

CSF Steering Committee statement

on the presidential election in Armenia, February 18, 2013

Armenia's recent presidential election gave the authorities an opportunity to consolidate public support which will be essential to politically underpin challenging reforms which await the country once it signs the Association Agreement currently being negotiated with the European Union. They failed to seize this opportunity. According to the post-election reports of NGOs – members of the Armenian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum, which conducted an election observation mission the poll “cannot be considered as fair both in terms of accuracy of procedures and perceptions of Armenian citizens vis-a-vis the official results”. Thus, the election failed to provide the leadership of the country with the sufficient level of legitimacy, which will be needed for the trust and endorsement by society in general towards the declared changes.

The election took place in conditions of calm and followed a lack lustre campaign in which three influential opposition parties failed to take part arguing that there was little chance that the voting and counting would be fair. According to the assessment of the local civil society organizations there was direct and indirect evidence that ballot papers were added to authentically cast votes in order to artificially boost the result of the incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan. This makes it imperative that in future the lists of the de facto voters are made public after the poll so that independent observers can check instances of fraud.

Before and on polling day the use of government and local government buildings as well as officials to build support for the incumbent was in evidence. As the observers said “it was impossible to distinguish between the resources of the state and local self-government bodies and those of the Republican party (the ruling party headed by President Serzh Sargsyan)”. Another feature of this election as well the parliamentary election in May 2012 was bribery of voters. This and the misuse of administrative resources shows that despite the urging and appeals of international and local observers, deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour persist, making it difficult for those working for fair elections to make head way.

Nevertheless, many Armenians decided to vote for the main rival candidate Raffi Hovhannisyan, the leader of the Heritage Party, in a bid for change. As a result Hovhannisyan enjoyed a surge of support which was impressive even according to the officially declared results. Hovhannisyan, challenged the official result and embarked on a campaign of street protests in Yerevan and in provincial centres which lasted till the inauguration of President Serzh Sargsyan on April 9. The peaceful protests were tolerated by the authorities while coverage in the media controlled by the authorities tended to uphold the official version that the published election result had been authentic. This was in contrast to media coverage during the election campaign which was balanced and contained no discrimination towards any candidate.

The election in Armenia showed that monitoring is essential if fraud is to be limited. Wherever observers were consistent and demanding, the results differed significantly to those in precincts where there was no strict control. Observers representing civil society reported that electoral officials and law enforcement authorities failed to adequately prevent attempts to falsify results or react to complaints that such attempts had been made.

The CSF will mount its own monitoring efforts during forthcoming elections in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Free and fair elections are the bedrock of a functioning democracy. Such elections give legitimacy to governments and provide societies with a guarantee of peaceful and sustainable development. Meanwhile, fraudulently elected leaders cannot be trusted by their societies to honestly fulfil their duties nor by foreign partners to stand by their international commitments.