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Georgia Needs A Different Path To Democracy

by Lincoln Mitchell, Andrew Sidamon-Eristoff

As bipartisan supporters of the Republic of Georgia's aspirations to become a fully functioning, Western-oriented democracy, we have followed with dismay the increasingly unproductive "dialogue" attendant to demonstrations against the current regime that began on April 9.

Both sides --- government and opposition --- bear responsibility for the resulting rhetorical and political stalemate, which if left unresolved could escalate into violence or instability. We urge an alternative course, one that requires both sides to offer something to the other and to acknowledge that neither side has all the answers.

The Georgian government must recognize that the demonstrations, regardless of their size, are a legitimate expression of a significant popular discontent. All is not well in Georgia. To assert otherwise or to continue using overheated rhetoric asserting that all those in the opposition are Russian operatives undermines the government's domestic and international credibility.

This is not to discount the real challenges Georgia's aggressive northern neighbor poses, but playing the Russia card at every turn has become a tired and ineffective diversion from the path of democratic dialogue and development.

The government must also resist the temptation to condescend toward the opposition. Elements of the opposition may be feckless and disorganized, but they deserve a measure of respect as representatives of alternative points of view. Using terms such as "reasonable opposition" to undermine the legitimacy of opposition groups conveys a not-so-subtle message that the government has taken upon itself the right to control or shape the opposition.

Similarly, the opposition must recognize that it made a serious error in focusing its entire efforts on securing President Mikheil Saakashvili's early resignation instead of confining its demands to more realistic, constructive, and credible goals. Saakashvili won his most recent popular mandate in a contested election that international observers agree generally reflected the popular will, despite significant flaws. Forcing an early resignation solely through demonstrations and civil disobedience is both extra-constitutional and undemocratic.

Moreover, we are concerned that this kind of all-or-nothing rhetoric is conditioning the Georgian electorate to believe that demonstrations and civil disobedience, rather than voting, are the only reliable means of securing political change. Stable democracies do not, and cannot, function in this way.

Instead, we propose the following:

First, the opposition must recognize that it has a right --- indeed, an obligation --- to oppose the government, but not to destroy the state and its leaders. It should withdraw its demands for Saakashvili's resignation and instead focus on specific, credible, and achievable demands for changes to Georgia's constitution and democratic processes.

These might include revising the composition of the Central Election Commission, direct election of big-city mayors, early parliamentary elections, replacing some members of the government, and reforms to reduce the government's use of "administrative resources" to hinder the opposition and support pro-government candidates in future elections. True, the opposition has been demanding such changes without success for the past two years, but in recent weeks the Georgian authorities have hinted they are now willing to address at least some of them.

Second, the government should be ready to discuss real changes to Georgia's constitution and democratic processes with the opposition and a broad array of stakeholders, including members of civil society, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the business community. The government must make a significant gesture demonstrating its commitment to reform; at this moment, actions will speak much louder than words.

On a larger scale, the government must be willing to create and sustain a political environment in which opponents of the regime can function and organize. Ironically, the current government's leaders benefited from just such an environment under former President Eduard Shevardnadze.

Finally, for the sake of Georgia's continued political and social development, and its international reputation, both the government and the opposition need to commit themselves to the kind of normal political dialogue that characterizes a functioning, stable democracy. Losing a hard-fought election is not the end of the world, nor is it an excuse to abandon democratic processes and debate. Instead, losing should be a catalyst for reflection and a call to organization leading to victory in future elections.

In a real democracy, winners must be willing to lose, so they might be winners again. Similarly, winning an election doesn't mean that you have "won the argument" for all time. It means, rather, that the voters have given you the privilege of governing for a relatively short period of time before you must again seek a renewed mandate. Let us hope that Georgians as Georgians, not as members of either the opposition or government, will seize this moment in history to begin a new chapter in the political development of their country.

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