

Election fraud induces political crisis in Georgia

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Ongoing political unrest in Georgia in the southern Caucasus region is threatening to get out of control.

Tens of thousands have been taking to the streets of the capital, Tbilisi, over the last week, in protest at the stealing of the November 2 parliamentary elections by allies of President Eduard Shevardnadze.

With larger protests planned for this week, Shevardnadze has mobilised counter-demonstrations by his supporters, with Reuters reporting that “hundreds of men—many in black leather coats—were bussed in from an autonomous region in western Georgia” to this end.

Civil war is a distinct possibility, with many fearing a repeat of the bloodshed eleven years ago in 1992 when Shevardnadze shot his way to power.

The November 2 elections, regarded as crucial in determining a successor when Shevardnadze is due to step down in 2005, have been derided as “spectacularly flawed” by international observers.

The rigged results gave Shevardnadze’s cronies including Aslan Abashidze an unlikely victory. In contrast, exit polls and alternative vote tabulations had clearly given opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili first place. The fraudulent character of the result was most openly displayed when Abashidze awarded himself 95 percent of the vote in his effectively autonomous fiefdom of Ajaria. Saakashvili is demanding that both the Ajarian results and those from the ethnic Armenian region of Kvemo Kartli be annulled.

Various election observers and media reported stuffed ballot boxes, policemen registered to vote at multiple ballot stations, tens of thousand missing from electoral registration lists and their names replaced by large numbers of the deceased. Some districts reported up to 30 percent of residents missing from electoral rolls. Those who could vote endured hours of queuing and intimidation by state forces.

Rustavi-2 television reported pro-government police hijacking ballot boxes and rerouting them via police stations. The ballot in Kutaisi, Georgia’s second city, was reported as “riddled with irregularities” by Imeldi television channel.

Rustavi-2 also reported how an electoral district with just

300 registered voters produced 1,500 completed ballots in the same city. Violent clashes occurred in the provincial city of Tkibuli, while voter harassment by state forces was almost universal.

In the face of such blatant corruption the government offered a second vote to be held in a mere 27 of the country’s almost 3,000 polling stations. Such a second ballot cannot alter the result. The Shevardnadze bloc—the “For a New Georgia” party—is already the official winner even though final results have yet to be declared.

Shevardnadze’s fraudulent methods complete a hat trick of rigged elections in the Caucasus this year—Armenia, Azerbaijan and now Georgia. Just weeks before Shevardnadze had watched the neighbouring Aliev ruling clique crudely rig their election without serious international condemnation and went so far as to publicly declare his intention to do the same.

By law, the results must be announced on November 20, but the government has drawn out the count. As the numbers on the streets of Tbilisi grew, there were concerns Shevardnadze would order troops to crush the opposition.

Shevardnadze was Mikhail Gorbachev’s foreign minister and rendered considerable services towards capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union. Like his former Azeri counterpart Heidar Aliev, recently succeeded by his son Ilham, Shevardnadze was a former local KGB chief and devoted Stalinist.

Both men came to power by force in their respective countries and imposed authoritarian regimes supported by Washington, whilst maintaining intermittently close relations with Moscow. Crucially both Aliev and Shevardnadze backed the US-led plan to construct the 1,000 mile Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The 40 percent completed oil pipeline between Baku and Ceyhan has just been granted full approval by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development—this within days of receiving similar approval from the World Bank.

Georgia’s geopolitical significance has risen steeply since a consortium of international oil companies decided at the

insistence of the Clinton administration to bypass both Russia and Iran and pipe oil and gas supplies from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean via Georgia.

Alarming for the Bush regime Shevardnadze is leaning more and more on the Russians for support. President Putin has congratulated Shevardnadze promising “to give all possible support” to his regime. Georgians fear Moscow might ultimately send troops to Tbilisi to prop up Shevardnadze should his rule begin to falter. The Georgian president has again spoken in recent days with Putin, reaffirming popular fears that the country is being drawn much closer into Moscow’s sphere of influence.

The Bush administration is distinctly unhappy with the Georgian president’s shift towards Moscow. So far the White House has limited itself to making condemnations of electoral subterfuge. Some media commentators believe Shevardnadze has outlived his usefulness to Washington but that the Bush administration will be reluctant to ditch him at such a crucial stage in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and gas pipeline running through Georgian territory. On November 18 Lynn Pascoe, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, arrived in Tbilisi for two days of talks with Shevardnadze and opposition leaders.

Beyond the competing interests of Russia and the US is the growing anger of the Georgian people whose protests are becoming more robust as time goes on. After Interior Minister Koba Narchamashvili ordered large numbers of troops stationed in the Pankisi Gorge to Tbilisi last week to confront the protests, demonstrators blocked their route with felled trees. Meanwhile the Georgian economy is slowing to a virtual standstill, rail freight has been halved and nothing is moving at Black Sea ports.

Talks between Shevardnadze and Saakashvili have failed to broker any agreement—ending with mutual animosity and threats. The atmosphere within the country is described as extremely polarised. Saakashvili’s National Movement is calling for Shevardnadze to resign. Saakashvili campaigned under the slogan “Georgia without Shevardnadze” and promises the president a revolution if need be, likening Shevardnadze’s future fate to that of the executed Romanian leader Nicolai Ceausescu. For his part Shevardnadze has rekindled memories of his usurping of Zvaid Gamasakhurdia and the bloodshed in Abkhazia in a crude attempt to intimidate the Georgian population.

A sign of Shevardnadze’s weakness is his current alignment with former enemy Abashidze, a regional warlord who controls the Ajarian region through his Revival party. Abashidze has urged the president to bring the full force of the state to bear against the protesters.

Shevardnadze’s rule has been nothing short of a disaster

for the Georgian people. Since the early 1990s, out of a population of less than six million, one million Georgians have emigrated abroad. Over the same period Georgian GDP has slumped two-thirds and, according to the *International Herald Tribune*, 80 percent of the economy is illicit consisting of contraband and general black market activity.

Shevardnadze, his family and ruling clique are up to their necks in such activities. Georgia is ranked highly on the lists of the world’s most corrupt and criminal states as Shevardnadze and his gang fill their Swiss bank accounts. The protection of such riches is believed to be the prime reason behind the president’s reluctance to allow others like Saakashvili a place at the table.

Blackouts in Tbilisi and provincial cities are frequent and electricity cuts can last for days. More than half of the country’s population live below the poverty line and monthly wages are as little as \$30. Government corruption and nepotism are out of control, while pensioners frequently fail to receive their meagre \$7 allowance for months on end. It is not surprising that Shevardnadze’s approval rating amongst the Georgian public barely scrapes into double figures.

Collapsing living standards are no doubt fuelling the street protests. Social polarisation is starkly evident. Writing just prior to the election the BBC warned of a possible social explosion in Georgia: “Anger simmers just beneath the surface of Georgian life. Anger at falling living standards, anger at the in-your-face wealth of the new-rich, anger at the arbitrary powers of the police, anger at the corruption of government officials, anger at the failures of Georgian foreign policy.”



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