

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World - Georgia (2008)

Capital:
Tbilisi

Population:
4,500,000

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 4
Status: Partly Free

Ratings Change

Georgia's political rights rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the restrictions placed on political opposition following the November 2007 emergency declaration, and the civil liberties rating declined from 3 to 4 due to the circumscription of media and expression in the aftermath of the November protests.

Overview

Georgians took to the streets to oppose President Mikheil Saakashvili in October and November 2007, turning out in the largest numbers since the 2003 "Rose Revolution," which swept Saakashvili to power. The authorities violently dispersed the demonstrators, causing hundreds of injuries, and imposed a state of emergency on November 7. The next day, Saakashvili called a snap presidential election for January 5, 2008. The state of emergency, which remained in place until November 16, banned all news broadcasts except state-controlled television and restricted public assembly. Also in 2007, former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, a onetime Saakashvili ally who subsequently emerged as a principal political rival, was charged with corruption, jailed, and then quickly released. Georgia's opposition exerted considerable pressure on Saakashvili during the year but remained unable to promote coherent alternatives to the policies of the ruling National Movement party. Meanwhile, Georgia continued to face considerable external pressures, including an ongoing trade and transport embargo by Russia. In August, an aircraft entered Georgian airspace from Russia and dropped a missile that landed in the Gori region near South Ossetia.

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 June 1992, South Ossetia's final political status remains 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 experienced 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 parliamentary elections in November and December 1995, the Shevardnadze-founded Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG) captured the most seats, while Shevardnadze was elected with 77 percent of the vote in a concurrent presidential poll.

The CUG won again in the October 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 April 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 Parliament Speaker Zurab Zhvania and Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili, who criticized the president's failure to contain widespread corruption. While Shevardnadze resigned as CUG chairman in September 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, that 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, leaving For New Georgia in second place with about 19 percent. 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–Democrats bloc (composed of the National Movement and the allied parties of Burjanadze and Zhvania), followed by the Rightist Opposition bloc (composed of the Industrialists

and the probusiness New Rights Party) with nearly 10 percent. Seven other parties received 8 percent or less of the total number of seats.

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 Russia. A trade and transport embargo imposed by Russia in 2006—in response to Georgia's brief detention of several alleged Russian spies—continued through 2007. The Georgian government accused Russia of interference in the "frozen conflicts" over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In August, the authorities reported that a military aircraft had entered Georgian airspace from Russia and dropped a guided missile that failed to explode. The incident took place in the Gori region, near South Ossetia.

Former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, who had taken a hard line on the separatist enclaves and left the government in late 2006, attempted to challenge Saakashvili's ongoing dominance of the political landscape in 2007. In September, he announced the formation of a new opposition group 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, Okruashvili maintained that the retraction was coerced. He was detained late that month by German authorities acting on a Georgian Interpol request, and the Georgian government has sought his extradition. Both Okruashvili and business mogul Badri Patarkatsishvili—one of Georgia's wealthiest men, founder of the Imedi media company, and a political opponent of Saakashvili—remained outside Georgia through the end of 2007.

Also in late 2007, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets to express opposition to the Georgian 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. Patarkatsishvili entered the race as a challenger.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Georgia is an electoral democracy. According to an observer mission from the OSCE, the January 2004 presidential and March 2004 parliamentary elections represented "commendable progress in relation to previous elections," which had fallen short of international standards.

The president serves five-year terms, and members of the unicameral Parliament serve four-year terms. The Parliament in 2005 passed amendments to modify its composition, effective after the next parliamentary elections in 2008. The date for those elections will be determined by a vote to be held at the time of the snap presidential election on January 5, 2008. A plebiscite gauging public support for Georgia's eventual entry into NATO will also be part of that day's voting. Under the 2005 amendments, Parliament will shrink from 235 to 150 members, with 100 members to be elected by party list and 50 through single-member districts.

Currently, 150 members are elected by party list and 75 through single-member districts, with 10 additional members representing displaced citizens from Abkhazia.

President Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement has been the dominant party since the 2003 Rose Revolution. There are two parliamentary opposition blocs: the New Conservatives–Industrialists and the Democratic Front. The latter, formed in 2005, is comprised of two party groups—the Republicans and the Conservatives, which were formerly part of the National Movement—along with a number of independent members of Parliament. 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 it remained unclear whether opposition parties would be able to compete effectively in the January 2008 election process or begin to offer coherent policy alternatives.

The current administration has made combating corruption a priority. A number of officials were arrested in 2004 for alleged graft during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. In June 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 79 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 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 a thoughtful discussion of public policy. Nevertheless, private broadcasters such as Imedi and the more polemical Kafkasia have been regularly critical of the government. In October 2007, the U.S.-based News Corporation acquired Imedi from its founder and owner, Badri Patarkatsishvili. During the November 2007 political turmoil, security forces raided Imedi's broadcast facility and shut down its operations. Saakashvili's assertions that Imedi used its news broadcasts to subvert the government were denied by News Corporation officials. Imedi returned to the airwaves on December 12, but the station's management, citing pressure from the authorities, ceased broadcasting on December 26 for an undetermined period. 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 in November 2007, when the authorities used tear gas and water cannons to disperse thousands of protesters. Several hundred people were injured. The state of emergency further restricted assembly rights for the eight days it was in force.

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 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 August 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. 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 generally respected, although the embargo imposed by Moscow prevents travel to and from Russia.

Societal violence against women is a problem. The Georgian authorities have acknowledged the issue and in June 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 spousal abuse or violence against women, the criminal code classifies rape, including spousal 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.