

GEORGIA 1999: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

BHHRG representatives visited Georgia to observe the parliamentary elections held on 31st October 1999. They were among the few observers to monitor the poll in the autonomous republic of Adjara. Their report challenges many of the conclusions reached by other international observer groups.

The Political Climate During the Election

It was reported in the Western media that Georgia's President, Eduard Shevardnadze, had stated on 9th October that if the opposition Democratic Revival Union of Georgia ("Revival") bloc was to win a majority in the new parliament, it would amount to a "coup d'etat." Ordinary Georgians told BHHRG that such a comment from the head of state of a country claiming to be a democracy was disgraceful, since elections are presumed to be a democratic alternative to coups d'etat. However, there was every indication during the election that the regime of Shevardnadze and his ruling Citizens' Union party felt that Revival posed a serious threat to its nexus of control.

In addition to the myriad instances of police brutality and violations of voters' rights perpetrated by functionaries of the Citizens' Union during the pre-election period, the Georgian government received two US Army Hughes helicopters which patrolled the skies at low altitude over Tbilisi for several days before the election, and on election day itself. Not only did they make a deafening noise; they also created a highly tense atmosphere as voters prepared to go to the polls. It was reported to BHHRG representatives that the Georgian government expected a shipment of an additional 20 such attack helicopters in coming weeks. Mr. Shevardnadze has regularly stated his intention of seeking NATO membership by 2005. The acquisition of this hardware is, presumably, preparation for accession itself.

The main opposition group, Revival, was denied equal access to voters in all areas of the country outside of Adjara, where the bloc's chairman, Aslan Abashidze, is regional head of government. On several occasions campaign buses carrying Revival candidates were blocked by tanks or police and denied access to particular towns or regions, and, in Alkhalkalaki, Revival candidates were forced to walk several miles to meet voters. Regional government chiefs outside Adjara collaborated directly and openly with the regime in blockading the opposition in one way or another.

In a well-documented example, the deputy governor of Kakheti region promised President Shevardnadze on state-controlled TV's Channel 1 that she would "not allow Revival candidates into the region." There were numerous complaints by Revival of having been denied access to buildings which they had reserved and paid for in order to hold campaign meetings. BHHRG viewed a piece of film footage showing a representative of Revival being blocked from entering a building the party had reserved in the town of Borjomi, and being pushed and manhandled until he agreed to leave the area altogether.

The Campaign in the Media

BHHRG observers saw **no** campaign advertising for the opposition Revival bloc on any state-controlled television stations, and compared with one month previously, when there were at least a few small Revival campaign posters around the centre of Tbilisi, the situation had actually deteriorated considerably. Giant, expensive billboards for the Citizens' Union were in evidence all over the city. Revival posters were not in evidence at all except for those that had been partially ripped down.

Posters for the Labour Party and People's Party-Didgori often had giant brown or red paint splotches covering the faces of the parties' leaders. It was interesting to note that in many cases it would have been practically impossible for a person standing at street level to throw such a large amount of paint so high and with such accuracy. We were informed that both the

ruling Citizens' Union and the National Democratic Alliance (which included former allies the National Democratic Party of Irina Sarashvili and the Republican Party of Ivlian Haindrava) had purchased expensive "waterproof" posters, to which paint would not adhere, and, surely enough, their posters were uniformly un-vandalized. Georgian eyewitnesses informed BHHRG that functionaries of the Citizens' Union carried out this vandalism in the middle of the night, while posting armed guards around their largest, most expensive billboards round the clock.

Expensive and lengthy "rock video"-style campaign ads frequently appeared for the Citizens' Union and the National Democratic Alliance on Georgian state television while Revival was allowed next to nothing despite having made numerous appeals to both the Georgian government and Western organizations for proper access to the media as provided under the election law. In addition, state news programmes began and ended with eulogies to the Citizens' Union.

Only one television station in Tbilisi, the privately-owned but financially-strapped Kavkasia channel appeared to give any significant air time to Revival. It broadcasted a hour-and-a-half-long interview with Revival leader Aslan Abashidze on the Thursday evening before election day. However, this channel was available only in Tbilisi. Throughout the rest of Georgia only central, state-controlled television could be received. According to the International Society for Human Rights' National Section of Georgia (ISHR-IGFM), approximately 80% of the pre-election party propaganda broadcasts on Georgian television were on behalf of Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union.

Treatment of the Opposition

The theme of the Citizens' Union campaign was that the victory of Revival would pose a great danger to Georgia. Shevardnadze repeatedly stressed both that Revival leader Aslan Abashidze was "pro-Russian" and "pro-Islamist." The assertion that Abashidze wished to make Georgia into an "Islamic state," although entirely unfounded, was maintained consistently throughout the campaign by the Citizens' Union; Revival was afforded little or no air time to counter the charge.

The population of Adjara is linguistically and ethnically Georgian but slightly more than 50% Muslim by religion. Mr. Abashidze is descended from Muslim ancestors although there are Christian members of his family. The regional government in Adjara has built far more churches than mosques since he became its chairman in 1991. Adjara itself has a distinctly secular atmosphere and accusations on behalf of the Citizens' Union by the Georgian Patriarch Ilya II that Abashidze represented a "threat to Christianity" were both partisan and excessive, to say the least.

Allegations that Abashidze favours a reassertion of Russian control over Georgia or that he received any financial or other help from Moscow during his campaign have never been substantiated. Quite the contrary, all indications were that the Revival campaign was financed entirely from inside Georgia, while the Citizens' Union's lavish campaign materials suggested it had received a large share of its financing from the West.

Apart from scurrilous attacks made on the opposition by the Citizens' Union during the election campaign, numerous reports of beatings, arrests, intimidation and other physical interference with the Revival campaign by functionaries of Citizens' Union were received by BHHRG. From 6th -8th October 1999, the CEC disqualified 478 opposition, majoritarian candidates in violation of its own electoral law which required that these candidates be already disqualified two days prior to that date, which was the deadline.

There were numerous reports of physical attacks on opposition candidates during the campaign. On 6th October, the home of Dr. Nodar Koberidze, a journalist and candidate of Revival, was ransacked. Two days later, on 8th October, two unknown people broke into the home of Sandro Bregadze, chairman of Revival's youth wing and a candidate for the party,

and beat Mr. Bregadze's mother. On 13th October, Citizens' Union representatives physically attacked Badri Daraselia, an independent candidate who actively supported the opposition Revival bloc, and left him in serious condition in the Khobi regional hospital. On 15th October, Revival representatives were set upon in Kakheti during a meeting with voters. On 28th October, unknown gunmen brandishing automatic weapons opened fire on Kutaisi candidate, Shota Sakhundadze, wounding him. Mr. Sakhundadze was a former member of the Citizens' Union, who left the party 8 months before.

In addition to the violence allegedly perpetrated by Citizens' Union representatives among others, BHHRG received several reports of illegal police activity against opposition candidates. On 11th October, under orders from the local authorities, police in Chumateleti (East Georgia) detained campaign buses belonging to Revival. Also on 11th October police in Kutaisi arrested Nugzar Sakvarelidze, executive director of the firm "Aya" and a close friend of Revaz Dvalishvili, a Revival candidate. On 24th October, police in the village of Velistsikhe (Kakheti) violently dispersed voters who were meeting with Revival candidate Shota Kitiashvili, and beat the candidate's bus driver.

It was alleged that the authorities pressured suspected opposition supporters in other ways as well. When a sewer pipe in the Gidani District of Tbilisi burst, the authorities declared they would repair the pipe only if the residents of the district agreed to vote for Citizens' Union. The city of Poti in Mingrelia, the majority of whose inhabitants were believed to support Revival, was deprived of electricity for much of the pre-election period.

The regime displayed a decidedly "partisan" approach when accrediting domestic election observers. On 28th September, the Citizens' Union arranged a meeting with 48 Georgian NGOs to discuss "active cooperation" between the NGOs and the government. The NGOs then met with President Shevardnadze and members of the government and signed a document wherein the NGOs agreed to "actively support" the president's policies. The "State Coordination Council" of Georgian NGOs was thus created within the official organs of the regime.

On 25th October, the CEC held "elections" in the mountain village of Omalo (East Georgia), at which no observers nor any representatives of parties or blocs except Citizens' Union were present. No accredited journalists were present either. The CEC explained that difficult weather conditions necessitated early polling. However, according to official data, the number of voters in Omalo was 78, but the voter list showed 116. The OSCE was apparently not informed about this election, and the ballot box was opened on 26th October, accompanied by declarations that the "election" was valid.

Conduct of Polling

As reported in its pre-election report, BHHRG was told by a representative of the ruling Citizens' Union that the 1999 Georgian parliamentary elections would be the freest and fairest to date – "except in Adjara," where "severe irregularities" would occur. BHHRG observers, therefore, chose to observe the election there. They concluded that polling in Adjara was peaceful and orderly with a high voter turnout considering the bad weather. Furthermore, electoral committee officials appeared to be going out of their way to conform to the letter of the law, perhaps in anticipation of the accusations that would, inevitably, be levelled at them by both the Georgian government and international observer groups such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe.

BHHRG visited several polling stations in Batumi, and noted that, in accordance with the Georgian Electoral Law, 7 out of 14 members of each precinct election committee, including the chairman, were nominated by the CEC. Almost all parties were represented on each electoral committee, including always the Citizens' Union, and in many cases the chairman had been nominated by the Citizens' Union before being appointed. The polling stations in Batumi were mostly clean and orderly, and apart from the large number of persons sitting and

walking around inside (something our observers have witnessed in practically every election we have monitored in the FSU) nothing seemed particularly untoward.

One notable exception was at Polling Station No. 47, where we noticed that the seal on the ballot box had been broken and the lid nailed shut. When we asked the committee members and observers what had happened, they said that a Citizens' Union representative had "accidentally" knocked the box open and the decision to nail it shut had been reached after a conference of all committee members. No one, not even opposition party representatives, was prepared to level any accusation of foul play over the incident, and all made apologies for the Citizen's Union representative. Since all the allegations of electoral fraud had involved the likely behaviour of the Revival party, BHHRG was surprised by this.

We witnessed no intimidation or any attempt at undue influence, either by Adjarian officials or representatives of Revival. There were no party posters inside any of the polling stations and only the voter lists and the ubiquitous, cartoon-strip, "voter education" posters of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems" (IFES) adorned the walls.

BHHRG observers headed north to Mingrelia in Georgia proper to compare the conduct of the polling there with Adjaria. They visited two polling stations in Poti, Mingrelia. In Polling Station No. 4, the level of noise and confusion appeared much higher than in Adjaria. The chairman of the precinct election committee told us that in addition to the 1,431 names on the voter list there were 45 refugees who had a "special table" at which to register. Also, there was a list of an additional 131 people who were not registered but who would be allowed to vote for the party list by showing their passports. Polling Station No. 1 in Poti was extremely crowded: a solid mass of people were pushing up against the registration tables.

Further north, at Polling Station No. 19 in Chaladidi, BHHRG observers were approached as they were leaving by two young men representing the Organization for Fair Elections and Democracy, who told them that serious irregularities had occurred there earlier in the day. Two candidates on the majoritarian half of the ballot (both members of the ruling Citizens' Union) had between them turned away roughly 40 people from the polling station. The young men said that these voters had proper documents and identification and should have been entitled to vote but were forced out and, in many cases, had their papers "ripped up." BHHRG was told that these two candidates were locked in a bitter rivalry for the same seat.

At Polling Station No. 1 in Zugdidi, the observers noticed that several voters were being allowed to cast ballots after the official closing time of 8 p.m. There were roughly 40 people inside the polling station at the time the doors were locked and the atmosphere was loud and chaotic.

BHHRG were told by a domestic observer that the package of ballot papers which arrived at the beginning of the day was unsealed, and upon inquiring further, we were told by the chairman that "this was the way they always came." Furthermore, the seal on the ballot box had clearly been broken by the time our observers arrived. BHHRG was informed that a large percentage of persons on the voter list had not turned up to vote because they had never received their "notification certificates" in the mail as required under the Electoral Law. Unused and "invalid" ballots were collected and placed in a large postal sack which BHHRG were told would be taken by the chairman to the district electoral committee at the end of the count. Despite the chaos, party observers as well as electoral committee officials all expressed confidence in the conduct of the election at their polling station. A couple confided to us that we would see no falsification or irregularity in the polling station, because it "would all take place at the centre." Others were also convinced that the central government was able to falsify the elections with greater "sophistication" than in previous polls.

Conclusion

The preliminary report of the OSCE said that, apart from unspecified problems with the Electoral Law, the OSCE had found no serious problems in the Georgian Parliamentary Elections of 1999, except in Adjara. Strangely, although the OSCE and Council of Europe combined had supposedly deployed several hundred observers in Georgia for the elections, BHHRG only encountered two observers from each organization in Adjara itself. Although the BHHRG observers accept that irregularities might have occurred there, their impression was that the conduct of the election in Adjara had been superior to that witnessed in Georgia proper.

It is unfortunate that an election should be given the stamp of approval because it was staged by a head of state the West finds geopolitically convenient. The Georgian parliamentary elections of 1999 were different from past elections only because of the added element of a genuine opposition. But the readiness shown by international organizations and NGOs to condemn this group and its leader, Aslan Abashidze, could ultimately hinder the future development of any viable opposition in Georgia and put the effective seal of approval on one-party rule

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