after the publication of the records on 24 March 2017, the Prosecutor General's Office 'did not examine [the records] in totality, as a pyramid of administrative resource abuse, but considered them one by one', and announced that only one of the records could potentially indicate a crime (Sut.am 2017b, author's translation). No criminal case was initiated after all: the director explained that she told people she would be offended if they did

not vote for the RPA and the responsible prosecutor found no proof of a crime (Mkrtchyan, 2017).

In addition to organizations, residential neighbourhoods have also been used as sites for voter recruitment on the basis of patron-client ties. In particular, businessmen, oligarchs or officials engaged in local charitable projects, for instance, providing social support for the needy, renovating or constructing infrastructure or promising/providing jobs in return for residents' votes. Such projects, even if illicit during the pre-election campaign, were usually appreciated by residents.

Vote-buying practices not based on interpersonal ties were also typically organized in residential neighbourhoods over the years. For instance, interviewees in several locations spoke of bribe-givers pervasively visiting people's homes and offering them deals; mass distribution of money from parties' pre-election headquarters was also talked about. In 2017, prior to municipal elections in the capital journalists and opposition members made several public reports concerning cases of vote-buying. Thus, on May 11 in the evening, a journalist noticed people gathered at one of the pre-election headquarters of the Republican candidate; she entered and witnessed people's names being called out from a list and money (20.000 AMD, equal to about 40 USD) being distributed to them. On May 12, after the oppositional candidate visited another RPA headquarters due to a report of bribery, his representatives observed a woman walking out of the headquarters and throwing a package into a garbage bin. The package contained various documents, e.g., a list of people responsible for polling stations of the city district with details on money and how many votes were expected at each station; detailed instructions for bribe givers containing the sentence 'nose-up, we stand at your back in all respects'; an un-signed contract for responsible persons with blank spaces for money and number of votes and a statement that they would have to return the money if they secured fewer than a certain number of votes; a list with types of specific community works offered, and a fax with a list of policemen and numbers of votes they could secure. The criminal case based on the latter discovery was also stopped (Azatutyun, 2017).

Citizens' Reasons for Collaboration

It should be mentioned at the outset that although such practices are pervasive, they are not all-encompassing; some of my interviewees were not engaged in them.

According to the interviews, citizens willingly or unwillingly collaborated as part of patron–client networks because they lacked social security and protection of rights as workers, depended on informal connections and hierarchies, feared losing jobs and social security,

in some cases perceived patron–client ties as a source of security and benefits, did not mind being connected to those who have power by reciprocal ties, and so forth (also see Baghdasaryan, 2017).

Many share the conviction that the ruling party holds unchallenged power in the republic based on informal hierarchical connections between officials. They assume that only people loyal to the ruling elite are being appointed to executive positions, much like the *nomenklatura* appointments in the Soviet period (see Stefes, 2006, p. 67), and those affiliated with the elite, e.g., officials and businessmen, control much of the access to sources of social security, including jobs. In organizations, too, people thought it hard to find jobs without acquaintances and bribes; furthermore, after the appointment, political loyalty and support often became an un-written job requirement. As one of my informants said, 'at my workplace, there are only two people who were appointed without connections; everybody else is from [managers'] circle'. Interviewees also spoke of the increasing powers of their directors at work and often felt they were at their mercy. Hence many believed that in order to find and preserve jobs or get promoted they had to be loyal to their superiors. As an informant put it, 'one has to flatter them [the RPA], there is no other way. Had I been flattering them in the past, I would by now have a position in state administration myself'. Some interviewees were convinced that their directors or businessmen were not independent either. A teacher expressed the opinion that 'school directors were also compelled, in the sense that if you don't bring votes, you will lose your position. The directors have to be government supporters by default in order to be appointed as such. They too got their positions through acquaintances and bribes'.

While some informants would have gladly voted for the opposition but felt unable to do so, others distrusted the oppositional forces altogether. According to some, those who did not have control over large economic and political resources and informal networks could not actually assume leadership even if they would be able to receive votes; others distrusted the 'poor' believing that they would start enriching themselves while the current elites have already done that. The lack of trust in the electoral process and fatalistic assumptions such as 'they will anyway retain their power' made the acceptance of money or other benefits justifiable for many.

The lack of moral concern associated with bribery, which was wide-spread in the Soviet period, is still quite prevalent. Some of my informants understand that accepting a television set, a job, or a sum of money in exchange for political support is illicit. However, many certainly do not think it is criminal or immoral but

rather a matter of how things work, especially given that such practices are pervasive and involve major political forces. Instead, not reciprocating the money and 'cheating' or reporting to the police concerning one's acquaintances' involvement in bribery is seen as immoral. On the other hand, the provision of charity, money, community works or jobs by politicians is often seen as a positive phenomenon, a part of what the government should actually be providing for the people but often fails to. Practical deeds seem to be more appreciated than promises of certain policies. For some, pre-election distributions are a toll that the ruling elites have to pay to the people for maintaining their lucrative positions. Such attitudes are often coupled with a lack of awareness of the law and of one's own rights.

To conclude, patron–client relations often involved violations of the law and of citizens' political rights to free and voluntary suffrage and party membership. While in some cases clients voted or joined parties feeling compelled to do so, often they did so eagerly, or at least their lack of choice was combined with a certain degree of genuine appreciation (also see Baghdasaryan, 2017). In some cases their willingness was the result of receiving material inducements or formed in conditions of unequal party propaganda. Even if ideological reasons were not absent from clients' motivations, those who were engaged in patron–client relations typically voted for reasons other than appreciating parties' programmes, policies or performance. In fact, many voted in spite of being dissatisfied in many ways. Instead, considerations concerning insecurity, patrons' charisma, personal relations with superiors, particularistic personal or communal benefits were dominant. Some of my informants believed that clientelist relations were beneficial since they could receive visible (though illicit) benefits or could request certain support in exchange for votes. However, when I asked if they could jointly negotiate certain policies through patron–client ties, for instance, raise an important issue during a 'pre-election meeting' at work, they said this was hardly possible or never crossed their mind. Therefore, clientelist political participation hindered their ability to communicate their political will to the elites, to hold them vertically accountable and to elect genuine representatives. Voting from a position of subordination or in exchange for material rewards, they fell into a vicious circle of perpetuating relations of domination and own insecurity.

My discussions with numerous interviewees showed that the beliefs governing their voting behaviour were deep-seated and difficult to challenge; it would hardly be possible to convince a person not to take a bribe if they decided to, to vote as they preferred anyway or to take political programmes and performance more seriously. Given that such beliefs and practices are pervasive, structural changes and more active civil engagement would be required to initiate transformations, including improving workers' rights protection, assuring pervasive observer missions, and raising popular awareness concerning citizens' rights, democratic political participation, vertical accountability, and other topics.

About the Author
Milena Baghdasaryan specializes in political sociology and anthropology. She holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. She has conducted long-term research on migration, citizenship, political participation and patron–client relations in Armenia. She currently works as an expert on migration from Armenia on the preparation of the Unified Migration Report within the scope of the project "Promotion of labor migrants' rights protection through strengthening partnerships in Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Russia" implemented by the PA "Resource Center for Elderly", Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

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The Role of Civil Society Observation Missions in Democratization Processes in Armenia

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the impact of civil society observation missions on the transparency of national and local elections in Armenia. Observation missions in transitioning countries are key to developing electoral institutions and increasing public trust in elections. In many post-Soviet countries, civil society observation missions developed earlier than in Armenia, where they mainly started after 2010, but during the short period since then, they have developed rapidly. The article examines how election observation influences the election process and democratization in Armenia. It also examines the abuse of state resources by the ruling political party and its allies as well as its impact on the results of elections.

Organising free and fair elections is more important than the result itself
Fatos Nano (BBC, 2003)

Introduction

Holding free and fair elections is one of the essential elements of democracy, without which it cannot exist and function. That is why the most important precondition for the democratization of any country is the development of a full-fledged democratic electoral system.

Democracy literally means "government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system" (Dictionary.com Unabridged, n.d.).

Today, one of the major challenges facing the states that are in the process of democratizing is manipulated elections. Armenia is also affected by this fundamental issue; moreover, it is one of the main obstacles to the democratization of the country. Starting with Par-