

The Struggle of Georgian Democracy

Giorgi Kanashvili* and Revaz Koiava**

The paper aims to review the democratization experience of post-Soviet Georgia. Due to the differences in geography, history, political culture, economy, and governance of each Soviet republic, the transition periods of these countries have eradicated all commonalities. Despite their common problems, the transformations are individual, due to local conditions and circumstances. Georgia's declared goal is the development of a stable and successful democracy. But how do Georgians understand democracy, and how is it supported via government policy? The social and educational diversity of Georgians shall be taken into consideration in assessing the functioning of judiciary, executive, administrative and legislative bodies. The various aspects of Georgian politics – informal deal making, attitudes of elites, generational specificities, and everyday concerns of citizens preclude the possibilities for generalization. The political culture of Georgia, social relations, local governance, employment problems, and daily political life was determined by the grotesque behavior of the Georgian elite and the Civil War, separatism and Russian intervention. This leads us to Tip O'Neill's maxim – "All politics is local".



* Giorgi Kanashvili is Executive Director of the 'Caucasian House', Tbilisi, Georgia.

** Revaz Koiava is a Researcher at the 'Caucasian House', Tbilisi, Georgia.

Introduction

“Georgian people have never accepted the loss of freedom,” declared Zviad Gamsakhurdia on 9 April 1991 at the Session of Supreme Council of Georgia. The issue of national independence was on the Session agenda. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, leader of the ‘Round Table – Free Georgia’ coalition who had controlled the Supreme Council since October 1990, debated the Russian – Georgian relations, Russian occupation of Georgia, the 1924 rebellion, the bloody tragedy of 9 April 1989, and the March 1990 referendum, in which 91% of Georgians voted for independence.¹ Gamsakhurdia promised the Georgian population that independent Georgia would be democratic: “the Republic of Georgia, aspiring to occupy decent place in the community of the world states, recognizes and equally ensures all rights and freedoms provided by international law for all national, ethnic, religious and language groups, as required by the UN Charter...”²

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Georgia still faces fundamental challenges, an issue that has been long forgotten by the West. The Georgian political elite should: establish the bodies of sovereign statehood; develop national identity, which would include non-ethnic Georgians; substitute centralized planned economy with competitive market; establish democratic institutes and implement effective foreign policy. However, Georgia tried to achieve all these goals without experienced staff, respective institutes, effective executive government and necessary funds. As the American political scientist Alexander John Motyl suggests, political elite, wishing revolutionary changes, shall be exceptionally well provided with finances.³ The post-Soviet

1 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, (1995) *The Act on Restoration of Independence of Georgia*, Vol. 1, Voice of Nation, p. 80.

2 Ibid, 82-89.

3 Motyl A. (1999) *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 32.

Georgian elite, working in a post-totalitarian environment, did not have the psychological or material resources for revolutionary changes, nor for the transformation of the country. Its development as a state began with independence of Georgia and remains underway. This process goes in waves, and can be divided into phases, which coincide with changes in government.

The goal of the article is to review the democratic processes in post-Soviet Georgia. Due to the differences in geography, history, political culture, economy, and governance of each Soviet republic, the transition periods of these countries have eradicated all commonalities. Despite their common problems, the transformations are individual, due to local conditions and circumstances. Georgia's declared goal is the development of a stable and successful democracy. But how do Georgians understand democracy, and how is it supported via government policy? The social and educational diversity of Georgians shall be taken into consideration in assessing the functioning of judiciary, executive, administrative and legislative bodies. The various aspects of Georgian politics – informal deal making, attitudes of elites, generational specificities, and everyday concerns of citizens preclude the possibilities for generalization. The political culture of Georgia, social relations, local governance, employment problems, and daily political life was determined by the *grotesque* behavior of the Georgian elite and the Civil War, separatism and Russian intervention. This leads us to Tip O'Neill's maxim – "All politics is local".

Ecstatic nationalism and the period of populism

Georgia's struggle for sovereignty and independence was underway at the end of 1980s, under the slogans opposing the Russian empire. According to Russian anthropologist Timur Muzaev, "in the middle of the 1980s, 'perestroika' and democratization of social life revealed the problems associated with nationalism in Soviet Union. Publicity and mitigation of party censorship enabled people to speak openly about own interests and goals".⁴

Consequently, the collapse of the USSR gave rise to ethnic nationalism and political archaism rather than the blossoming of

4 Музаев Т. М. (1999) Этнический сепаратизм в России. М.: Изд-во □Панорама□. p.25.

Consequently, the collapse of the USSR gave rise to ethnic nationalism and political archaism rather than the blossoming of civil society and social modernization promised by the leaders of the national democratic movement.

civil society and social modernization promised by the leaders of the national democratic movement. Progressivism (in its Marxist definition) was changed not by Bourgeois progressivism, but by an intensive search for the ‘golden age’. The concept of ‘bright future’ was substituted by the concept of ‘bright past’. The development of political authority and public organizations, based on medieval political-legal and social concepts, emerged as particular manifestations of ‘returning to the past’. Other than the development of civil society and healthy political competition, it was rather the factionalism that played a major role in social political processes. Outside the imperial context, the political elites of Georgia became much more provincial in their mentality and behavior.

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The first president of Georgia held a peculiar attitude towards democracy, considering elections, a constitution, and a multiparty system as sufficient constituent parts. Gamsakhurdia polarized political forces. His political rhetoric, directed against the opposition, was dominated by the terminology of the USSR in the 1930s. He called his opponents “enemies of nation”, “agents of the Kremlin”, “Judas”, and “criminals”.⁵ Gamsakhurdia’s insulting rhetoric mobilized the population and demonized the opposition, shutting down any prospects for compromise or cooperation. He used the conflict in South Ossetia to justify censorship and restrictions on public criticism.

Gamsakhurdia failed to modernize traditional Georgian society. Christopher Clapham has described cultures similar to Georgia as neo-patrimonial, wherein governmental structures are shaped by personal relations and status, and distinctions between official and private worlds are minimal.⁶ In such societies, people in office, become the source of political power and resources; other than the institutional structure. This yet promoted a policy of charisma. In the context of the neo-patrimonial culture of Georgia, the president could not express power without legitimate state institutes; yet as the charism was the main source of Gamsakhurdia’s political authority, the style

5 Newspaper, “The Republic of Georgia”, *NII*, 1990, p. 2

6 Clapham C. (1985) *The World Politics: An Introduction*, London and Sydney: Croom Helm, pp. 39-60.

of his governance undermined the embryonic state institutions. It was on this very ground that Gamsakhurdia urged people to overcome institutional barriers.

Economic chaos, however, promoted a hunt for scapegoats. In Georgia, these were communists, ‘red intellectuals’, and national minorities. In his work on populism, Ernesto Laclau calls these arguments the “simplification of political space”. The public struggle accordingly unites around one issue and political complexity is substituted by the vision of *ours* and *others*. Margaret Canovan states that populist movements entail a kind of exaltation and appeal to “people” - and all of them are somehow anti-elite.⁷ Features of a populist government include scapegoating of ethnic minorities, intellectuals or foreign governments; a state-managed economy; manipulation of the press; emphasis on charismatic power; a special destiny for the nation; cult of personality, all reinforced by a strong presidential system.

Erika Bener, in her review of nationalism, addresses changeable normative views. She notes that movements and ideologies developed on ethnic basis are complex. New circumstances may defeat the leaders within a couple of years, and transform their goals and forms of expression.⁸ Gamsakhurdia’s regime of ethnic nationalism fell within a year as a result of military coup. Gamsakhurdia, elected ‘with universal passion’, died in suspicious circumstances after three years.

Interregnum

On returning to Georgia, Shevardnadze faced a fundamental challenge – to restore the integrity of the state. Charles Tilly highlights three main functions of the state – collection, coercion, and integration.⁹ By that time, Georgia was unable to defend its borders, handle growing corruption, pay salaries and pensions, or ensure the operation of schools and hospitals. In the regions, the state’s ability to implement its policy was dependent on local authorities or field commanders. The new government of

7 Canovan M. (1981) *Populism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 294.

8 Benner, E. (1997) “Nationality without nationalism”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*; 2, p. 189-206.

9 Tilly C. (1990) *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1990*, Cambridge: Blackwell, Chapters 1-3.

The new government of Georgia needed to ensure all three of Tilly's functions: Shevardnadze should generate revenues, establish public order, and reconcile with alienated national minorities and supporters of the defeated Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Georgia needed to ensure all three of Tilly's functions: Shevardnadze should generate revenues, establish public order, and reconcile with alienated national minorities and supporters of the defeated Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The most acute challenge was the solution of the problem of 'Mkhedrioni' and the National Guard, which controlled the military council, economy, and regions. They took revenge on the supporters of former President. It was necessary to suspend these operations and reconcile with these groups. At the same time, it was necessary to adopt new laws on citizenship, privatization, local self-government, the judiciary, elections, Parliament, and the executive government. It was necessary to implement an effective foreign policy, which would ensure stability. Shevardnadze needed to implement a proper economic policy, which would lead the country out of poverty.

During the transition period, Shevardnadze managed to obtain enormous power. Upon being elected as Chair of Parliament, he officially controlled both the executive and legislative branches. As the head of the state, Parliament granted him exclusive rights. He was responsible for foreign relations and had the authority to appoint the highest military personnel and state representatives in the regions (governors and mayors), without needing approval from Parliament. Shevardnadze's power grew further in July of 1993, when the Parliament granted him the right to issue legal acts pertaining to the economy, convoke and lead cabinet sessions, and replace senior officials without parliamentary approval.¹⁰

The development of the new Constitution was considered as Shevardnadze's main achievement. Modelled on the US Constitution, the new document significantly strengthened the Presidency. It became easier for Shevardnadze to dominate the legislative process. He appointed and dismissed ministers without approval from Parliament. The state minister, who presided over the cabinet of ministers, was accountable directly to the President. In contrast to the French presidential system, where the Prime Minister often had the grounds for parliamentary power, Shevardnadze did not face opposition from the ministers. The new

10 Jones S. (2013) "Georgia: Political History after Announcing Independence", Tbilisi: The Centre of Social Sciences, pp. 104-149.

Constitution was developed during a time of crisis, and instead of ensuring longer term prospects for constitutional stability, balanced short term needs. However, despite of the shortfalls, it had vital importance for Georgian politics. Shevardnadze improved Georgian state and established governing institutes.¹¹

'Trust gap' in democracy

Shevardnadze legalized democracy, but neglected to build up its practical pillars – a fair tax system, independent local governance, rule of law, opportunity for free economic activity. It was difficult for the state to enforce its laws; for example, in Adjara, where Aslan Abashidze was heading a feudal authoritarian creature. This was a major problem for democracy.¹²

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With the help of neo-patrimonialism, Shevardnadze avoided Parliament and the judicial system. Using his Soviet networks, he maintained the basic functioning of country, and his own political power. However, ultimately he failed to control the networks of patronage. Edward Benfield calls describes these conditions as 'family' without morals; the absence of social confidence and dominance of an authoritarian state are, according to Benfield, caused by the experience of colonialism, and leads us to direct contacts rather than laws.¹³

The 'Trust Gap' in a democracy (drawing upon the terminology of Lipset and Schneider) emerged as a result of unsuccessful financial support that failed to bring tangible results to the population.¹⁴ International financial support was based on the donors' agenda, leading to a professional system of local activists was developed. The activists were bound to programs created outside of the country, instead of being focused on the needs of the intended program beneficiaries. The leaders of Georgian NGOs became a kind of labor aristocracy, being paid in foreign currency and enjoying a standard of living far beyond the reach of most Georgians. Consequently, by

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 154.

¹³ Banfield E. (1958) *The Moral Basis to Backward Society*, Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.

¹⁴ Martin S. and Schneider W. (1983) *The Confidence Gap*, New York: Free Press.

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Under Shevardnadze's governance, weak functioning of state institutions seriously affected the public, and the non-collection of tax revenues seriously damages its ability to protect citizens from unelected violent groups and monopolies. There was almost no consensus in regard to the essence of the state and its political values and goals. Corruption and insolvency undermined development of the army, and weakened market infrastructure. Baseline economic welfare was beyond the reach of the majority of the population, which damaged the value of citizenship and widened the gap between the state and the citizen.

Edward Shevardnadze failed to narrow the gap between the governing and governed. He could not prevent the political asymmetry resulting from the extremely strong presidency, supported only by the dominant party, and was unable to control the transfer power or to engage citizens in political processes. Georgians understood Shevardnadze's focus on stability and consolidation of society, but by the end of 1990s, economic reforms had failed. In the last years of his presidency, the central government was dramatically weakened due to corruption, intrigues, un-investigated murders, and empty state coffers. The administration was no longer capable of building a well-organized state. The problem was further exacerbated by the unresolved conflicts on Georgian territory. Ultimately, Shevardnadze's regime collapsed following the revolution.

The period of liberal democracy

The protests against fraudulent elections on Rustaveli Avenue in 22 November 2003 had dramatic consequences. Opposition forces, led by Michael Saakashvili, entered parliament and forced Shevardnadze to leave the session mid-speech. This event became known as the 'the Rose Revolution'. The revolution reflected public dissatisfaction with the corrupt regime as well as appropriation of power in the absence of checks and balances. Reforms were now possible to be carried out, but it again failed due to the inability in the country in legally transferring the power. Georgia's institutional weakness were obvious, dubbed

¹⁵ Jones, "Georgia", p. 155.

the ‘Permanent Revolution’ of Georgia by Vicken Cheterian.¹⁶

The new government accepted responsibility for the development of liberal democracy and a liberal economic regime. However, its achievements, which included more transparent elections, reducing corruption, rapid economic growth and a balanced budget, revealed tensions between liberal economy and civil democracy. There emerged increasing contradictions between individual and collective rights, state regulations and private freedoms. In this vein, “scaling down the state”, which is considered the best way to develop a successful liberal democracy and market economy in Georgia, hinders the process of granting political rights to citizens and extending of participatory capacities.¹⁷ Georgia accordingly developed as a “society of limited access”, where mobility within and access to the political system of the country is blocked by poverty, inequality and system hierarchies.¹⁸

Since Saakashvili’s administration, economic liberalism has been shaped as utopian warrior, focusing, as Robert Reich has mentioned, on consumer rather than citizen values.¹⁹ The economic policy of Georgia has seen dramatic reductions to public investments in the labor market, healthcare and environmental protections, as well as weakening of public controls on the executive government. According to John Kenneth Galbraith, the weakness of the ‘balancing force’ has created a political system based on unstable charismatic populism. As a result of deregulation of the state, civil rights were reduced even further.

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Pluralistic structures were imported to Georgia from abroad, and were based on Georgian idealistic values such as: ethnic tolerance and individualism. At the same time, economic problems created challenges for the country’s democracy. According to Galbraith, “nothing more effectively limits freedom as the total lack of money”.

16 Vicken Cheterian (2008) “Georgia’s Rose Revolution: Democratization? State-Building? or Permanent Revolution?” Paper delivered at conference, *Georgia: Making of a National Culture* at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 15th-18th

17 De Soto H. (1989) *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, New York: Harper and Row/Perennial Library.

18 North D., Wallis J. and Weingast B. (2006) “A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History”, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper, No. 12795.

19 Reich R. (2007) *Super capitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy and Everyday Life*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 13.

more effectively limits freedom as the total lack of money”.²⁰ This was obvious in Georgia, where one third-population lives below the poverty line.

According to the World Bank and IMF, focusing on the reduction of the state’s role was not an appropriate measure for post-Soviet societies in difficult conditions. Building market democracy in the post-Soviet environment requires resources which can only be provided by the state.

Conclusion

Adam Przeworski states that “democracy shall bring substantial results”. Youthful dynamism, counter corruption rhetoric/initiatives and EU integration are not enough to maintain public support. Georgians, who once stood out the most optimistic about democratic changes among the post-Soviet populations, are now ambivalent towards democracy.

The force balancing the political influence of the state is still not developed. The third sector has failed to actively engage citizens in social or political life. The media is under the influence of malign sponsors, strong owners, or the government. Despite the reduction of corruption, Georgian political and economic elites are isolated from ordinary citizens. The society is in a state of apathy, and national consensus remains a distant goal, considered a prerequisite of democracy by John Stuart Mill. It could be said thus that Georgia is facing unsustainability, created by the alienation of the population from the political system.

Nevertheless, the transition of Georgia was supported particularly by the Western states; the biggest support is provided by the US. Despite the level of financial support, however, the majority of population lives at or below the poverty line. The IMF’s plan has made a significant contribution rather however to political instability and economic decline. It, in addition, it increased the tensions between economic and political liberalization.

There are many hypotheses regarding democratic transitions. Seymour Martin Lipset states that economic development is the

²⁰ Held D. (1995) *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 253.

most important. Samuel Huntington and Ronald Inglehart argue that common cultural characteristics are decisive. Fareed Zakaria and Russel Bova highlight the experience of a liberal regime. Robert Putnam is focused on social capital and trust, while Adam Przeworski underscores equality of revenue. In the case of Georgia, political divisions, historic absence of statehood, and an under-developed and fragmented civil society led to weak national cohesion. This problem remains unsolved.²¹

The concept of democracy has acquired multiple meanings in Georgia. Formally, democracy is liberal; in reality it is often non-liberal. During the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the reason for the failure of democracy was the oversimplified attitude towards independent statehood and majority rule. Under Shevardnadze, democracy was swallowed by corruption and unaccountable networks. Public policy since Saakashvili's leadership created a feeling of alienation among the middle class. No leader in Georgia has managed to ensure a balance between the needs of political elites and the middle class; the rule of law is still not ensured and nepotism remains a powerful force. Therefore, a functioning institutional order fulfilling certain obligations could not be achieved.

Recent government policy in Georgia, namely the development of a *market paradise* failed in terms of attracting foreign investments; on the other hand, it rendered democracy meaningless.²² Ambitious builders of democracy from the West exacerbated the general disappointment by importing abstract models and concepts. Now, the main obstacle to the development of democracy is not civil and ethnic divisions, or foreign threats, but rather the polarized, weak economy, non-existence of organized social groups and solidarity, and the lack of reliable public institutions. As Illia Roubanis states; "Georgian politicians do not have strings connecting with the government", they neither fulfill the articulated interests nor deal with organized electorate.²³

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21 Jones, "Georgia", p. 20.

22 Zinoviev A. (2002) *Russian Tragedy (The Destruction of Utopia)*, Moscow: Algoritm.

23 Roubanis I. (2009) "Georgia pluralistic feudalism: a frontline report", Available at: www.open-democracy.net/article/georgia-pluralistic-feudalism (Accessed: 15 April 2017).

In Georgia, democracy and personal freedoms are under a substantial threat; a threat worse than institutional crime or corruption. Soviet heritage has also impeded democratic development, in particular, with regard to the social and political gap between the elites and their 'subjects'. The system of developed patronage was also a problem, whereby problems were solved using personal connections rather than transparent institutional mechanisms.

The concentration of power is damaging. In the case of Georgia, this has led to weak legislative body, a toothless judicial system, and powerless local self-governance. The system has seen periodic improvement through massive public protests. Georgian presidents have been overthrown and their governments forced to resign. This form of the right to democratic expression is characterized by the development of instability, and a tendency to political manipulation and violence. However, the recent history of Georgia demonstrates that Georgians can bring about change in government. In 1991-1992 this happened through force; in 2003 Shevardnadze was ousted through revolution; and 2012 saw the peaceful transfer of power.