Democratization in Armenia: Some Trends of Political Culture and Behavior

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Abstract: Historically, Armenian society was organized by strong communities established around the Armenian Apostolic Church, which helped these communities survive throughout the centuries despite the lack of a central authority. Community relationships are still very essential, especially during political processes such as elections. Community ties, combined with democratic ideas, have fostered some democratic practices, but the former Soviet republics still have a long way to go before they can be described as liberal democracies. Elections play an important role in a free society. However, in some Newly Independent States' societies, they are seen as a hindrance. Some Newly Independent States espouse their own kind of democracy, which, they proclaim, serves as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Kazakhstan). In the case of Armenia, it is a Christian island on the border of Europe and the Muslim world.

Key words: community, democracy, Newly Independent States

Armenia was one of the Socialist republics within the former Soviet Union, covering an area of approximately 11,500 square miles. During the process of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenia was one of the first countries to witness a national movement and fight for and declare independence in 1991, before the formal declaration of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although still formally a Soviet country, building democracy and a wholesale transforming of Armenian society became necessities. According to the theory of social institutions, the elements of social structure of any society are tightly interlinked, and changes in one institution lead to changes in others. In the case of Armenia,

changing or reforming the political institution necessarily would stimulate some innovations and changes in others, such as the economical system, education, family structure and functions, and the role of religion.

This was a new process. Even if some of the leadership responsible for the transformation had a theoretical notion of democracy and democratic transformation, such knowledge was not sufficient to successfully implement a program of transformation and make it work. Experience is still being accumulated in Armenia, as well as in other post-Soviet republics, but it is difficult to use the term democracy to describe the political system in Armenia.

Historically, Armenian society was organized in strong communities established around the Armenian Apostolic Church, which helped the nation survive through centuries of statelessness. For long periods of their history, Armenians lived under the domination of various empires. Starting early in the common era, and especially during the period that followed Armenia's adoption of Christianity as a state religion in the early fourth century, Armenia came under the influence of or was conquered by the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Mongols, Arabs, Ottoman Turks, and Russians. In 1920, after two years of independence, the Russian sector, or Eastern Armenia, became a part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Community ties organized around the churches were the most important connections to preserve Armenian identity through those centuries, while many of their powerful neighbors of the time no longer exist as separate nations and states.

The concept of community and related issues are discussed often, especially in contemporary literature, and has many connotations. The term could refer to small rural areas, where everybody knows each other, as well as large metropolitan districts. We define *community* as a group of people who share a common territory, are involved in everyday personal interactions, and invest an emotional dimension in their relations. Such community ties are shown in such interpersonal relations as friendships and cognizance of neighborhood and relatives. A community is usually small enough to produce a sense of commonality, which is defined by natural closeness of living places and the everyday activities of its members, by their day-to-day personal relationships, and by sharing some lifestyle. As a self-sufficient unit of the social structure, community executes these main social functions: production-distribution-consumption, socialization, social control over the members of community, and social and emotional support. Such a strong network of relationships traditionally was very resistive to external influences.

Traditional Armenian communities were governed by the community heads and council of elders, who were respected and usually the wealthiest people inside the community. The traditional type of legitimacy as described by Max Weber was characteristic of Armenian communities—the head of the community was elected in the community meeting, which was organized occasionally to make important decisions for the community with the participation of the male population. Once a person was elected as a head of the community, his family was recognized as a decision-making line, and his descendants continued to be elected in community meetings or in the meetings of elders.

During Soviet times there was, of course, no public participation in government; the centralized government of the Communist Party appointed all governors and high-ranking authorities. Formally, the mayors should have been elected by the community members again, but the main and unique candidacy was announced by the government and people had to elect this sole candidate.

At present, Armenia includes forty-eight cities (including the capital city of Yerevan) and 952 rural settlements, eight of which are attached to city communities, with the remaining 944 villages comprising constituents of rural communities.[1]

Of a population of about three million, almost one-third is located in Yerevan, and the rest in the *marzes,* or provinces. The biggest city after Yerevan is Gyumri, with approximately one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, more than six times smaller than Yerevan. For election purposes, these urban and rural settlements are divided generally into electoral districts on a geographic or territorial basis, and citizens living in the same neighborhood are usually attached to one center.

The research data analysis shows that community relationships remain essential, especially in Armenian rural areas and towns. Whether in parliamentary, presidential, or local government, ordinary people most often do not consider the ideas or programs of candidates or parties. They usually orient themselves by asking others whom they respect as wise people or those they fear, which are the influential, wealthy, or strong persons in the community. During the elections for local government, especially for local mayors, the government informally controls the process. To have their candidates elected, the authorities use their knowledge of traditional community organization in Armenian society; they adjust their financial and administrative resources to local human and cultural resources. First, they search for a suitable candidate—one who has a multitude of relationships inside his community, including many relatives, friends, or circles. The candidate must also be politically reliable. Sometimes the education level of that person is a secondary or even unimportant factor. These social relations indicate their relevance through the solidarity of the circles during the electoral processes. There is also a strong community control over the process of the election inside the group of candidate's relatives. If a member of the family fails to vote for the chosen candidate, he or she is looked on as an enemy, or one who dishonors the rest in the community. The authorities also help local candidates to hire some respected and active community insiders to organize the campaign. These community insiders are usually middle-aged men, sometimes with tendencies toward violent behavior, who have the tacit support of the local police and governors. It is very easy to have a candidate elected with such campaigners.

During the actual voting, these campaigners also control the voting process by using a merry-go-round or carousel mechanism that does not involve any violence but ensures the maximum support from these circles for their candidate. The mechanism begins with one of the campaigners qualified to vote in a given polling station entering the voting room, picking up the blank ballot, marking it, but walking out without casting the ballot. Once outside, the carousel manager gives the ballot to the next voter, who would go in, pick up his or her blank ballot, cast the premarked one, and once outside give the blank

one to the manager. Now the manager marks the blank ballot and gives it to the next voter.

There are also many other mechanisms that impact the outcome of an election, including intimidating voters, bribing the population before the elections, stealing ballot boxes, stuffing boxes, counting anomalies by local election commissions, and so on. The composition of local election commissions—three members appointed by the president and six others representing political parties with seats in the Parliament—also makes possible the use of such mechanisms. Because most parties in Parliament support the president, it is not difficult to see the substantial influence that the authorities have over the electoral process.

There are many reasons for the efficacy or appeal of such violations of the election process:

• The social relations of members of these close-knit communities do not travel much outside their geographic area and have, therefore, limited exposure to a larger framework.
• Voting is considered an extension of the set of relations they are exposed to.
• Protesting against the abuse or intimidation of the voting process is useless, as law enforcement agents and courts are part of that process, it costs money to take a case to court, and there is antipathy in the community toward those who challenge the internal workings of the community.
• Informal sanctions are sometimes more powerful inside the community than formal ones, and they are the main form of social control.

However, some of the mechanisms described above often do not work in big cities such as Yerevan. That is why in the provinces, especially in rural settlements, elections are usually carried out peacefully, without any unpleasant incidents. Even if such incidents occur, the strong community network makes it difficult to be known by outsiders.

The next factor that indicates the importance of community relationships in public consciousness is the high level of corruption. Usually people accepting and offering bribes are communicating through mediators. Those who are ready to offer money for some services first seek an individual who has a close relationship to the one they want to offer a bribe. Usually the mediator communicating the bribe offer is aggressive enough to force the one accepting it to do his will. In many cases, the provider of the service asks for a certain amount of money, again through a very reliable mediator, whose role is played by their closest relatives—sons, brothers, cousins, friends, and so on. Relationships between providers and acceptors are regulated by informal norms. This informal system of hierarchy works in administrative structures inside the government. Many senior positions in the government and membership in the Parliament have certain informal prices known only in very narrow circles, but are open for insiders who are pretending to occupy those positions.

Elections, as a basic mechanism for implementing democracy, do not serve their goal because of the specific organization of Armenian society. Since independence, the authorities are trying, or at least acting as if they are trying, to build

democracy without having a good basis for it. It is more than clear that democracy is not just a simple form; it is not simple software to install in a particular state and have that program work without any troubles. First of all, it is a set of specific values and norms and a specific culture. As such, democracy needs to come through a process of crystallization in every particular society. It needs to be reproduced and experienced through generations to be improved in public consciousness. That is, artificial implementation and installation of that culture may be unrecognized by the body politic and will create a mixture of fiction and reality. This condition is present in Armenia; democracy is more a fiction than reality. Former Soviet republics, and Armenia in particular, play democracy, but do not know how to live with it. The performance is also very poor and vulnerable. Unfortunately, besides some formal changes in regulations, laws, and procedures, there are no basic changes on the level of public consciousness. Moreover, the domination of community relationships in decision-making processes, which is incompatible with a democracy based on individualism, is growing in everyday interactions. Instead of seeing elections as a means for expressing their will, many citizens are frustrated and often do not wish to participate in any elections.

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The modern experience within the Newly Independent States (NIS) shows that proven democratic procedures copied from Western countries (United States, France, and so on) do not work as they are designed to do. In these societies, democracy as ideology and mechanism is misused by officials and ruling groups to be reelected in perpetuity, for the reproduction of the same elite. This paradox stems from the present condition of political culture of the post-Soviet societies, as well as specifics of social structure. To be strong and to solve problems, it is necessary to be a member of any group, particularly political, to protect personal rights and the rights of relatives in case a given party comes to power.

To understand the political processes in NIS countries, it is important to appreciate the cult of family, a tradition-based, deep, and essential component of social life. This historically evolved cult is supported by the experience of many nations, including Russia and some in Central Asia that needed to survive in the wild environment of deserts and taiga. The populations of these regions lived by the family unit, which tended to be enlarged to be stronger and more functional. The social structure based on the family or clan and their interrelations determines modern political life in these countries and societies. Family interests are a major concern for political leaders and understandable to common citizens, who would behave the same way if they had become the leaders. As for most of the NIS country leaders, politics is a very useful arena to protect personal and family interests

using public needs and manipulating public goals. Oppositions perceive things the same way; they just wait for their turn to protect the interest of the enlarged family—parties or clans—using a different ideology.

The tolerance shown by the population of such phenomena as personification of elections and party structure, as well as to clan and community-based principles of organization of political life, might be understood because each member of society has the potential ability to feel and behave as a part of the same political culture where family and community are still the natural players.

One of the essential elements of the mentality and behavior of post-Soviet citizens is that their participation in the electoral process is not congruent with the rational behavior or rules of rationality assumed in rational choice theories. Such rational choice is based on individual interests, and participation in elections and voting must be justified by the interests of the individual and society. If the interests are not understood and defined in terms of the individual, there is no participation and no action.

Moreover, another theory related to marketing and specifically to political marketing, offers some basic rules of political behavior that apply equally to any type of political action, as well as for electoral behavior. According to this theory, people buying goods in the market act the same way as selecting candidates for marriage and in politics. In any case, people select the result of their choice using their personal scale of interests and their individual taste to explain their own choice. Here individuals do not accept that someone else compels them take an action or determines their choice without taking into consideration their own preferences or tastes.

So these two theories determine our electoral behavior as individual, interest-based choice directed to maximize our outputs, whereas input during elections by each citizen as part of the electorate is always minimal—to get to the voting place and put a piece of marked paper into the ballot box. This input is less perceptible for the individual than paying money to buy something in the market. According to these two theories, people never elect bad candidates because no one being rational (or being called rational) is ready to pay for bad products; no one will vote for a bad candidate to suffer because of such a choice four or five years down the way.

Western electorates behave this way, and these two theories of political behavior stem from the exercises of Western theoreticians and are based on the historical experience in Western democracies. Eurasians, Armenians, Georgians, and even Russians and citizens of Asian republics of the NIS behave another way, demonstrating another type of rationality. In this context, being rational means being able to solve short-term problems. When offered a bribe to elect a candidate you have never seen or heard, and sometimes even knowing that the candidate is involved in crime or is a mafioso, you accept the bribe, go and mark his name, and elect him to govern you. The Armenian electorate is mostly ready to accept bribes, leaders are ready to offer bribes to be elected, and such a horrific harmony determines electoral campaigns in our countries. Each citizen accepting a bribe knows that he or she gets minimal benefit while paying the ultimate price

in his or her individual political rights. People behave in such a way consciously, because sometimes having five or ten dollars today is more important (and even more perceptible) than waiting for a stable income tomorrow. Considering the low level of income of a major part of the population, people are ready to accept it and to vote accordingly. This is rational, too.

There is another very specific phenomenon in the post-Soviet societies: sometimes the voter will accept money from the incumbent running for reelection promising to vote for him and still vote for an opponent. This is rational, too. The voter does not think this is wrong. If an official promises to solve problems and improve social life but has not kept those promises, the voter has the right to behave the same way. Consequently, the results of elections might still be unpredictable for those candidates who bribe the electorate, because bribing does not always guarantee election. That is why candidates do not rely on bribing as the main strategy for their election. They use that strategy as a supporting mechanism and mostly to get the votes of neutral and passive voters.

The recent experience of democratization in the NIS countries shows that an essential part of the new "democratic" elite consists of members of the Soviet nomenklatura reelected during post-Soviet electoral campaigns. These people succeeded in being reelected because they have the same mentality as most of the population and share essential components of the dominant ideological stereotypes that survive in context of democratization. Moreover, voters more than fifty years old prefer the Soviet elite to new and younger candidates, because they consider the old guard as, like the former Soviet, having more experience in governing big and complicated bureaucratic systems. Additionally, new leaders educated in Western countries and having idealistic views on democratization are considered naïve in their home countries. Still, a segment of the population is uncomfortable with the former Soviet leaders who play democracy without having a real feel for it, and prefers young leaders educated in liberal values.

These two types of electorate attempt to reform political, social, and economic systems based on conservative (pro-Soviet) and liberal (democratic) values. These attempts are sometimes headed by authoritarian leaders such as Vladmir Putin in Russia, Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, and Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus, or less authoritarian and powerful ones, such as Kocharian in Armenia. Some reforms succeed due to strong authoritarian power and the will of these leaders. Economic growth is perceptible in Kazakhstan, and such growth is perceptibly part of Nazarbaev's official strategy and ideology. Authoritarianism functions as a system of transition from Soviet totalitarianism to democracy. This schema works well in Putin's Russia, too. Other authoritarian regimes survive under conditions of fewer or no natural and financial sources. Economic reforms in countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan are not so evident and successful, which is why an ideology based on patriotic and democratic rhetoric is used to compensate for social and personal insecurity in these countries.

Segments of the population in Armenia and other NIS countries do not believe in democracy, considering it an ideological myth imported from the West and arti-

ficially injected into their societies. People do not believe in democracy because they are suspicious of big ideas. In these ideas, citizens of the former Soviet Union recognize the major mechanisms to dominate society and make people do what the Communist Party wanted them to do. Now the process of democratization touches the same nerves; people are again being asked to follow an ideology, albeit a new one. The indifference toward it is a normal reaction. People do not think they need ideologies; what they need is real improvement in their lives.

Moreover, so far these populations have seen declarations about democracy, but few of its benefits. The political arena is full of declarations of human rights and the proper rhetoric to extol them. The mass media and leaders of political and nongovernmental organizations proclaim the superiority of a system that protects human rights, when only the rights of the elites are actually protected. A majority in these populations considers democracy as an ideology created by the elites that is aimed at protecting the interests of the elite and manipulating the majority. The indifference of the population toward democracy may be transformed into aggressive behavior, if the situation continues to evolve in the same direction.

In some republics of the NIS, leaders promote specific models of democracy. For example, in Kazakhstan, the political elite headed by President Nazarbaev proclaimed its own path to democracy, justified by the specificities of the country. According to this rhetoric, Kazakhstan plays a special role in the region, acting as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, so it might have its own model in developing democratic values and implementing them in Central Asia.

Armenians sometimes talk about their specific role in the South Caucasian region, too. Being one of the oldest Christian countries in the world and surrounded by Muslims, Armenia considers itself the historic and geographic Christian island on the border between Europe and Islamic Turkey and Iran. Armenia also has a mission: to protect Christian values and human rights and to serve as a European strategic security border.

That is why Armenians accept Western values indirectly and critically, and sometimes with humor. Armenians consider Western democracy, especially the American version, to be better organized, but mechanically reproduced at home and pushed on others without any consideration of the religious bases of democratic values, and without placing democracy and democratization in the specific historical, cultural, and civilizational context of each country where they want to export it. Armenians consider what passes for democracy today as essentially an American visualization of democracy, and they can imagine that each country might develop its own form while adhering to basic values, such as tolerance and human rights.

NOTE

1. "Brief Characteristic of Social and Economic Situation in Marzes (administrative division) of the Republic of Armenia," http://www.armstat.am/Publications/2001/Armenia2001-eng/Armenia-13.pdf/.