
A Perspective On The Presidential Election From Inside Armenia

By Fr. Ktrij Devejian
AZG Armenian Daily - 20/03/2008

Opinion

Since Tuesday's presidential elections in Armenia, I have received a number of well-intentioned e-mails from diasporan Armenians who have strong opinions about the outcome, and the methods with which that outcome was reached. Many of these authors have used language bordering on the hysterical and offensive to characterize the current situation in Armenia. Some state that they have received their information from sources within Armenia, including a number of "opposition" websites.

Well, since I am actually in Armenia, I would like to explain a few things, which may not occur to those who don't live here. And as a resident of this country for the past seven years, I think I have earned the right to make certain observations and criticisms emanating from personal experiences.

Armenia is not the United States. Therefore, there is no accepted tradition or institutional culture when it comes to many political activities to which Americans are accustomed. Democracy and democratic principles in Armenia are developing and progressing. It may not be happening at a pace that is acceptable to many; nevertheless, it is happening. Notwithstanding the pace, however, each and every Armenian, whether in Armenia or in the diaspora, has a solemn responsibility to support and encourage the maintenance, strength and endurance of our statehood.

Stability for our state is a high priority, one that may be difficult to comprehend for anyone or any people who, having enjoyed free and independent statehood for centuries, thus take it for granted. In the U.S., we accept America as no longer an experiment - it is a fait accompli. By contrast, Armenia is at a crossroads, and our very survival is at stake. Turkey continues its illegal blockade of Armenia and refuses to establish diplomatic ties with us. We are still technically at war, and although the cease-fire with Azerbaijan has held for more than 10 years, it is still a fragile and tenuous one. The threat of resuming hostilities and aggression by the Azeris is one that we live with every day, and has been one of the reasons, I believe, that unlike Georgia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries, Armenia has persevered and remained free of major civic unrest in recent years. We understand that unity is our weapon and our strength. And although internally we may have sharp disagreements and heated political arguments, Armenians know well that at the end of the day, no one, no nation, no country and no international organization can be relied upon to save us this time from complete annihilation. I am sure many of you would agree.

It is true, the elections were not flawless.

Deficiencies of all sorts were observed and are an unfortunate reality. However, the constitution of the Republic of Armenia worked: scheduled elections did take place, and a president who is term-limited is willingly stepping aside and giving up the power entrusted to him by the people. This may no longer be a revolutionary concept in California, Massachusetts, or Illinois, but for the former Soviet Union, it's an important, if symbolic, step. (For those who need further info, see Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, etc.)

Furthermore, international observers from the United States, Europe and Russia were present before and during the election to monitor the campaign atmosphere and balloting. They issued an 11-page report on the day following the elections. You can read it here: www.osce.org/item/29779.html. [See page A8 for the executive summary.] The report is available in English and Armenian, and was prepared by the OSCE/ODIHR monitoring mission. The report is critical in some areas, and offers praise in others, which was to be expected. In a nutshell, the monitors presented their findings, stating that the 2008 presidential elections were "mostly in line with international commitments."

This is not an apologia. We all want Armenia to do better. We all wait for the day when elections in Armenia are completely fair and transparent. And that day will come when our citizens fully become aware of their rights and responsibilities, and when the western "culture" of elections, voting, campaigning and political platforms become better integrated into Armenian society.

But just because that day is not here yet, does not mean that we throw up our arms, give up on democracy and think it merely an experiment gone bad. It has been said that democracy is a very bad form of government - it's just much better than anything else that's been tried in history. It would be hard to find anyone today, whether the authorities of Armenia or the opposition, who would seriously argue that abandoning our republican form of government because we haven't yet perfected it, is a logical or preferred path to follow.

We must therefore take great care before making frantic accusations, for they are heard by us as well as our adversaries. The mental laziness of giving in to wild conspiracies does not serve the long-term endurance of Armenia or the diaspora. For the first time in more than 600 years, Armenia is free and independent, and we are therefore obligated to place our national interests ahead of our personal gains or aspirations.

Fr. Ktrij Devejian is the foreign press secretary of the Catholicate of All Armenians, at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Born and educated in the United States, Fr. Devejian has lived in Armenia for the past seven years.
