

The Emperor's New Clothes:

The Nagorno-Karabakh Elections in the Context of the Peaceful settlement of the Conflict

Conflict of Interest

On the occasion of the parliamentary elections in the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which were held on June 19, 2005, yet another round of political meddling and bickering was in the works, with statements from leaders of countries - in the region as well as outside it - that have an interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, either literally or figuratively. The elections were not only monitored by governments, but also non-governmental organizations and media personnel from different countries, including ones that are notorious for keeping mum on violations of the rights of ethnic minorities in their respective countries. Herein lay the problem: it is not in the roots of the conflict per se, but in the reasons for the stalemate on its resolution. One could argue that the entire region is kept hostage to the struggle for power and worldwide control raging between superpowers. Thus, arguing that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is simply regional in nature is a gross underestimation of the manner in which one conflict results in the perpetuation of another. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the outbursts on the recent elections are but one example in a large bag of conflicts, one of the most significant of which is the ongoing battle for Palestine. Were the elections in Nagorno-Karabakh fair and free? The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh affirms that this was indeed the case, as do representatives of NGOs who monitored the elections. The more important question, however, is whether or not the results of the elections will favor the prospects for the settlement of the conflict and peace in the long run. It seems that the reality of the situation has been lost on the many NGOs and governments that have shown interest in the elections, be it positively or negatively.

Democratic Elections, and then?

An argument has been circulating in the geopolitical realm that given the reality of democratic elections in Nagorno-Karabakh there should be renewed hope for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. However, little has been said about the press release issued by the Foreign Ministry of Russia, which aimed to show Russia's support for "Azerbaijan's territorial wholeness", or the statement issued by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, terming the "elections held by Armenians" in "occupied" Nagorno-Karabakh "illegal", or even more importantly the rejection of the idea of holding elections by the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan. What, then, is the implication of these "democratic elections"? Surely democracy is desirable and beneficial for citizens of any state (be it internationally recognized or not), but neither the observers of the elections who talked about the positive effects of the latter on the settlement of the conflict, nor the United States and Russia have so far elaborated on what the next step should be for the Republics of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. It is therefore safe to conclude that while the former group is unable to find any solutions and has decided to be simply optimistic about the future, the two superpowers have decided that it is in their respective interests to prevent any settlement to the conflict in the near future.

“A Revolution a Day Keeps Russia Away”

To carry on with the game, the United States has introduced a new approach: changing regimes by engineering revolutions and attempting to shift loyalties by giving military “aid” to the three republics in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, Russia has found itself on the losing end and has been trying to consolidate its grip on Armenia and Azerbaijan – Georgia being out of the picture as a result of the “Rose Revolution” – by playing the role of the parent who is genuinely interested in the settlement of the conflict between his/her two children, and therefore makes statements that are sometimes supportive of one (Armenians) and at other times of the other (Azerbaijanis). While the United States has taken a daring approach, Russia’s stance has been significantly reserved and careful, for fear of upsetting the delicate “balance” and further pushing Armenia and Azerbaijan onto the lap of its arch-enemy. And while the two superpowers talk about their allegedly genuine interest in democracy and freedom, settlement of conflicts and peace in the region, we are left wondering what color the next revolution will be, which country it will hit first, how it will affect the region, and whether or not there will be any real revolutions to counter the world order imposed by the United States and to a smaller extent Russia. Real democracy is not simply about holding elections; it is about the real will of the people, untainted by external pressures and never bowing to the interests of groups that are in no way connected to the country (and by extension region) in question. It is a self and even regionally-interested democracy that Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh need, rather than one that is defined by the standards set by superpowers or the pressures of countries that boast of influential lobbying bodies (e.g. Israel and its lobbying services for the denial of the Armenian Genocide). It will remain to be seen whether the elections in Nagorno-Karabakh are absolutely (rather than relatively) democratic, and if so how they will impact the peace process.

The Final Battle: Propaganda versus Realism

It is important to note that while the elected individuals might represent the will of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, it does not follow that the program for peaceful settlement would coincide with the demands of the government of Azerbaijan, even if the latter were also democratically elected. Elections are not a guarantee for peace per se. The media outlets that argue to the contrary must realize that their deception is detrimental to the very process that they claim to show genuine interest in. Propaganda that aims to mislead the public is never the first step in the settlement of any conflict. It is a step or two in the opposite direction, as it was and still is in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The first and healthy step is to inject a dose of realism into the equation and hope that it would dispel the myths plaguing the settlement process. The heart of the case is whether or not the two sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Armenians and Azerbaijanis) are willing to receive this antidote. That, too, remains to be seen.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion on “Democracy and Security”, which took place on July 4, 2005. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, entrepreneurs, and representatives of the international organizations.

The discussion was organized in collaboration with LINKS (The London Information Network on Conflict and State-building).