

# *The Difficulties and Prospects of Parliamentary Culture Development in Post-Soviet Armenia*

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**Abstract - The phenomenon of parliamentary culture in post-Soviet Armenia is not deeply explored. But it does not mean that this problem has been or is a matter of less importance as political science issue. The effective functioning of parliamentary system is directly related to the quality of parliamentary culture. In any country without proper elements of parliamentary culture, the parliamentary system cannot provide political stability and be an effective model of state governance.**

**The system analysis of difficulties and development prospects' issues of parliamentary culture is impossible without the study of political culture characteristics and their influence on political process. Consequently, the current state of parliamentary culture in Armenia directly depends on the nature and peculiarities of political culture, as the parliament has a status of political representation body. As conclusion, the institutional legitimization of authorities as well as democratic parliamentary culture mechanisms implementation can become key factors for ensuring political stability, particularly in the case of parliamentary model of governance.**

**Keywords - Parliamentary Culture, System Analysis, Political Representation, Political Stability, Post-Soviet Transformation.**

Political culture indirectly affects the establishment and development of state power bodies, and it also determines the nature of political regime. The unstable nature of political institutions in transforming societies, due to the lack of interaction between their operation experience and new socio-political environment, requires an answer to the question of what factors and conditions, political and social institutions and structures affect the process of state-building, by making a certain system democratic. In this case, the question discussing the effectiveness of this or that constitutional model becomes urgent in terms of its impact on the formation of a democratic society and the political socialization of the citizens, which is impossible without considering the peculiarity of the political culture of society (Kerimov, 2013, pp. 106-110).

In this aspect, it is interesting Leonenkova's statement on the issue that parliamentary culture is characterized as a culture of interaction and cooperation between public discourse, social communities, parties, civil movements

within the framework of civil society. It is also a culture of discussions on parliamentary debates and other state institutions within the framework of policy makers' strategies and tactics (Leonenkova, 2004<sup>a</sup>, p. 8). But it is important to state that however, the characteristic given to the parliamentary culture in another work of the same author is slightly contrary to the previous definition. Specifically, the parliamentary culture is a combination of historical peculiarities and regularities in the process of establishing a legal, democratic state under the conditions of national representative bodies, when the law-making activity in the parliament takes place in accordance with social and political demands of society (Leonenkova, 2004<sup>b</sup>, p. 149).

In these definitions, we accept that without a culture-carrying political subject it is impossible to interpret or describe the parliamentary culture. Therefore, it is impossible to speak about parliamentary culture without the identification of culture-carrying political subjects, whose

functions in parliament are re-affiliated with the people's representatives, deputies.

In this case, it is appropriate to mention the fact that political culture is based on the values orientation system of political subjects, since till now the social and cultural as well as world-view issues of parliamentarism have been explored within the framework of political culture (Kovbenko & Koletsnikov, 2008, p. 78).

Democratic political culture includes parliamentary culture. But the distinction of parliamentary culture as an independent category is conditioned by the characteristics of social classes and layers, nations, demographic and territorial communities as well as by the contradictions between formal-logical justifications of parliamentary institutions and the precise historical forms of their implementation (Kovbenko & Koletsnikov, 2008, pp. 78-85).

In this case, parliamentary culture should be considered in a broad and narrow sense. First, the parliamentary culture represents a whole set of institutional and socio-cultural factors of parliamentarism. Secondly, the parliamentary culture represents the right of citizens to freely elect their representatives of legislative body. Hence, this is also their conviction that this action is the only possible way to bring their demands to the authorities and thus to control them (Kovbenko & Koletsnikov, 2008, pp. 78-85).

Parliamentary culture can be defined as a visible phenomenon of political culture when it comes to the common political phenomenon: from political culture to the chain of reducing transitions of parliamentary culture. In this case, implicit and explicit parliamentary communications are subject to patterns specific to the political culture of society (Sherbinin & Sherbinina, 2013, p. 68).

Parliamentary culture consists of some elements that include the public behavior of deputies which is regulated by parliament's rule of procedures, parliamentary traditions, by parliamentary ethics commission, if it is intended. In a broad sense, parliamentary culture is part of the overall political culture of society (Sherbinin & Sherbinina, 2013, p. 68). It should be noted that the above-mentioned elements of parliamentary culture, including the Ethics Commission, function in the Armenian parliament. But more important is that behavioral traditions still have no solid basis, which has long been conditioned by the parliament representatives staff.

J. Cohen and E. Arato state that if indirect participation of citizens is out of democracy circle, it is practically impossible to determine whether the state structure is really democratic or not. In this case the most important criterion that allows to distinguish a true democratic process from its formal ritual, a systemic manipulation from managed consensus, is lost (Cohen & Arato, 2003, pp. 28-29).

It is important to throw a retrospective to the dilemma of *presidentialism* / parliamentarism when studying the issue of parliamentary culture which has a long history. This issue was revived in 1990 with Juan Linz's articles about the supposed perils of presidentialism and the virtues of parliamentarism (Linz, 1990<sup>a</sup>, pp. 51-69; 1990<sup>b</sup>, pp. 84-91). The comparative analysis of this research problem allowed R. Elgie to distinguish three different waves. The 'first wave' began with Linz's articles. It was characterized by a debate in which there was one explanatory variable (the regime type) and one dependent variable (the success of democratic consolidation). The 'second wave' of presidential/parliamentary studies began around 1992-93. In the 'second wave' there is more than one explanatory variable (the regime type, usually, plus the party system and/or leadership powers) and often a different dependent variable ('good governance' as opposed to democratic consolidation). The 'third wave' is quite different. This work is informed by more general theories of political science. Here, the respective merits of presidential and parliamentary regimes are not necessarily the sole focus of the work. However, its overarching approach informs the debate in this area in a more or less direct manner. The argument in this review article is that the 'third wave' of studies has much to offer the ongoing debate about the relative merits of *presidentialism* and *parliamentarism* (Elgie, 2005, pp. 106-122).

The consideration of these theoretical questions allows us to take into account the international experience when exploring the issue how to overcome the difficulties of parliamentary culture formation and development in Armenia. This circumstance is also important because of the fact that since the Independence in 1991, the governance system in Armenia has gradually shifted from presidential to semi-presidential, and after to parliamentary system. Thus, when exploring parliamentary culture, both the regime and the issues of democracy consolidation, party system development, leadership type definition, and management effectiveness should be taken into account.

The institutional differences between presidential and parliamentary rule are well known, yet the practical effects

of these divergent constitutional arrangements within democratic polities have received scant attention. When testing the relationship between a historical measure of parliamentary rule and indicators ranging across three policy areas: political development, economic development, and human development, some western researchers find a strong relationship between parliamentarism and good governance, particularly in the latter two policy areas. They conclude that the extent that these institutions influence the quality of governance, parliamentary systems may offer advantages over presidential systems of democratic rule (Gerring & Thacker & Moreno, 2008, pp. 327-359).

A certain combination of state structure and governance forms may have a huge impact on the efficiency of political institutions and their corrupt practices. In this regard, it is noteworthy that J. Gerring and S. Thacker discuss this issue in their joint research. The results of their research confirm the hypothesis that suggests that unitary and parliamentary forms of government help to reduce levels of corruption (Gerring & Thacker, 2004, pp. 295-330). Of course, during the period (1997-1998), when this research was made, Armenia was a unitary but non-parliamentary country. Anyway, as a result of constitutional amendments referendum in 2015, Armenia has adopted a parliamentary model of governance, and consequently, there are all preconditions that can allow to reduce the level of corruption due to the parliamentary model of governance and the unitary state structure. However, the prospect of such results cannot only be determined by these two factors, which only can ensure the formal side. In this case, a content approach is needed that is manifested in the process of parliamentary culture development. That is, without parliamentary culture development, it is impossible to achieve a decline in corruption only with unitary structure and parliamentary governance model.

S. Lipset, when referring to the role of political culture in the context of governance systems, mentions that J. Linz and D. Horowitz are worthy of praise because they have made again modern the scientific debate on presidential and parliamentary constitutional systems, aiming to develop a stable democracy (Lipset, 2010).

J. Linz, based largely on the experience of Latin America, notes that most presidential systems have repeatedly failed (Linz, 1994, pp. 3-87). D. Horowitz, exploring Asia and Africa, stresses that most parliamentary systems, especially those that were attempted in almost all African countries and some new states of post-war Asia, also ended in failure (Horowitz, 1990, pp. 73-79). He could

also point out the collapse of democratic parliamentarism between two World Wars, especially in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, Austria, Germany and most part of Eastern Europe. Conversely, in addition to the successful parliamentary regimes of Northern Europe, it should be underlined the stable cases of presidential democracies in France (the 5th Republic), Chile (after S. Allende), Costa Rica, and Uruguay (Lipset, 2010).

In this regard A. Lijphart notes that he strongly concurs with Horowitz's contention that the electoral system is an equally vital element in democratic constitutional design, and therefore that it is of crucial importance to evaluate these two sets of choices in relation with each other. Such an analysis indicates that the combination of parliamentarism with proportional representation should be an especially attractive one to newly democratic and democratizing countries (Lijphart, 1991, pp. 72-84).

It is certainly important to emphasize K. Palonen's approach to parliamentarism when he relates it with discourse by extending the concept of parliamentarism in two respects seldom dealt with by constitutional lawyers, historians and political scientists (Palonen, 2004, p. 111). First of all, parliamentarism also refers to "government by speaking" (Macaulay & Pitt, 1889) or "government by discussion" (Bagehot, 1956), that is to a rhetorical political culture which is constituted by speaking for and against, or, in classical terms arguing *in utramque partem* (Skinner, 1996). In other words, parliamentarism refers to a style of politics for which deeds consist primarily of words. Moreover, parliamentary politics by speaking differs from other styles insofar as it is conducted with the adversaries in the same audience and with the intention to alter or at least shake up their views by means of persuasive speeches (Palonen, 2004, p. 111-125). As a paradigm of rhetorical political culture, the regular representation of conflicting views also distinguishes parliament with its culture from other political institutions (Habermas, 1991, pp. 175-177). The nature of parliamentary discourse conditions the impact of political speeches in the parliament as well as the political atmosphere within the institution, and the political consciousness of society because the direct addressees of parliamentary speech are the representatives of opposite side, and the indirect addressee is the public as a discourse consumer. This means that the role and significance of political discourse for parliamentary culture development is extremely important. As confirmation we have to refer to the quality of parliamentary debates in the Armenian National Assemblies of previous convocations when these debates have been often creating a common repulsion and

distrust towards this representative state body, weakening its legitimacy. It should be noted that parliamentary culture cannot be considered as developed without citizens' participation to the political process as a kind of electoral-legal culture. The electoral culture synthesizes national culture and democratic political culture by transforming them into divers modifications, including parliamentary culture (Sisolyatina, 2015, p. 1741).

Parliamentary culture is directly dependent on the electoral institute. The lower the number of citizens who consciously participate in the elections, the lower the level of parliamentary culture. The findings of study on electoral process dynamics and electoral institute effectiveness in Armenia confirm the reliability of this theoretical thesis. However, it should be noted that according to A. Sherbinin, the inverse correlation of this thesis is impossible: "We cannot confirm that high voter turnout testifies a high level of parliamentary culture" (Sherbinin, 2007). On the one hand parliamentary culture also includes the social, economic, legal and political knowledge of legislative body representatives. On the other hand, the society's level of basic knowledge is no less important for parliamentary culture. The interpenetrability of these factors is important for the parliament not to be transformed into a body that only registers legislative initiatives of the executive or economic interests groups (Sisolyatina, 2015, p. 1741).

It should be noted that this phenomenon has existed for many years in the Armenian parliament. And many parliamentarians have been partly representatives or servants of various economic interests. As for the executive's activity on legislative initiatives, it has been quite large. This circumstance was one of the difficulties in parliamentary culture establishing in Armenia. The educational low level of some deputies, the low level of their relevant professional knowledge also partly forbade the parliamentary culture development.

As a collegial body, the parliament functions as people's representative institution. Consequently, deputies should also comply with some requirements. In this regard A. Kerimov rightly points out that the professionalism of deputies is an issue of primary importance. According to A. Kerimov's statement, deputies must meet the following requirements:

- to satisfy international standards of parliamentary activity;
- to work in parliament regularly, without any alternative;

- to have certain social status and powers (Kerimov, 2009, pp. 16-20).

It should be noted that this list can also be supplemented by other requirements, particularly with regard to the minimum required level of education and knowledge on relevant legislation. But this is a pretty delicate question. And it is a little complicated to comply with such requirements, because of the fact that human rights and freedoms are dominating, as well as the fact that deputies are elected by the people. However, in case of indirect involvement of these requirements, it is much more important not to explore this problem for deputies, but to consider the issue of political parties and party system as the most important components for parliamentary culture development. The findings of our research show that in the process of parliamentary culture development and its effective functioning, the collective quality increase of political parties and party system is more important by the way of their institutionalization.

Democratic parliamentary culture depends on the principle of party pluralism. In this respect, the distinction of parliamentary culture functions is also important. These include aggregation and circulation of political interests, legitimization, political socialization, and worldview orientation. Integration, education, communication and regulatory functions are equally important (Kolesnikov, 2010, pp. 33-40). A significant function of parliamentary culture is also social stabilization that tends to the satisfaction of various public interests through representative institutions (Sisolyatina, 2015, p. 1713-1717).

Among the difficulties of parliamentary culture development, the paternalistic consciousness of society can also be relevant. It has been preserved since the Soviet period and has formed a stable personalized perception of power. That is, the power is primarily perceived by political leaders rather than political institutions.

V. Kolesnikov, exploring parliamentary culture as a political stability modeling system, rightly points out that in order to establish democratic political stability, the role of political parties and civil society is essential. In this regard, it is important to restore the possibility of independent mass media to participate in public and political life of the country, especially in electoral process. The author emphasizes the fact that parliamentary culture is considered as a complicated and quite controversial phenomenon in political process. But in any case its development is considered to be a non-institutional basis for country's social development and political stability (Kolesnikov, 2008). We

should note that in this regard there are some similarities with the Republic of Armenia. However, recent political processes and developments in Armenia are promising in terms of some prerequisites setting for parliamentary culture development. Therefore, the institutional legitimization of authorities as well as democratic parliamentary culture mechanisms implementation can become key factors for ensuring political stability particularly in the case of parliamentary model of governance.

Parliament's activity is aimed to formulate the priorities of national interests and social development, which can significantly contribute to the state political stability (Kolesnikov, 2010, p. 33). V. Kolesnikov refers that any parliament is primarily responsible for ensuring the interaction between civil society and state authorities. That's why its full functioning is a necessary condition for ensuring social and political stability and making optimal political decisions. This kind of interaction *has, is and will* take place in terms of any democratic regime (Kolesnikov, 2010, p. 31). For that reason parliamentary institutions are, in their nature, called to solve the main problem of democratic development, ie to ensure a representation and circulation of the entire set of private, group and national interests. Thus, political representation is the most efficient democratic mechanism for civil society to affect authorities.

Democracy is based not only on institutions, but on values as well. Accepting this fact shows that even in different countries the parliaments with similar structure are functioning in different ways (Popravko & Shirko, 2007, p. 29). For example, there can be no doubt that the traditions of French and British parliaments are different, despite the fact that these countries are ones of the best bearers of democratic values. The same thing can be said about various activities of the former Soviet states' parliaments, despite their common Soviet past. In this respect, the important circumstance conditioning these distinctions are cultural, civilizational and traditional diversities between these nations and societies that are mostly expressed in the parliament's representative "behavior".

It is also significant that parliamentary culture directly depends on the nature of elites' political culture. In practice, the nature of political elites activities, conditioned by political regime features, affects the type and quality of parliamentary culture. For example, the dominant authoritarian political culture of the Armenian elite for many years has had a negative impact on parliamentary culture development. In fact, political elite hindered the effective realization of public interests representation and

maintenance by the national parliament. And this is one of the reasons that the Armenian parliament did not have a high public trust. Very often the parliament has not been an efficient platform for people to present their demands to the authorities. The ruling elite was particularly interested to give advantage to its power consolidation and stabilization, increasing the reliance on its regime and political order.

In this regard A. Sherbinin and N. Sherbinina rightly refer: "When the elite stops to be a mechanism for presenting social demands to the authorities, then its representative function in the parliament becomes insignificant" (Sherbinin & Sherbinina, 2013, p. 69). This means that the parliament gradually loses its legitimacy, making its role secondary. And the rise of authoritarian tendencies is gaining more power for the opposition to demolish the ruling elite. The "Velvet" revolution in 2018 is a prominent practical example of that theoretical thesis, when in a result of political process initiated by the small part of parliament's minority faction, the authoritarian power in Armenia was removed by people's pressure.

The above mentioned statement can also be justified by the fact that the high level of centralized power in the hands of ruling class can lead to revolutionary changes when that power's slightest weakness can turn into a growing uncontrollable situation in the case of decline in economic and social growth rates.

In general, the weakness of political system as fragile stability in countries that have adopted the democratic way of modernization, stems from the failure of party system. This is a direct obstacle for parliamentary culture development. In this regard, the Armenian political scientist G. Kerian, studying the process of establishing and development of multi-party system in Armenia as a process emerged in transitional societies, rightly notes that:

- (a) the multi-party system helped to avoid totalitarian regime, but the absence of political culture and parliamentarism traditions as well as socio-economic problems led to the consolidation of pseudo-democratism,
- b) the electoral participation of a large number of political parties with an uncertain social orientation and political course contributed to the apolitization of broader layers of society,
- c) The deepening of socio-economic crisis contributed to the ruling parties reputation loss and emergence of charismatic parties (Keryan, 2002, p. 286).

Certainly, these reflections were typical for 1988-2000, some of which continued their existence with proper transformations. However, it should be noted after that

period these charismatic parties lost their charisma mainly due to the preference of narrow group interests, not ideologies. As for the absence of parliamentarism traditions, we have to emphasize that the First Republic of Armenia had at least some experience during its short existence, which was interrupted on the path to becoming a political tradition. But this does not mean that the potential of parliamentarism is exhausted in Armenia. And it is possible to identify and realize this potential only by highlighting the priority of multi-party system development.

The collapse of USSR and the proclamation of Union republics' independence were also accompanied by radical processes that are characteristic to societies in transit. The totalitarian one-party system and the communist regime were demolished. In Russia, Ukraine, Baltic states, Moldova and Armenia, have emerged multi-party system and formal democratic institutions. The totalitarian regime was preserved or transformed in some Central Asian republics. Armenia is one of the post-Soviet states that has moved from one-party system to a multi-party system, which has also transformed the political regime (Keryan, 2002, p. 266).

This means that in formal sense, there are all required elements for multi-party system in Armenia, but in the substantial aspect there are still many things to do. And first of all, in its substantial aspect this issue can only be solved by overcoming the personalized perception of political parties. In general political processes in Armenia show that the success and failure of political parties are largely determined by their leaders' political success and failures. There is no coincidence that political actors rejected by the "velvet" revolution have pulled out from political field the political forces they have led, such as the RPA (Republican Party of Armenia) and the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation). This was evidenced by the fact that these political forces were identified with their leaders, and not their ideologies. This circumstance can be explained by the fact that in spring of 2018 the popular movement rejected not concrete ideologies, but concrete individuals who also pushed out that political parties from the parliament.

In this regard M. Margaryan mentions that there are two problems in Armenia, related with parliamentary governance process: 1) the disagreement between stages of social instability and socialization limits the prospect of citizenship, civil position and civic culture development. As a result, the individual is constantly in cultural and ideological wonderings. 2) The feeling of alienation, marginality, disappointment weakens if the in core of professionalism, advocacy goals and associative links

relates on democracy quality development. As a result of these difficulties, in Armenia's political culture the value uncertainty (or polarity) continues to occupy a certain place. The author rightly states that parliamentary democracy is complete if the will of majority does not only pressure the minority, but also creates conditions for the constant connection with voters to develop participatory democracy (Margaryan, 2017).

Thus, for a long period since independence, until April 2015 and after, when the scope of parliamentary powers was extended by constitutional amendments, the gap of parliamentary culture in Armenia was also due to its *de jure* and *de facto* weaker representative political significance compared with presidential institution. The scope of president's powers was broader, and his activity was *de facto* more influential and decisive in policy making process. The existence of unequal conditions in political competition as well as the existence of mostly "controlled party system" also hindered the parliamentary culture development.

This analysis shows that the low level of parliament effectiveness in Armenia's democratic transition was mostly due to a personalized perception of political power. But after the adoption of parliamentary governance model, in terms of legal, legislative and civil activism the prerequisites for parliament significance growth are encouraging. This process is based on revealing of society's new political values adoption potential, which is the guarantee of parliamentary culture development.

In this case, parliamentary culture is the recognition of political values by the public and political actors when the society is able to force the government to bear responsibility before the people (Kovbenko & Koletsnikov, 2008, p. 79).

Consequently, the following steps need to be taken to overcome the difficulties of parliamentary culture development in Armenia:

- To ideologize political parties not only theoretically but also in practice, minimizing the tendencies of their identification with their leaders. In this context the effectiveness of parliamentary culture depends on the electoral system. The proportional representation gives more opportunities for the opposition than majoritarian voting system. The first one also promotes party system consolidation and increases the significance of political parties, which is very important factor for parliamentary culture development. When

asserting proportional representation, it is necessary to avoid the "rating system" established by the electoral legislation of the Republic of Armenia, which, in essence, involves the logic of majoritarian electoral system when again the election is made by voting for person-candidate. "The rating system" is a direct obstacle for parliamentary culture development, and it is crucial to cancel it by an amendment of the Electoral Code.

- To increase the role of parliamentary opposition by legal protection which implies drafting of the bills proposed by opposition faction and after including them in the agenda of parliamentary sessions for a full discussion. This proceeds from the principle of proportionality and representation, enabling the parliamentary minority to make its voice more audible.

- To promote constructive parliamentary discourse. In general, the quality of parliamentary discourse testifies the quality of parliamentary culture. The more discourse is substantial and argumentative, more efficient it is and more constructive elements it contains. In order to formulate a constructive discourse, a bilateral readiness of majority and minority is required, because majority does not always mean being true and vice versa. When developing parliamentary culture, the discourse is of key importance.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis allows to argue that the parliament in Armenia, as a political institution, often failed to realize its representative function with great efficiency. It was only partially based on the aggregation of people's demands arising from the bottom of society. And perhaps, in comparison with other state representative institutions such as the president's institution, the actual role of the parliament in Armenia was smaller in terms of decision making in key political issues. It does not refer to the less power or less legal functions of the parliament at all. First of all, this situation was related to the dominance and tendency of authoritarian regime development in Armenia, where political figures permanently had *de facto* much greater influence than the parliament as a nationwide representative political institution. This situation is explained by the gap of parliamentary culture as an important component of parliamentarism.

The low level of parliament effectiveness in Armenia's democratic transition was mostly due to a personalized perception of political power. But after the adoption of parliamentary governance model, in terms of legal, legislative and civil activism the prerequisites of parliament significance growth are encouraging. This process is based on revealing of society's potential of new political values adoption which is the guarantee of parliamentary culture development.

Recent political processes and developments in Armenia are promising in terms of some prerequisites setting for parliamentary culture development. Therefore, the institutional legitimization of authorities as well as democratic parliamentary culture mechanisms implementation can become key factors for ensuring political stability, particularly in the case of parliamentary model of governance.

In order to overcome the difficulties of parliamentary culture development in Armenia we need to ideologize political parties, increase the role of parliamentary opposition in the sphere of legal protection, and promote constructive parliamentary discourse.

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