

A Way Out?

No Easy Answer to Georgia's Election Crisis

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There is no simple way out of the current standoff in Georgia. On November 20, the Central Election Commission released the final results of the highly disputed November 2 parliamentary elections. The pro-government bloc, For A New Georgia, received 21 percent of the vote, while its electoral ally Revival—a political machine of regional leader Aslan Abashidze—received 19 percent. This translates into 71 of the 150 seats reserved for party lists. The distribution of the remaining 85 seats, selected on the basis of single-mandate races, will undoubtedly secure a pro-government majority in parliament.

Even the Georgian government recognizes that these elections were fraudulent. In addition to run-of-the-mill violations that tipped the balance in favor of the pro-government bloc, it was the Soviet-style election in Ajara, Abashidze's stronghold, that caused the greatest problem. The insistence of the government that Revival retain its unrealistically high vote count means not only that the presumed victor, Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement, came in third place, but that at least two other parties that entered Parliament have less legislative power than they deserve.

In recent days the situation in Georgia has included some of the classic ingredients for the staging of a peaceful revolution. The government has lost legitimacy among most of the population and has resorted to bussing in residents from Ajara to demonstrate support. President Shevardnadze has retreated into his own peculiar bubble. He refuses to acknowledge the opposition's basic complaints and insists that their actions—not the fraudulent vote count—are threatening to destroy Georgia. He even lambasted state television for not offering the government appropriate support.

This last measure has led to a visible rift within the government. The head of the state television channel resigned; the channel's hosts criticized the president and his actions on live TV. Other resignations have followed. This could lead to more defections from the presidential team.

If this happens, Shevardnadze will find himself alone with a bare handful of political supporters, as well as the all-important Ministries of Interior and State Security. If public statements are to be believed, Shevardnadze also has Russia's support.

The nightmare scenario is that opposition supporters, or provocateurs posing as supporters, will now clash with pro-government demonstrators from Ajara. While this would not necessarily lead to a full-fledged civil war, it could bring on the crackdown that the government has thus far pledged to avoid.

Opposition leaders have promised to bring as many as a hundred thousand Georgians on the streets in the near future to demonstrate against Shevardnadze's rule. If they fail to do so, Shevardnadze will have won and will be able to start the task of reconsolidating power.

If a demonstration of this size does occur, however, some influential actors will have a choice to make. Both the power ministries and the Russian government will need to decide if it is still in their interest to support the Georgian government. If they decide that it is, they will find themselves accomplices in an unpleasant re-imposition of control by a government despised by its people.

What is important for the power ministries and Russia to consider is that they will not necessarily lose influence in Georgia if Shevardnadze accepts defeat. A future Georgian government, whatever its composition, will require their support if it hopes to maintain stability in the transition period. Presumably, opposition leaders will be wise enough to work with the power ministries and Russia to ensure this support.

The police and the Kremlin do not have to hinder political transition in Georgia, if this is what the Georgian people desire. By allowing a transition to happen, they can exhibit a measure of goodwill that, in the long run, will enable them to exert a far more meaningful role in Georgia's development than that which they could otherwise hope to achieve.

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