

The End of the Rose Era

by **Lincoln A. Mitchell**

27 May 2008

Two recent elections show that Georgian democracy is alive. But it is not yet flourishing.

The initial excitement of the Rose Revolution has worn off. More than four years on, Georgia has made significant progress in reforming its laws, fighting corruption and in governance more generally, but it is now more clear than ever that democracy is one of the areas where the government still has some work to do.

While the 21 May parliamentary elections in Georgia were better than in most parts of the region, and a clear improvement over the widespread fraud which was common in pre-Rose Revolution Georgia, they were still a far cry from being truly democratic.

Two elections this year – the presidential contest in January and last week's vote for legislators – mark a new period, where the exercise of democracy means restraining the dominant ruling party rather than full contestation for political power.

Neither the quality nor the outcome of the parliamentary election should come as a surprise to anybody. As expected, President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement won a clear victory to again assure that this party will dominate the Parliament. Moreover, not unlike the January presidential election that returned Saakashvili to power for a second term, most international observers viewed the election more positively than negatively but still raised concerns about media access and the ruling party's use of state resources. Election day went relatively smoothly in most parts of the country, but domestic observers reported instances of harassment and intimidation and some fraud throughout the day.

All the major actors behaved predictably during and immediately after this election. The president and the governing party declared victory and asserted that this was proof of their success and the success of Georgian democracy. The opposition politicians accused the government of massive fraud and called for a boycott of the Parliament and street demonstrations. Friendly Western governments lauded the Georgian government and asserted that these elections were a step forward for democracy.

As has become typical in Georgia, the elections were billed months in advance as a key test for democracy. However, as is also usually the case, this analysis is somewhat reductive and misses the true tests and opportunities that Georgian democracy meets outside of elections.

Although the opposition has made it clear throughout the process that they do not

consider the parliamentary election democratic by any means, the vote has changed political reality in Georgia. It is likely that the United National Movement, largely thanks to virtually sweeping the single-mandate seats, will have a greater majority than its more modest success in the party list voting might suggest.

Saakashvili will still be able to govern, but may have a more difficult time doing so with impunity. It will no longer be possible to speak of the absence or weakness of the opposition. In this region of the world, in the media and resource environment in which the parliamentary election occurred, holding a government party to 60 percent of the vote is a sign of the emergence of the opposition, not weakness or absence.

IMPERFECT DEMOCRACY

It is likely then that post-revolutionary Georgia will continue to be characterized by one-party dominance, less than full freedom of the press, and continued concerns about the government's illiberal tendencies. The government's impressive record of reform, fighting corruption and working for economic development will likely allow it to maintain the support of a majority, or at least a plurality, of Georgians. The tensions with Russia will continue to ebb and flow based on internal Russian and Georgian political factors as well as more global issues. Georgian democracy, should it develop further, will have to do so in this difficult international context.

Georgia's political system is consolidating as a semi-democratic, one-and-a-half party system. There was no real possibility that the ruling party or its presidential candidate would lose either of Georgia's elections in 2008. In this sense, these elections were not genuine contests over political power; rather they were opportunities for the voters to evaluate the governing party and either rein it in or give it a freer hand. The results suggest that both times, the people chose the former option. It is likely that Georgian elections in the near future will continue to be characterized by this dynamic.

While the parliamentary election occurred in a climate that could not be described as entirely democratic, opposition descriptions of it as "criminal" and other similar epithets not only overstate the case but detract from a full understanding of the current political and electoral environment in Georgia. Twice this year the voters have gone to the polls and sent a clear message that they were ready to chasten the government, but not reject it.

The governing party still has a firm hand on political power, partly because of how it has manipulated the political environment, but it should be obvious to all but the most extreme members of the Georgian opposition that the government also enjoys broad, although far from unanimous, support among the population. The government's work over the last four years has not gone unrecognized by ordinary Georgians who do not want to go back to the chaos, corruption and economic deterioration of the Shevardnadze years.

These elections helped solidify the political environment which has been evolving in Georgia since the Rose Revolution. In this regard, the elections can be seen as the close

of the Rose Revolution era in Georgia. The days of great democratic promise and hope have given way to a strong, stable, reform-oriented regime with persistent shortcomings with regard to democracy. The failure to meet the democratic promise of the Rose Revolution does not mean Saakashvili's government has been a failure. The government has meaningfully improved the lives of many in Georgia, and it has done so while facing a grave threat from Russia.

It is now time for the United States – one of Saakashvili's most ardent cheerleaders – to recognize the political reality in Georgia. Georgia is a U.S. ally which is governed by a stable and normalizing regime, which generally works to make the lives of its citizens better, and has successfully promoted economic reform and reduced corruption. Clearly this is a major step forward from where Georgia was five years ago. The United States, of course, should also bear in mind that Georgia is stuck in a difficult conflict with an unfriendly and powerful neighbor and that Washington can help Georgia resolve that conflict and be more secure.

Democracy, however, is not advancing in Georgia. For Washington to claim otherwise will make it easier for the Georgian government to sidestep the real work of democratization by improving the media climate, developing a truly independent judiciary, and drawing a firm line between the state and the ruling party.

Lincoln A. Mitchell is the Arnold A. Saltzman assistant professor in the Practice of International Politics at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.