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Georgian Democracy A Complex Evolution

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During the current conflict between [Russia](#) and Georgia, U.S. officials have frequently referred to the former Soviet republic as a democracy, a nation President Bush once called "a beacon of liberty." Speaking before the Veterans of Foreign Wars last week, the president declared, "Georgia has stood for freedom around the world -- now the world must stand for freedom in Georgia."

But the story of Georgia's democracy is more complex than the administration's rhetoric suggests, and some experts say U.S. policies have undermined the country's democratic trends.

After the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia brought the government of [President Mikheil Saakashvili](#) to power, the Bush administration scaled back funding for voluntary civil and social organizations in order to devote resources to building up the central government -- precisely as such organizations were being weakened by a drain of top officials joining the new government. Separate aid efforts to create a professional civil service have also been thwarted by objections by the Georgia government.

As a result, experts and aid specialists said, Georgia's central government has become more powerful, while other governmental and nongovernmental institutions have become weaker since the 2003 overthrow of leader Eduard Shevardnadze, resulting in few outlets for popular discontent. Last November, the government used excessive force to disperse largely peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), and Saakashvili briefly imposed emergency rule.

Last month, the Georgian government further tried to limit aid to nongovernmental groups, bluntly informing foreign donors that future technical assistance "would be provided in direct response to government requests." According to a copy of the government's July 7 briefing, provided by a person who attended it, future projects must focus on infrastructure, such as roads and sanitation. The Georgia government "did not appreciate" and was opposed to projects "which eventually attain policy dynamics of their own and become a burden on the government and/or confuse the policy-making process," the briefing document said.

"Georgia is a semi-democracy. We have traded one kind of semi-democratic system for another. There is a real need to understand that what happened is another one-party government emerged," said Lincoln Mitchell, who worked for the National Democratic Institute in Georgia from 2002 to 2004 and is author of the forthcoming book "Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution."

Under Shevardnadze, there was freedom of assembly and the press, and the government was too weak to crack down on dissent, Mitchell said. But the state was rife with corruption, and elections were poorly run. Under Saakashvili, the central government is stronger and official corruption has been reduced, but the media have far fewer freedoms and there are fewer civil organizations. Elections still don't function well. Mitchell added that Parliament has been weakened through constitutional changes mandated by Saakashvili, making it difficult for the legislative branch to restrain executive power.

"We undermine Georgia's cause when we overstate their democracy," said **Mitchell, now an assistant professor at Columbia University**. "If we declare victory prematurely, as I think the Bush administration has done, it is not good for democracy generally and not good for Georgia in particular."

Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, agreed that "relative to its self-image and the way it is portrayed in the United States, Georgia is not a pristine democracy." But, he said, compared with such neighbors as Armenia, Azerbaijan and other former Soviet republics in the region, "it is a much better place."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza, pressed by foreign reporters last week on the nature of Georgia's democracy, acknowledged that Tbilisi "has not even come close to finishing its democratic evolution. It still has a long way to go on many fronts. . . . And we are committed to helping Georgia move even deeper in its democratic evolution."

Still, aid specialists said working in Georgia is often a frustrating experience, with initiatives blocked by a rotating cast of ministers or officials who are frequently replaced by Saakashvili. While the president wins praise for his crackdown on corruption and his ability to attract investment, former and current aid workers said it is often difficult to make real improvements.

"I was excited to go to Georgia. I thought it had real prospects," said Jamie Factor, who has spent 15 years working on international donor programs to advance democratic reforms in transitional countries and served in Georgia in 2006 and 2007. "But I couldn't have been more disappointed in terms of being able to accomplish anything."

Out of a total of \$67 million the Bush administration has requested in aid for Georgia for fiscal 2009, more is devoted to military assistance (\$15.2 million) than democracy programs (\$14.8 million). Before the conflict with Russia erupted early this month, Georgia's armed forces made up the third-largest foreign force in the U.S.-led coalition in [Iraq](#).

"Georgia has made enormous strides in governmental reform but must improve the effectiveness of key institutions, strengthen political pluralism and increase public participation to truly consolidate its democratic gains," the [State Department](#) said in its budget justification to Congress.

Officials at the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) say that the Georgian government did not pressure the United States to reduce funding to civil society groups but that the agency "rebalanced" funding after the Rose Revolution because it could begin to work directly with the Georgian government. An official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to answer questions about particular programs, said that efforts to create a professional civil service have suffered a setback. "USAID can only engage in this type of wholesale reform if the host country wants it and is behind the initiative," the official said.