

TRANSITIONS ONLINE

## **Dour Democrats**

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*Presidential races in Georgia, Armenia and Russia were not just bumps on the road to democracy, and that's a big problem for democracy advocates.*

Georgia, Russia and Armenia have all held presidential elections this year, and in each case, the outcomes demonstrate that efforts to strengthen democracy are either stagnant or, more worryingly, failing.

In Russia, we saw a well orchestrated and smoothly run *undemocratic* election, and there was little democracy advocates or international observers could have done to change that.

In Georgia, an election broadly assessed as essentially free and fair occurred in a less than democratic political environment. It gave rise to substantial demonstrations after results were released and questions about the extent to which the result, a first-round victory for incumbent Mikheil Saakashvili, reflected the actual voting.

The Armenian election was somewhere between Georgia and Russia with regard to democracy, as the outcome was never really in doubt, but it was considerably more competitive than the Russian race. Following the Armenian election there were protests in the capital, a violent crackdown and, as of this writing, no clear resolution.

These elections, and the political contexts in which they occurred, were distinct from each other, but together they point toward the major challenges facing the advance of democracy and policies to support it. All three of elections demonstrate the importance of developing democracy assistance strategies that can help liberalize illiberal regimes or stop the slide of semi-democracies toward authoritarianism.

### COMMON DEFICIENCIES

The election in Georgia was clearly the best-run of the three, followed by Armenia and then Russia. However, we must not overlook the similarities between the three cases. These elections shared several important characteristics, which highlight broader trends in the region.

First, they were not competitive. Dmitry Medvedev faced no real opposition in Russia, while few in Armenia or Georgia thought that victory for Serzh Sarkisian or Saakashvili was ever really in doubt. Second, none of these elections saw a clear-cut choice between a democratic and non-democratic candidate. Third, the most substantial irregularities occurred in the pre-election period: various combinations of media bias, intimidation of

opposition candidates, and liberal use of state resources on behalf of the eventual winner. The election days themselves were relatively smooth and not marked by rampant irregularities.

Another similarity is that in each election the role of international observers was complex. In Russia, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's electoral monitoring agency, the ODIHR, did not observe the process because of the government's refusal to cooperate in a way that would have made serious observation possible. In Georgia, the snap election gave ODIHR and other election monitors little time to put an observation mission in place. In both Georgia and Armenia there were substantial discrepancies between the evaluation done by ODIHR and the views of the political opposition.

Finally, in none of the cases did the election contribute to greater democracy in the country. Moreover, the role of Western democracy advocates was very limited. In Russia, they were virtually shut out of the process. Many Western, particularly American, supporters of Georgia sought unsuccessfully to explain away the crackdown and state of emergency in November 2007 which led up to the election. The events in Armenia are perhaps most striking because of the lack of attention being paid by Western media and governments alike. Clearly, these are no longer the days of oranges and roses in the former Soviet Union.

## STAGNANT DEMOCRACY

Looking for reasons behind the stagnancy of democracy and of democracy assistance in the Caucasus and Russia, we can see that 17 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the first phase of post-communism now in the past, there is a movement toward illiberal democracies in the region. These states are characterized by strong executives, limited freedoms, weak political oppositions and elections which are, generally speaking, non-competitive. In Russia, this transition away from democracy seems almost complete. Unless Medvedev does something extremely surprising, Russia will likely continue to move away from semi-democracy and consolidate its authoritarian rule.

It is clearly unfair and inaccurate to suggest that Saakashvili's Georgia is as authoritarian as Vladimir Putin and Medvedev's Russia. Nonetheless, to a great extent the differences between the two countries are of degree, not kind. The same is true of Armenia which, once again, can be placed somewhere between Russia and Georgia on this scale.

The rise of illiberal regimes should also be viewed through the prism of seeking to balance democracy assistance with broader foreign policy goals. More specifically, in Russia the West is now confronted with a regime that is no longer weak and does not see itself as having anything to gain from Western or U.S. expertise on issues like democracy. However, Russia is an increasingly important player in areas that include frozen conflicts in the Caucasus, energy security, and Iran's nuclear capability.

In Georgia, the close relationship between the Bush and Saakashvili administrations has clouded U.S. efforts to help Georgia consolidate the initial gains of the Rose Revolution

and helped to mute criticism of problems with Georgian democracy long before last November. Armenia is probably the country of least strategic importance to the United States, but recent events there make it clear that the U.S. appetite and ability to facilitate democratic change in the region is not what it once was.

In Armenia, Russia and Georgia the rise of illiberal regimes and the effects of American foreign policy have contributed to situations that were not only complex, but where both sides employed different tactics in attempts to make it unclear who the democrats were or how democracy might be strengthened in their respective countries. In Russia, orderly elections, a clean election day and a smooth, if not altogether sincere, transfer of power characterized what Putin's government might refer to as a Russian style of democracy.

In Georgia and Armenia, the situation was more complex. The elections in Georgia occurred because of a somewhat unexpected decision by Saakashvili to resign in the backlash against his government's violent crackdown on opposition protesters. Saakashvili and his supporters presented his decision as evidence of his supreme commitment to democracy, but this seems somewhat Pollyannaish. The issue in Georgia was not Saakashvili's legitimacy, or even his public support, both of which were acknowledged by all but his most extreme critics. Rather, the issue was Saakashvili's tendency to govern unilaterally with little regard for the niceties of consultation, legislative process or constitutional stability.

Elections, particularly in the tense political climate of January 2008, were not likely to have an impact on that problem.

## HOW TO HELP DEMOCRATS

The context of the Armenian election raises a different set of problems for democracy advocates because it was essentially typical for that country. The outcome was never in doubt, the fix was in early, the opposition was not really democratic, and there were few strategic options for internal or foreign democrats. Moreover, by making electoral reforms, the Armenian government was able to avoid a negative election report or any significant negative consequences for staging yet another flawed contest.

It is the ordinariness of the Armenian election that goes to the crux of its importance. It is precisely in elections of that nature where the United States and its allies must be able to help democratic forces with assistance to maintain democracy's relevance and centrality. Elections of this type in the region's illiberal regimes cannot be reasonably expected to play pivotal roles in democratization. Similarly, in illiberal regimes relatively smooth election days, and technical election-related improvements cannot be taken on their own as evidence of a government's efforts to democratize. U.S. policy must begin to reflect this by taking longer-term approaches to democracy assistance which recognize the breadth of the problems facing democracy in these regimes and the limited immediate prospects of elections meaningfully addressing these problems.

Elections were further complicated in Georgia and Armenia by the initial refusal of the

opposition to respect the results. Demonstrators came to the streets of Tbilisi and Yerevan to protest elections which Western observers and multilateral organizations had assessed as largely free and fair. In Armenia, violence was used to disperse the demonstrators, but the final card there has not yet been played.

In Georgia, the demonstrations eventually gave way to the parliamentary campaign, hunger strikes and on-and-off negotiations between the government and the opposition. In both these countries opposition demonstrators questioned both the veracity and the motives behind international assessments of the elections.

While elections are only one of several pillars of both democracy and democracy assistance, this is the institution that draws the most media attention and is most salient to both domestic and international audiences. It's not hard to find explanations for why the West was unable or unwilling to take a more critical approach to any of these elections, particularly in Armenia and Georgia: the opposition was weak and not really made up of democrats; these were better elections than in the past; the outcome wasn't really at stake; these countries are either too powerful (Russia) or too important (Georgia). All these are empirically accurate, but add up to a dead end for democracy assistance.

The elections this year in Russia, Georgia and Armenia represent a range of outcomes with which democracy advocates have become increasingly familiar. The presidential election scheduled later this year in another south Caucasus country, Azerbaijan, will probably look a lot like these. There is little likelihood of a change in leadership or an advance in democracy.

The question of what to do about an election where the outcome is not in doubt, choice is limited, democratic institutions are not firmly in place, and it is not so easy to determine who the democrats are, will not go away. Those interested in seeing these countries become more democratic must find a way to either de-emphasize elections in favor of other aspects of democracy assistance such as civil society development, hold governments accountable for bad elections even when the fraud does not change the outcome, or determine a longer-term strategy for supporting democratic development that will not get sidetracked during every election season.

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