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Freedom in the World 2009 - Georgia

Capital: Tbilisi

Population: 4,600,000

Political Rights Score: 4

Civil Liberties Score: 4

Status: Partly Free

Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, which are examined in separate reports.

Trend Arrow ↓

Georgia received a downward trend arrow due to flaws in the presidential and parliamentary election processes, including extensive reports of intimidation and the use of state administrative resources, which resulted in a marked advantage for the ruling National Movement party.

Overview

President Mikheil Saakashvili won reelection in January 2008, having called an early poll after a controversial crackdown on the opposition in late 2007. His National Movement party also handily won parliamentary elections in May, but international monitors noted an array of irregularities. The Georgian state was thoroughly shaken in August, when an outbreak of fighting between government forces and South Ossetian separatists triggered a massive Russian invasion. Under the terms of a French-brokered ceasefire that month, Russian troops largely withdrew to the confines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia's other breakaway territory, but the episode led Russia to recognize the independence of both entities. In the aftermath of the conflict, Saakashvili struggled to fend off domestic criticism as key allies defected to the still-fragmented opposition.

Absorbed by Russia in the early 19th century, Georgia gained its independence in 1918. In 1922, it entered the Soviet Union as a component of the Transcaucasian Federated Soviet Republic, becoming a separate Soviet republic in 1936. An attempt by the region of South Ossetia to declare independence from Georgia and join Russia's North Ossetia in 1990 sparked a war between the separatists and Georgian forces. Although a ceasefire was signed in 1992, South Ossetia's final political status remained unresolved

Following a national referendum in April 1991, Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Nationalist leader and former dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president in May. The next year, he was overthrown by opposition forces and replaced with former Georgian Communist Party head and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Parliamentary elections held in 1992 resulted in more than 30 parties and blocs winning seats, although none secured a clear majority.

In 1993, Georgia was rocked by the violent secession of the Abkhazia region and an insurrection by Gamsakhurdia loyalists. Shevardnadze legalized the presence of some 19,000 Russian troops in Georgia in return for Russian support against Gamsakhurdia, who, once defeated, committed suicide. In early 1994, Georgia and Abkhazia signed an agreement in Moscow that called for a ceasefire, the stationing of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) troops under Russian command along the Abkhazian border, and the return of refugees under UN supervision. In 1995 parliamentary elections, the Shevardnadze-founded Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG) captured the most seats, while Shevardnadze himself was elected with 77 percent of the vote in a concurrent presidential poll.

The CUG won again in the 1999 parliamentary elections, and observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that, despite some irregularities, the vote was generally fair. In the 2000 presidential poll, Shevardnadze won a second five-year term as expected, but his wide margin of victory led to fraud accusations that were supported by the findings of election monitors.

Following the parliamentary elections, Shevardnadze faced growing opposition from prominent members of the CUG, including Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili, who criticized the president's failure to contain widespread corruption. While Shevardnadze resigned as CUG chairman in 2001, Saakashvili left the CUG to form his own party, the National Movement, and a formal party split was ratified in May 2002. The CUG lost ground to several rival parties in June 2002 local elections, and Saakashvili was later named chairman of the Tbilisi city council.

A flawed parliamentary vote in November 2003 sparked a campaign of street protests, known as the Rose Revolution, which ultimately led to Shevardnadze's resignation. Official results put the pro-Shevardnadze coalition For New Georgia in the lead with 21 percent, followed by a party headed by the leader of the semiautonomous southwestern region of Ajaria with nearly 19 percent, Saakashvili's National Movement with 18 percent, and three smaller factions. However, independent domestic monitors concluded that the National Movement had actually won the election with nearly 27 percent of the vote. OSCE monitors reported violations including ballot-box stuffing, inaccurate voter lists, biased media coverage, harassment of some domestic election monitors, and pressure on public employees to support progovernment candidates.

Mass demonstrations in the wake of the flawed vote culminated on November 22, when Saakashvili led protesters into the Parliament building and forced the president, who was addressing the new legislature's opening session, to flee the premises. Shevardnadze resigned the following day, and Parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze, a Saakashvili ally, was named interim president. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court cancelled the results of the parliamentary elections.

Saakashvili won a snap presidential election in January 2004, running virtually unopposed and capturing 96 percent of the vote. Fresh parliamentary elections in March gave two-thirds of the seats to the National Movement and allied parties.

Saakashvili's relations with Russia soured as he quickly reestablished Tbilisi's control over Ajaria and declared his intention to reintegrate the separatist enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were tacitly supported by the Kremlin. Russia imposed a trade and transport embargo on Georgia in 2006 – in response to Georgia's brief detention of several alleged Russian spies – and the two countries continued to exchange accusations of military provocation surrounding the two breakaway territories over the next two years.

Meanwhile, new challenges emerged to Saakashvili's ongoing dominance of the domestic political scene. Former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, who had taken a hard line on the separatist enclaves and left the government in late 2006, announced the formation of a new opposition group in September 2007 and claimed that the president had ordered the murders of political opponents, although he offered no evidence to support the allegation. Shortly thereafter, Okruashvili was arrested on corruption charges, then released on bail following a televised retraction of his accusations. Speaking from Germany in November of that year, he maintained that the retraction was coerced. The Georgian government pursued his extradition, but he was eventually granted political asylum in France.

Also in late 2007, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets to express opposition to the president. The second wave of protests in early November drew between 50,000 and 100,000 demonstrators, prompting a violent police crackdown and the imposition of a state of emergency on November 7. The state of emergency, which remained in force until November 16, barred opposition media from the airwaves and restricted street protests. Responding to opposition demands for early elections, Saakashvili scheduled a snap presidential vote for January 5, 2008, giving his opponents relatively little time to prepare. To become a candidate, Saakashvili resigned and left Burjanadze, the speaker of Parliament, as acting president.

Saakashvili won reelection with roughly 53 percent of the vote, but OSCE observers noted an array of irregularities. Levan Gachechiladze, candidate of the National Council opposition bloc, placed second with 27 percent; he claimed that fraud had pushed Saakashvili beyond the 50 percent threshold, preventing a runoff. The ruling party and its allies captured 119 of the 150 seats in May parliamentary elections, with the opposition again declaring that the balloting was rigged. More than a dozen of the winning opposition candidates refused to take their seats, and international monitors found that the authorities had failed to correct the problems noted in the presidential vote.

Georgia's ambitions to join NATO were dealt a blow in April, when leaders at an alliance summit decided not to offer the country a Membership Action Plan, which would prepare the way for accession. However, the summit's final statement predicted that Georgia would join eventually. The issue took on added importance as tensions with Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia mounted during the spring and summer. Open warfare erupted in South Ossetia in early August, and an ensuing Russian invasion pressed deep into Georgian territory. A French-brokered ceasefire took hold after more than a week of fighting, and by fall Russian forces had largely withdrawn to the confines of the two separatist enclaves. Russia recognized the territories' independence in the wake of the conflict, but few other countries followed suit. In late December, the OSCE announced that it was ending its long-standing military monitoring mission in Georgia, citing Russia's refusal to extend the mandate unless other OSCE members acknowledged the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, European Union civilian monitors would continue to patrol the regions' borders under an agreement stemming from the August ceasefire.

In a sign of growing domestic dissatisfaction with Saakashvili's leadership, Burjanadze announced in October that she was forming a new opposition party to be known as Democratic Movement-United Georgia; she had previously indicated her break with the president in April. Several other former allies defected to the opposition during the year, including Saakashvili's envoy to the United Nations, who cited the president's handling of the South Ossetia standoff. On the same day as Burjanadze's October declaration, Saakashvili fired prime minister Lado Gurgensidze. The defense and foreign ministers were dismissed two months later, marking the fourth cabinet reshuffle that year. Several opposition parties mounted a demonstration in November to mark the anniversary of the 2007 crackdown, criticizing the president's performance and calling for new elections. Other denunciations during the year came from Georgia's human rights ombudsman, who said in September that the leadership was abandoning democracy for "authoritarian rule."

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Georgia is not an electoral democracy. While the elections following the 2003 Rose Revolution were considered improvements over previous polls, OSCE monitors found a number of problems with the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections. These included the passage of electoral code changes just weeks before voting, the abuse of state resources, reports of intimidation aimed at public employees and opposition activists, biased coverage by privately owned media outlets, suspected voter-list inaccuracies, and flaws in the tabulation and complaint-adjudication processes.

The president appoints the cabinet and serves up to two five-year terms, although current president Mikheil Saakashvili – first elected in 2004 – was reelected in 2008 after calling an early vote. Parliament until the 2008 elections consisted of 235 members, with 100 elected by party list, 75 elected in single-member districts, and 10 others representing displaced citizens from Abkhazia. Under the new structure, which came into effect in 2008, Parliament has just 150 seats, with half chosen by party list and the other half in single-member districts. The OSCE monitoring report on the May elections noted that the number of voters in the single-member districts ranged from 6,000 to 140,000, since the amended electoral code did not require the constituencies to be of equal size.

Saakashvili's National Movement has been the dominant party since the Rose Revolution. There are numerous opposition parties, which have formed a series of shifting alliances in recent years. The violent dispersal of demonstrators and state of emergency in November 2007 quashed the opposition's first major effort to assert itself against Saakashvili, and the outcome of the flawed 2008 elections dealt opposition parties another blow. The defection of former Parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze and other Saakashvili allies to the opposition in 2008 set off a new round of reorganization, and the political landscape remained in flux at year's end.

The current administration has made combating corruption a priority. Although Georgia continues to suffer from corruption, the country has worked to distinguish itself from the majority of its regional neighbors. Among the government's recent achievements have been meaningful university-level education reforms that have helped to limit previously entrenched corrupt admissions and grading practices. A number of officials were arrested in 2004 for alleged graft during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. In 2005, the government adopted an anticorruption plan aimed at improving the transparency and effectiveness of the civil service while strengthening the role of inspectors general within public agencies; the implementation of this plan is in its nascent stages. Despite progress in fighting lower- and mid-level corruption, Georgia apparently continues to suffer from corruption at elite levels, and the political opposition has seized on the issue in its criticisms of the Saakashvili government. As the administration has become more insular, opportunities for cronyism and insider deals have grown. Georgia was ranked 67 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Georgia's constitution provides guarantees for press freedom, and the print media, though limited in reach, feature a diversity of political opinions and perspectives. The state television and radio outlets were converted into public-service broadcasters in 2005. Critics assert that over time, Georgia's public broadcasting has become more friendly to the authorities. The broadcast media reflect the quality of the country's political debate, which is sorely lacking in thoughtful discussion of public policy, and private ownership is often nontransparent. During the November 2007 political turmoil, security forces raided the broadcast facility of a critical television station, Imedi, and shut down its operations. Saakashvili's assertions that Imedi used its broadcasts to subvert the government were denied by U.S.-based News Corporation, which had recently acquired the outlet. Imedi briefly returned to the airwaves in December, but the station's management soon shut it down again, citing pressure from the authorities. It resumed broadcasting in September 2008, having been purchased by a progovernment businessman. The authorities do not restrict access to the internet, but high-speed internet connections are prohibitively expensive for many citizens.

Freedom of religion is respected for the country's largely Georgian Orthodox Christian population and some traditional minority religious groups, including Muslims and Jews.

However, members of newer groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, have faced harassment and intimidation by law enforcement officials and Georgian Orthodox extremists.

The government does not restrict academic freedom. Georgia has put in place significant reforms to improve academic standards and independence. These steps have helped eliminate the bribes students previously paid to receive high marks or pass entrance examinations.

Respect for the freedoms of association and assembly were tarnished during the November 2007 state of emergency and crackdown on opposition protests, in which several hundred people were injured. These rights were again constrained by the August 2008 conflict and Russia's weeks-long occupation of significant portions of Georgian territory. Several opposition parties held a rally on the anniversary of the 2007 crackdown; there was no repeat of the previous violence, but the protest was significantly smaller than those in 2007, and a number of parties declined to participate.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are able to register and operate without arbitrary restrictions. The country's NGOs play an active role in public debate, though their influence has diminished somewhat under the current administration. The constitution and the Law on Trade Unions allow workers to organize and prohibit antiunion discrimination. The Amalgamated Trade Unions of Georgia, the successor to the Soviet-era trade federation, is the principal trade union bloc. It is not affiliated with, and receives no funding from, the government.

The judiciary has been unable to establish itself as an independent institution, and it continues to suffer from extensive corruption and pressure from the executive branch. The payment of bribes to judges is reportedly common, and judicial reform efforts have been slow in moving forward.

The police force has improved its performance since the government dismissed half of its personnel in 2004 as part of an anticorruption overhaul. Among other results, the reforms led to a virtual eradication of corrupt vehicle stops by police to extract bribes from motorists – previously a part of daily life and still prevalent in nearly all other former Soviet republics. However, human rights ombudsman Sozar Subari has repeatedly accused the police of abusing and torturing detainees, and prison conditions in Georgia remain grim.

The government generally respects the rights of ethnic minorities in areas of the country that are not contested by separatists. Freedom of residence and freedom to travel to and from the country are observed, although the embargo imposed by Moscow prevents travel to and from Russia, and the August 2008 Russian invasion restricted internal travel for part of the year.

Societal violence against women is a problem. The authorities have acknowledged the issue and in 2006 passed the first law on domestic violence, which allows victims to file immediate protective orders against their abusers and permits police to issue a temporary restrictive order against suspects. While there are no laws that specifically criminalize violence against women, the criminal code classifies rape and sexual coercion as crimes. Georgian law prohibits trafficking in persons, but the country remains a source, transit point, and destination for the trade.

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