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FOR POLITICS
AND SOCIETY

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POLICY PAPER / NOVEMBER 2020

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Policy Paper – Mihajlo Jakovljević, November 2020

Parliamentary elections in Georgia showed great promise after the recent election reform which allowed for more competition and optimism in creating a pluralistic parliament structure. However, the results may deepen political apathy and the faith in Georgian democracy still remains questionable. How did a promising reform lead to such pessimistic result and can we question the attempts to consolidate Georgia's democracy? Furthermore, what is the international impact of such attempts, in a shadow of the current conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, leading further towards the consolidation of power of the Georgian Dream party? It would seem that answers to such questions can be found by placing Georgia in a broader global context – one focusing on the process of democracy building.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the recent parliamentary elections in Georgia through a prism of legislative endeavors, political schemes and international consequences and influences all forming a broad assumption of where to go next and answer a rather complex question – how does a country consolidate its democracy. Such a question at first glance may seem contradictory – a country is a democracy or it is not. That kind of a mathematical categorization would lead us to ignore the ever-changing nature of political processes. Hence to build and consolidate democracy is to look past what is written and search for the meanings which always present themselves as a scale, never mathematical and always changing. What makes this event in Georgia rather unique are not the numbers, nor the outcome, rather it is the analysis of an endeavor to consolidate democracy.

Democracy in limbo

Although Georgia has a multi-party system, mapping key political actors leads us to only two. Firstly, the ruling Georgian Dream party founded in 2012 by the billionaire business man and politician Bidzina Ivanishvili. Secondly, the United National Movement party (UNM), led officially by Grigol Vashadze, however noting that Mikheil Saakashvili holds a position of an honorary chairman. UNM is the main opposition acting as an umbrella party for most of the smaller opposition parties. Considering that the course of Georgia's future is mostly impacted by the influence of two very controversial actors, Ivanishvili and Saakashvili, it is difficult question any bleak and pessimistic predictions while analyzing the political landscape of Georgia.

Parliamentary elections in Georgia resulted in a decisive win for the Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili. According to the Election administration of Georgia (CEC) “Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia” had won 48,23% while the second ranked is the “Election Block – United National Movement – United Opposition Strength is in Unity” won 27.17% of the proportional vote. In the majoritarian elections the ruling Georgian Dream candidates have so far won 14 of 30 majoritarian constituencies noting that a run-off will be held in other 16 majoritarian constituencies on November 21st.¹ The main conclusion derived from these numbers is that the Georgian Dream has succeeded in getting over 40% of the overall results, thus achieving the possibility of forming the government by itself. Despite the fact that one day before the elections, 10 opposition parties, amongst which is the United National Movement, signed a memorandum stating that they are “confident that by the will of the Georgian people it will have a convincing victory in the parliament elections on October 31st and will form

¹ *Elections 2020: all votes counted. What happens next?* Agenda. 2020. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3444>

a government endowed with the confidence of the Georgian people”², this was simply not realistic. The opposing “Election Block” has failed in its most realistic goal for these elections which is to force the formation of a coalition government, despite hoping that the election reform would shift the tide of Georgian political landscape.

Celebrated on an international level, the potential and meaning of the parliamentary elections in Georgia gradually faded in comparison to neighbouring Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. During the election campaign in Georgia, this question had remained rather avoided by the ruling party, stating official neutrality in the conflict. Given that the “western leaders seem mostly pre-occupied with internal issues (whether it is the US elections, internal troubles in the EU, protests in Belarus etc.)” while Russia seems rather unimpressive in its role, there is some room for Georgia’s diplomatic activity.³ However despite the expressed desire to from Tbilisi to host potential bilateral Armenia-Azerbaijan talks, the mutual distrust between Baku and Yerevan is still the biggest obstacle.⁴ While the ruling party has taken a neutral and seemingly productive stance in the matter, the opposition seeks to choose a side. Former President Mikheil Saakashvili (UNM) stated that his position is based on the principle of territorial integrity, which implies that Nagorno-Karabakh is a sovereign territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan.⁵ From an electoral point of view this action is understandable – UNM is seeking support from the Azeri minority in the municipality of Marneuli by supporting Azerbaijan in the conflict. However, the opposition still didn’t manage to achieve the desired level of support as the Marneuli municipality still remains traditionally in support of the Georgian dream party.

Democracy in limbo is not a new label and in most cases it refers to the EU’s neighborhood of Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus striving to increase their democracy progress.⁶ This paper would argue that the concept of a “democracy in limbo” shows potential to be analyzed on a greater scale, not only in correlation with the EU, but also giving it a national and internal dimension of a country trying to consolidate its democracy. Democracy in limbo is formed from democratic, fair and equal for all elections, but giving undemocratic results and thus it poses as a significant danger to the process of consolidating democracy. The correlation between the two, even though it seems paradoxical, it is simply a natural course of events when democratic values are implemented by the institutions but not adopted by the people. In fair and equal for all elections, what is stopping a party from gaining every vote? Despite the fact that there is no rule against such a scenario, what makes it improbable is the adoption of democratic values by the people, by the voters, expressing freely their difference in opinion and engaging with the institutions whose members they should wholeheartedly elect. If such an element is lacking, democracy cannot achieve its full potential,

² JAMnews, Tbilisi. *Georgian elections: opposition parties agree not to form coalition government with ruling party*. 2020 elections in Georgia. October 30, 2020. JAMnews 2015 – 2019. <https://jam-news.net/georgia-opposition-georgian-dream-tina-bokuchava-sergi-kapanadze-giorgi-vashadze-memorandum-coalition-bidzina-ivanishvili/>

³ Avdaliani, Emil. *Georgia & the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. Georgia Today. October 7, 2020. <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/22607/Georgia-%26-the-Nagorno-Karabakh-Conflict>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *In Quotes: Georgian Politicians on Nagorno-Karabakh Developments*. Civil Georgia. September 29, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/371383>

⁶ Solonenko, Iryna. *Democracy in Limbo*. Study: BTI 2014 Report. Political Management in International Comparison. 2015. <https://blog.bti-project.org/2015/01/13/democracy-in-limbo/>

hence, it will fall short in comparison to other democratic countries possessing such an element.

While Georgia is steady marching towards the consolidation of its democracy from a legal standpoint, it is still significantly lacking in other spheres. Georgia is a country shackled by its lack of democratic values caused by economic disparities which in turn led to losing faith in democracy. Democracies in limbo see strength and unity in one leader, rather than a pluralistic political scene. Chances for the Georgian Dream to lose these elections or lose enough to be forced into a coalition government were incredibly slim from the beginning.

Election reform – long awaited step forward

It takes time not to set the rules and impose them but for the human nature to adapt to change. In the bubble of political science thinkers, there is little or no need to discuss the importance of elections, however reality of most democracies is often disappointing, showing a clear discrepancy. This paper will narrow down these broad statements to the political context of Georgia in which they are developing.

The question which forms a premise to this analysis is how democratic is Georgia. According to Freedom House, Georgia can be labeled as “partly free” with the overall methodological score of 61/100, slowly dropping from last year’s 63.⁷ Often repeated in this discussion are the drawbacks of the mixed election system, combining proportional and majoritarian elements for electing Members of the Parliament. On the election day, voters are given two ballots – one for voting for party lists (according to the proportional system); the second ballot contains the names of the candidates (one from each party) from that particular constituency.⁸ The Georgian Parliament counts 150 seats, of which 77 were elected in a proportional manner while the remaining 73 were elected in majoritarian manner. In the previous parliamentary elections held in 2016, this system allowed for the ruling Georgian Dream party to win 44 seats (48%) on the first ballot. Even such a result derived from a proportional system seems rather questionable, adding that Georgian Dream won 71 out of 73 majoritarian seats, ushering in an era in which one party holds 115 seats in the Parliament, while the second ranked party in the election, United National Movement holds only 27 seats. The danger of having such a mixed electoral system is that it could lead to final results that are rather different or even opposite to the popular vote and impacting the psychological freedom of voters by strongly favoring the ruling party.

In their endeavor to reform the election system, the public pressure imposed on the Georgian government was successful. On one end it brought international attention to the irregularities of the election system, its incompatibility with the political landscape of Georgia and showed a glimpse of light. On the other end, skepticism of proposed reforms by the Georgian government also grew as time was necessary in order to implement such changes. However, one thing was certain – a change in the election system was necessary. Solution was found in reforming the election system, at least to a degree in order to achieve public satisfaction. Under the new system, the number of MPs elected proportionally through party lists increased from

⁷ Freedom House. *Freedom in the world 2020, Georgia*. 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2020>

⁸ JAMnews, Tbilisi. *Why the proportional electoral system is so important for Georgia. 2020 elections in Georgia*. November 16, 2019. JAMnews 2015 – 2019. <https://jam-news.net/why-the-proportional-electoral-system-is-so-important-for-georgia/>

77 to 120 while the number of single-member majoritarian constituencies fell from 73 to 30.⁹ In addition to the newly changed allocation of seats in the Georgian Parliament, the electoral threshold for proportional elections is set at 1%, allowing for greater competition. With the new system, the country could be entering an era of coalition governance and ending the current dominance of disproportionately powerful ruling parties.¹⁰ This deal was achieved with help from the newly established U.S. ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan and was announced on March 8th, with both ruling and opposition parties involved. The most important aspect of this deal states that the election system in 2024 Parliamentary Elections is to be fully proportional, ushering a new era for Georgian democracy in its endeavor to escape the landfalls and consequences ever provoked by the majoritarian system. In hindsight, two significant percentual barriers exist. Firstly, the 1% electoral threshold would allow for greater plurality with a risk of having a less disciplined parliament. Secondly, the 40% barrier for the winner which would, if crossed by a single party, allow it to form the government by itself. Other changes introduced include a gender quota of 25%, significantly increasing the number of women in the Parliament to 30 or more as opposed to the previous 9. However, what seems to be lacking is a minority quota, which despite the growing political activity of minority representatives, still has not been decided upon.

The aftermath

Why were the parliamentary elections in Georgia on 31st of October 2020 so important? Holding a pivotal nature derived from the change in the election system, the new parliamentary elections hold significant prospects to allow for the people of Georgia to finally have representation that provides more correlation to their vote. However, reality is often disappointing and election results led to no significant change in spite of the election reform. The day after the election on 31st of October, opposition leaders led their supporters in a march to the hilltop home of Georgian Dream's billionaire chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili.¹¹

Numerous violations were reported throughout the Election day, noting physical confrontation and obstruction of the activities of a journalist, attack on a journalist, expulsion of observers and violation of the secrecy of voting.¹² However, various independent observers (representatives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and others) reported that the few electoral irregularities are not enough to invalidate results. The opposition would disagree. Following the ongoing protest in Tbilisi over the election results, the opposition political parties have signed a joint statement saying they will not enter the new convocation of

⁹ OC media. *Georgia transforms electoral system ahead of October parliamentary elections*. June 29, 2020. <https://oc-media.org/georgia-transforms-electoral-system-ahead-of-october-parliamentary-elections/>

¹⁰ Lomsadze, Giorgi. *Georgian parties reach agreement to resolve crisis*. Eurasianet. 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-parties-reach-agreement-to-resolve-crisis>

¹¹ Lomsadze, Giorgi. *Contested Georgian vote results in opposition boycott*. Eurasianet. 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/contested-georgian-vote-results-in-opposition-boycott>

¹² JAMnews, Tbilisi. *Play by play of Georgian parliamentary elections*. 2020 elections in Georgia. October 31, 2020. JAMnews 2015 – 2019. <https://jam-news.net/parliamentary-elections-in-georgia-news-live-what-is-happening-parties-candidates-georgian-dream-opposition-ivanishvili-photo-video/>

parliament.¹³ The outrage caused by the election results led to most of the opposition parties and thousands of their supporters gathering by the parliament in Tbilisi and signing a statement by 18 opposition parties demanding for the “cancellation of election results and holding repeated elections” as well as the “elimination of systemic electoral violations that led to massive fraud”. The opposition leaders were calling to organize a large rally in Tbilisi on November 8^h.¹⁴

Georgia is not foreign to internal turmoil caused by the repeated clashes between the police and the opposition supporters organizing rallies to show their dissatisfaction. Last year, “protests began after Sergei Gavrilov, a member of Russia’s lower house of parliament, took the chair of an inter-parliamentary session” in the Georgian parliament causing a controversial event leading to “thousands of demonstrators [taking] to the streets of Georgia’s capital city Tbilisi since June 20 in protest against Russian interference, the largest demonstrations in over seven years”.¹⁵ This abrupt sequence of events led to heavy clashes with the police using tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. Reforming the election system was one of the questions addressed during this period. Now, the question is if the elections on October 31st will become a linchpin for a new sequence of protests. Unfortunately, the answer seems to be affirmative. On November 8th, “opposition politicians and their supporters gathered in front of the parliament of Georgia”¹⁶ which led to a situation in which the police have used water cannons against the demonstrators in order to disperse them.

¹³ JAMnews, Tbilisi. *Opposition parties in Georgia sign joint statement renouncing their seats in parliament*. 2020 elections in Georgia. November 3, 2020. JAMnews 2015 – 2019. <https://jam-news.net/georgia-document-nika-melia-opposition-parliament-boycott-national-movement-lelo/>

¹⁴ *Opposition plans not to take up mandates in parliament, calls for repeat elections*. Agenda. 2020. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3432>

¹⁵ Roache, Madeline. *Georgians Have Now Been Protesting Russian Interference for a Week. Here’s Why*. Time. 2019 <https://time.com/5615726/anti-russia-protests-georgia/>

¹⁶ *Opposition holds rally, demands repeat parliamentary elections*. Agenda. 2020. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3522>

Photo 1: Rally in front of the Georgian parliament, November 8, 2020



Source: JAMnews¹⁷

Nothing will change. The election results are undisputedly accepted by the CEC as well as confirmed by the independent international observers. It is very unlikely that the opposition parties would be able to invoke a level of outrage from the people needed to force new elections simply basing their discontent on a ‘hunch’ that the elections were fraudulent and don’t represent the ‘true will of the Georgian people’. Rather than being nearly impossible, such an endeavor in a global pandemic could prove to be very dangerous. The near-future of Georgia seems rather bleak and questionable raising not enough international concern as it normally would have without a global pandemic.

Conclusion

Every ending is a new beginning. Making such a presumptuous statement often leads to more questions than answers. There lies the essence of struggles undertaken by every country looking to change its political system, to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of international relations, to work in the same realm of political endeavors as most, to build and consolidate. Naivety in analyzing such transitional periods would be to assume that there is a pattern to follow – an already set system of rules and regulations that one must simply complete – however, only dormant theories and broad assumptions exist, waiting for individual human nature to fill them with meaning most comfortable for the masses to undertake in a given time frame and in a given radius. Categorizing political systems as mathematical variables and stating that a country is either one thing or another would be to avoid the undertaking that shows that in political science, even numbers have their own nature, constantly in motion with only a broad assumption of where to go next.

¹⁷ Pipia, David. Police disperse election fraud protesters in Tbilisi streets with water cannon. JAMnews. 2020. <https://jam-news.net/protest-against-rigged-parliamentary-elections-in-georgia-news-photo-tbilisi-opposition/>

The role of democratic elections is often portrayed as fundamental to the democratic progress, however, looking into the electoral history of Europe and to some extent the United States, it becomes rather evident that elections themselves are not enough to keep democracy on the right track. The parliamentary elections in Georgia, held on the 31st of October show a misplaced faith in elections leading to the consolidation of power instead of democracy. Financial aspects, popular trust in institutions and economic problems found in the shadow of the electoral reform led to a failure in fostering accountability and consolidating Georgian democracy. In turn, this may have resulted in deepening political apathy and shaking the faith in elections as Georgia remains a democracy in limbo.

Recommendations

- Maintain on a steady democracy consolidation track and secure that the Parliamentary elections in 2024 be held in a fully proportional election system.
- Thread with caution in fostering a successful new parliament structure. Opposition rallies are unlikely to stop. Ignoring the opposition would be to delegitimize the new parliament.
- Minimize the further escalation of the new wave of COVID-19. Opposition rallies are likely to increase the number of patients. The government must work on dissuading the general public to gather in large groups without infringing on their rights to protest.



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