

Georgia 2000: Presidential Elections

Representatives of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group observed the presidential elections in Georgia held on 9th April, 2000. BHHRG has observed previous elections in the country (see, Georgia Index) and has found them to be seriously flawed. Yet, the international community and OSCE observation missions have deemed those past elections uniformly free and fair. However, the rosy view of Georgian democracy may be changing as the OSCE did make some serious criticism of the conduct of the latest poll.

Introduction

BHHRG representatives visited Georgia to observe the conduct of presidential elections held on 9th April 2000. Perhaps, because of its president, Eduard Shevardnadze - the former Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union who is regarded as a hero for ending Russian domination in Eastern Europe and bringing about the re-unification of Germany - Georgia is generally viewed in the West as a model country for the transition to democracy and the free market. Yet, since 1991 it has been plagued by violence, political unrest, human rights abuses of opponents of the regime, territorial disintegration, fraudulent elections and economic collapse. BHHRG has observed previous elections in Georgia and has consistently found them to be seriously flawed while OSCE observation missions have always deemed those past elections free and fair. However, this may have started to change as the OSCE made some serious criticisms of the conduct of the 2000 presidential poll.

After the violent overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's government in late 1991, his supporters were harassed, arrested, and convicted on trumped up charges. Since that time the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been de facto separate from Georgia proper, while the governor of the Adjara region rules semi-independently from the central administration in Tbilisi. Obviously, the country's economic plight has not been helped by these events and poverty is widespread with, as yet, no sign of an economic upturn. The sale of the state electricity distribution company to the American firm, AES, has not led to any improvement in supply. Even now, nine years into the transition, the inhabitants of Tbilisi can only count on six hours of electricity a day, while people in the countryside often have to make do with two. Pensions stand at \$6 a month while teachers only receive a salary of \$15. However, both pensions and salaries are often not paid out for months in a row.

According to the Georgian constitution, the president can only serve two five-year terms but Shevardnadze was able to stand in 2000 by discounting his years as Parliamentary Chairman, in effect, the ex officio head of state. The main political opposition to Shevardnadze's rule is unthreatening. The Zviadist opposition split up into several factions and is regularly intimidated through the arrest and imprisonment of officials of the former government. The Revival of Georgia bloc under its leader, Aslan Abashidze, the president of Adjara, is the most coherent opposition with 60 seats in parliament. Shevardnadze's party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia, still holds an absolute majority with 119 seats. 16 candidates took part in the presidential election after Abashidze withdrew his candidacy the day before the poll. Apart from Shevardnadze and former Communist party boss, Jumber Patiashvili, none of the other candidates were well-known nor had any popular appeal.

The campaign

The 9th April, the day chosen to hold the presidential election, is a highly symbolic date in Georgia. On the same day in 1989 Soviet troops killed 18 demonstrators in central Tbilisi. The presidential candidate Jumber Patiashvili was Communist Party boss at the time while Shevardnadze was still in Moscow. Eleven years later, Shevardnadze used the event to blacken his opponent during the campaign period. However, there wasn't much of a campaign anyway, and what there was was blatantly biased towards the incumbent. There were hardly any posters on display for the candidates - Shevardnadze had the most and the

most lavish. Ordinary citizens expressed feelings of apathy or disgust at a campaign in which they felt their views were not represented. Enthusiasm for the election and confidence in its fairness seemed to be low, since to most the outcome was a forgone conclusion.

Although all candidates were allotted ten to fifteen minutes free airtime on the main State Television channel, they were easily drowned out by saturation coverage of Shevardnadze. In the days before the poll long interviews were conducted with the President in which he freely dwelt on his past achievements. On election eve, Channel 1 showed an interview with the President's granddaughter interspersed with footage of happy Shevardnadze family life. This programme was followed by a pop-concert that had been organised by 'New Georgian Alternative', an NGO set up, allegedly, to encourage people to vote. Yet, the stage backdrop carried the slogan 'We choose Shevardnadze' and the young presenters announced their decision to support the president. Before that, this NGO had organised a mock election among students of the University of Tbilisi which revealed that 77% of them had voted for Shevardnadze.

Campaigning around the country had been difficult for opposition candidates. According to Maka Tabidze, a member of the Vakja district election commission in Tbilisi for Patiashvili, a meeting organized by her candidate in the regions had been disrupted as an audiotape about the events of April 9, 1989 was played loudly. Ms Tabidze found it hard to imagine that the inhabitants of a poor, small village had taken the initiative to do this. Allegations were also made that the governing Citizens' Union party organized meetings deliberately to coincide with and sabotage prearranged meetings of other candidates.

The Poll

BHRG representatives visited polling stations in Tbilisi, Mtseta, Tsikhisdiri, Gori, Shaskvedi and Kanda. Turn-out of 50%+1 of registered voters was necessary in order for the elections to be valid.

There were problems with the voters registers. Often names of people who were allegedly dead or had moved had been crossed off the lists. For instance, in one Tbilisi polling station (District 2, station 7) out of 1,229 people registered on the list, only 1,072 were eligible to vote. This meant that more than 12% of people on this register, which had also been used for the previous elections in October 1999, had been disqualified over the past five months - a large number in such a short period of time. Yet, in the village of Mtseta the number of registered voters had increased from about 2,100 to 2,470 in the past five months. The chairman suggested that this might be because many Georgians had returned home from abroad to vote.

Additional lists for voters not on the registers were allowed and often contained many names, sometimes even up to a third of the number on the original list. But, commission chairmen were often unclear as to what the rules were for allowing people to be added to this list. Some said they would allow it while others seemed to believe registration ended the day before polling.

The almost 250,000 refugees from the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were officially allowed to vote (the presidential poll was not conducted in these two areas). However, many commission chairmen had no clear grasp of the rules governing the refugee vote. According to Maka Tabidze, a member of a Tbilisi district electoral commission, refugees were allowed to vote upon showing a special refugee ID. She said that these documents were easy to falsify since they did not carry a picture of the owner. Moreover, refugees did not need an additional document showing their current address - non-refugee voters who wanted to be registered on an additional list did need to show their personal ID.

The chairman of a Mtseta polling station confirmed that refugees could be registered on polling day upon producing a valid ID and the invitation slip. He maintained that this was only

allowed in his station, which was contradicted by the chairman of another polling station in the same village. During the day it became obvious that no chairman applied the same rules concerning refugee voting. Although they all stated that refugees needed to bring an ID, they differed on every other aspect. The lack of clear rules opened the possibility for fraud.

The count

BHHRG observers visited polling station, No. 8, district number 27, in the village of Tsikhidiri three times during the day. At 12:30 p.m., 181 out of 932 registered voters had voted. At 7:15 in the evening the chairman announced that 470 people had voted, yet a quick check of the register revealed that it most likely contained only some 40% of signatures. BHHRG observers returned to this station at 7:50, ten minutes before the polls closed to watch the count. There were 392 signatures on the register. When the ballots were counted the total came up to 604, with 436 votes for Shevardnadze and 148 for Patiashvili. BHHRG observers counted the signatures on the register once again and they now came to 505. There are two points to be made about this. Firstly, there was a discrepancy of 99 between the signatures on the register and the actual number of ballots. Secondly, the difference between the first count of the register and the second was 113 signatures. This would mean that between 7:15 and 7:50, i.e., within 35 minutes, 113 voters had rushed into the station to vote. Given that the processing of one voter took, on average, three minutes, this seemed impossible. Moreover, no-one voted in the last ten minutes before the polls closed.

Although BHHRG did not witness actual ballot-stuffing, it was clear that the official figures did not add up. And the overall impression during the day was that the turn-out was far lower than the official 78% announced the day after the election.

Conclusion

The 2000 presidential election in Georgia fell short of international standards. The campaign was heavily biased towards the incumbent and it is difficult to speak of a free election when so many representatives of a leading opposition group are imprisoned on what appear to be dubious charges. The general atmosphere in Georgia was one of resignation; voters in the street expressed their frustration at the lack of choice, saying that the outcome - the victory of Eduard Shevardnadze - was a foregone conclusion, whatever happened on election day.

BHHRG observers witnessed irregular election practices in polling stations visited, including sloppily prepared electoral registers and the (possible) augmentation of the turnout by the widespread use of additional voter lists. There was also a strong suspicion of ballot stuffing. Other infringements of the electoral law included widespread family voting, one person signing the electoral register on behalf the whole family, more than one person in the polling booth, and the presence of unauthorised personnel (often introduced as 'observers') in polling stations, including uniformed police.

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