# Referendum in Armenia : lessons to be learned.

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The Council of Europe, and for that matter, the whole of the European Union, could not fail to congratulate the record level of 'yes' votes recorded during the referendum on constitutional reform in Armenia on 27 November. But the satisfaction at seeing the law adopted - 93% voting 'yes' at a turnout of over 65% - was tempered by the wave of fraud allegations. The record number of people in favour of reform suddenly seemed just a little curious. Between calls for a straight boycott of the vote from the opposition, the post-referendum demonstrations that the opposition tried to organise and which only managed to bring together a few hundred people and the self-satisfaction of the government, the content of the reform itself was almost forgotten...

The least that you could say is that the debate on the text for Armenian constitutional reform hardly monopolised the masses - even less so the media and everyday conversation. On the eve of the vote, many people admitted to not really understanding the extent of the proposed reforms, which 2.4 million people were supposed to give their opinions on.

However, some of these reforms, which were described as "a step in the right direction towards more democracy" by the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission, which approved mot of the final draft, will have a distinct impact on the daily life of Armenians, both those in Armenia and those in the diaspora.

Basically, the law seeks to re-balance power between the parliament and the president. Some institutions, such as the law courts, were targeted by the reforms. The president's powers concerning the nomination and referral of judges are substantially restricted by the reforms. Equally, the procedure of nominating members to the highly controversial Television and Radio Commission, which is in charge of awarding broadcasting frequencies each year - and which has been criticised for being solely a instrument of the ruling party - is also set to be given more legal structure. Ditto for the ombudsman for human rights, while the possibility to elect the mayor of Yerevan, who has been named by the government up until now, is also set to become a reality.

Finally, and this is an important point, this new law revokes the article in the constitution outlawing dual nationality. The diaspora has requested this move for a long time and it is seen by many Armenians in Armenia as a positive step, with the exception of several Soviet dinosaurs who remain convinced that the hand of the West, the capitalist vampire, is behind the diaspora. Although the reform would end the ban on dual nationality, the parliament still has to legislate and prepare a draft law and such a process would no doubt be very complicated. In reality, awarding Armenian citizenship to the diaspora is not the problem; it is knowing what to do with the more than one million Armenians who have left the country since its independence and who now have different passports.

Drawing up a law determining the conditions of dual nationality would be a lengthy process, but it is now no longer impossible, thanks to the referendum. This is a clear sign that, since 1999 and the first pan-Armenian conference, there have been changes in the relationship

between the two halves of the Armenian people and that these changes have been in the right direction.

The opposition in trouble?

When it comes to the opposition, however, it will never be as clear on anything as on this particular point of the reform. One week before the vote on 27 November, the opposition called for people to boycott the referendum. But on the day of the vote, the normal leaders tried to mobilise their troops - troops that were more scattered than usual: from 2pm, barely 400 people around the opera house, in the cold and fog to denounce election rigging.

Demonstrations on the following days brought together even fewer people, the 'revolt' of the opposition barely got off the ground.

The results of the vote confused many observers and regular citizens.

At 3pm on the day of the vote, just 10% of voters had turned out in one of the major offices in the centre. These figures were announced by the chairman of this particular office. It is no surprise that the level of participation, even more so than the actual percentage voting "yes", was the subject of much comment. For the referendum to be valid, at least one-third of the 2.4 million people eligible to vote must have taken part - if not, the reform would have been dropped, as was the case two years ago when a referendum failed due to lack of voter participation. Criticism was focussed far more on the actual turnout figures than on the results of the referendum itself.

We are left with an apparent sense of apathy concerning the referendum, and also concerning the issue of whether it was rigged.

This is obviously because, once again, the opposition, which denounced the referendum, has shown itself incapable of being able to reach agreement and propose a true counter-programme, apart from the plan of toppling the current government for whatever reason comes to hand that day. Choosing to focus on vote-rigging in a referendum where the results seemed painless was, without doubt, the last straw for an opposition that is structurally weak and badly organised.