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ELECTION WATCH SERIES

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Georgia: Consolidating the Revolution

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Georgia's March 28 parliamentary elections delivered a resounding victory to President Mikheil Saakashvili and his ruling coalition, the National Movement-Democrats. The only other bloc to receive enough votes to enter parliament was the Rightist Opposition—an alliance of the pro-business New Right and the Industrialists.

While the outcome of the race was a foregone conclusion, how events in the autonomous republic of Ajara would proceed was uncertain. Ultimately, the Ajaran-based party Revival, customarily the recipient of over 90 percent of the local vote, received just 53 percent in the region, compared to the National Movement's 41 percent. Revival did not overcome the 7 percent barrier on the national level to enter parliament. This crack in the political power of Ajara's leader, Aslan Abashidze, represents a significant victory for the central government in its efforts to assert authority over Ajara, an ethnically-Georgian region on the Black Sea that serves as the country's main transit outlet to the west.

Georgia's Lopsided Advance Toward Democracy

Before the vote, the only question was whether any bloc or party besides the National Movement-Democrats would enter parliament. 85 of the 235 parliamentary seats were already filled, on the basis of single-mandate results from the November 2003 parliamentary election (as well as ten seats for representatives of internally displaced persons from Abkhazia). These deputies are mainly holdovers from the Shevardnadze regime and are not expected to form an organized opposition (many probably will be co-opted into the ruling party).

Some concerns about the poll's democratic credentials did exist. Prior to the election, debate continued to swirl around the composition of election commissions and the government's refusal to lower the barrier to entry from 7 percent to 5 percent. The campaigning of government officials, including President Saakashvili (in apparent violation of the election code), and an overly compliant media also raised flags. During the election, the Central Election Commission acknowledged that violations may have occurred in several districts.

Still, the election—with approximately 67 percent participation (a smaller turnout than January's presidential election)—was pronounced a significant advance by international election observers. The National Movement-Democrats were the victors with two-thirds of the vote. With the Rightist Opposition barely clearing the electoral barrier, at 7.6 percent, the new ruling party will control approximately 135 of the 150 seats contested.

Despite the National Movement-Democrat's monolithic victory, some indicators hold promise for the development of multiparty democracy in Georgia. Despite being on the "losing" side of history after November's "revolution of roses," opposition parties still received some measure of support. The Rightist Opposition, in particular, may develop into a productive opposition force. In addition, while the National Movement-Democrats have exhibited a remarkable ability to stay together despite internal differences and power struggles, the possibility of a split within the ranks cannot be discarded. This would pave the way for another institutionalized political party to emerge, either as an independent force or even as ally to the Rightist Opposition.

Ultimately, the tenure of President Saakashvili and the new Georgian parliament will be judged not on whether they came to power in a purely fair election but on their future accomplishments. If the government demonstrates the capacity for responsible governance, lays the foundation for a sustainable economy, and starts putting the country back together, any reservations regarding the ruling party's early hegemony will fade. If it does not do these things or—worse—retreats into familiar patterns of abuse, the condemnation of the new regime will be harsh indeed.

Ajara: Victory in Second Place

The pre-election confrontation between Ajara and the central government was resolved with the overt submission of Abashidze to the central government's authority. In a deal that ended a blockade against Ajara, Abashidze agreed to the posting of presidential representatives at customs points at the Turkish border and the Batumi port. When the presidential representatives returned from the region unable to fulfill their duties, it was unclear whether their appointment was intended to be merely a symbolic display of authority or if Abashidze was already testing the government's resolve.

The more obvious significance of the deal lay in Abashidze's consent to permit democratic elections. Since the "revolution of roses," Saakashvili had encouraged the rise of a local opposition, headed by well-known politicians of Ajaran origin as well as residents of the region, who lobbied on behalf of the National Movement-Democrats. With the latter's strong showing in Ajara, it is primed to seize legislative power in the autonomous republic in the next local elections, scheduled for 2006.

Unsurprisingly, Abashidze did not initially accede to these attempts to erode his power. Instead, he sought to preempt the establishment of a link between the opposition movement and the local population, breaking up demonstrations, arresting and harassing opposition leaders and investigative journalists, and ransacking opposition offices.

After the confrontation with the center, however, elections in Ajara produced something significantly less than a Soviet-style outcome. While Revival was the official lead vote-getter, the National Movement-Democrats were the outright victor in the Ajaran capital of Batumi. Just in case Revival thought to contest their final tally, the Central Election Commission warned that results from precincts in Ajara with particularly egregious cases of fraud could still be thrown out; a week later, it ruled that a recount would be held in two of Ajara's five electoral districts. While Abashidze declared he would send his supporters to Tbilisi in protest, he has so far appeared to accept Revival's loss of representation in the Georgian national parliament.

Ajara is on its way back to the central government's fold. How long this will take, however, is uncertain. The coming weeks will reveal whether the outcome of the vote represents a new understanding between the central government and Ajara or the latest strike in a determined assault on Abashidze's power.

"A new sense of empowerment among Ajara's voters may have launched the region on a trajectory of political change impossible to halt."

If there is a new understanding in Ajara, the central government will focus less on regime change in Ajara and more on enforcing the region's commitments to central authority. This will involve ensuring the transmission of Ajara's legally obligated share of customs and oil transit revenues to the center and exerting consistent pressure on the regime to legalize an ever greater share of the shadow revenues it accumulates. If successful, President Saakashvili will legitimately be able to term this progress. Georgians and Georgia's foreign supporters are likely to accept that further attempts at regime change in Ajara must await the next round of local elections.

Saakashvili has, however, been taking precautionary measures that make an accelerated transfer of power in Ajara much easier should he intend to try. Indictments of leading regional officials that the government issued during its pre-

election standoff with Ajara have not been voided, and Saakashvili has not relented in his decision to have the new parliament abolish the region's security ministry. He has also ordered the disarming of illegal armed formations.

Most importantly, the Ajaran population, at least in Batumi, has been emboldened by election day developments. The opposition has already announced a signature campaign to hold new local elections ahead of schedule. A new sense of empowerment among Ajara's voters may have launched the region on a trajectory of political change impossible to halt. One wrong move—not difficult for the central government or local supporters to provoke—could encourage Saakashvili to try to sack Abashidze. If that happens, the Ajaran leadership will not be entirely powerless—it possesses sufficient defense capabilities to put up a fight if local troops choose to support Abashidze. Before resolving to effect regime change in Ajara, the central government will have to gamble that it can convince Abashidze to step down or efficiently carry out its threats. At least the Russian government, Abashidze's traditional patron, does not appear willing to go out of its way to protect him.

The Next Step?

The “revolution of roses” is entering a new stage. After consolidating power at the center and bringing Ajara into line, we can expect President Saakashvili to turn to the far more formidable task of negotiating settlements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He is likely to begin with the latter. The region—which serves as a major conduit of duty-free and smuggled goods across the Russian border—is already under partial Georgian control. Celebrating the National Movement's victory the night of elections, Saakashvili revealed his next step: “As soon as we consolidate power in the rest of Georgia, we will seek agreement with our Ossetian friends.... [B]oth sides made mistakes in the past. We should restore the situation now.”

If Saakashvili manages South Ossetia, he will be in a much stronger position to tackle the formidable challenge of unifying Abkhazia to Georgia. Many think it impossible. After ousting Shevardnadze and taming Ajara, however, Saakashvili may yet have a few tricks up his sleeve.

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