

Democracy in Georgia Since the Rose Revolution

by Lincoln A. Mitchell

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Abstract: Success for Georgia's nascent democracy would be a major success for the democracy-promotion efforts of the United States, which has hailed the democratization there since the Rose Revolution as a success even as concerns have been voiced by some observers regarding the pace and direction of this effort. The U.S. policy of unconditional support for Georgia's government and its disinterest in drawing attention to the new government's democratization shortcomings call into question how serious the United States is about democracy-promotion, particularly in countries that have a semi-democratic but pro-American government. A U.S. approach to Georgia that recognizes the challenges there and seeks to help it solve these problems will demonstrate that America is sincere in its desire to promote democracy, not just to support friendly governments.

Since the Rose Revolution of November 2003, when thousands of protestors took to the streets of Tbilisi to demand fair elections and to demonstrate against the attempt by President Eduard Shevardnadze to seat an illegally elected parliament, Georgia has become increasingly important for the United States. In May 2005 President Bush visited the country, addressing thousands of Georgians in Tbilisi's Freedom Square; American political, economic, and military advisors are seeking to help the new government at virtually every level; and Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili, who led the Rose Revolution, has made several trips to the United States to secure more aid and discuss ongoing military and economic cooperation. In September 2005 the two countries agreed upon a five-year compact that will send an additional \$295.3 million in U.S. assistance to Georgia through the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). This direct government assistance will be earmarked to help rebuild the country's infrastructure and energy sector.

Georgia's strategic location between oil-rich Azerbaijan and the Black Sea; its proximity to Iraq, Iran, and the rest of the Middle East; and its contentious relationship with Russia are among the reasons given by those

who consider Georgia of geopolitical importance to the United States. But these reasons are not entirely convincing. While Georgia certainly faces substantial security challenges that have some potential bearing on U.S. interests in the region, it is far from unique in this. Dozens of countries about oil-producing countries, are located near the Middle East, or have contentious relations with important foreign powers. But success for Georgia's nascent democracy will be understood as a major success for American democracy-promotion. The Rose Revolution was the first breakthrough of its kind in the former Soviet Union outside of the Baltic states, and it was immediately and visibly recognized in the West as a major democratic advance. Since the revolution, the United States has continued to hail democratization there as a success even as concerns have begun to be raised by some observers regarding the pace and direction of this effort.¹

Georgia also represents a test of America's commitment to democracy-promotion. As the war in Iraq continues to dominate the Bush foreign policy, arguments that its democracy-promotion policy is simply part of promoting U.S. interests, or even the newest form of American imperialism, are gaining steam both domestically and abroad. Meanwhile, as Georgia's new government struggles to consolidate the democratic gains of the Rose Revolution, it has to overcome decades of Soviet domination and its unfamiliarity with democratic institutions. It has not yet sent any clear messages that advancing democracy is a top priority.

The U.S. policy of unconditional support for Georgia's government and its disinterest in drawing attention to the new government's shortcomings in the area of democratization call into question how serious the United States is about democracy-promotion, particularly in countries that have a semi-democratic but pro-American government (Georgia has been generally supportive of the Bush administration's foreign policy). A U.S. approach to Georgia that recognizes the challenges there and seeks to help it solve these problems will demonstrate to Americans and to democracy activists around the world that America is sincere in its desire to promote democracy, not just to support friendly governments.

The stakes are high. Failure of democracy in Georgia would raise serious questions about whether democracy can develop in any country where there is no history of democracy and whether democracy is a realistic expectation anywhere in the non-Baltic former Soviet Union.

Georgia Since 2003

At first glance it would seem that Georgia is poised to consolidate its democratic gains. In many respects, the conditions for democracy are today

¹ See, e.g., Charles A. Kupchan, "Sukhumi Dispatch: Wilted Rose," *New Republic*, Feb. 6, 2006.

more hospitable in post-revolution Georgia than in any other democratizing country. But it will not be easy. Georgia's ongoing efforts to bring South Ossetia and Abkhazia back into the country, the absence of any strong democratic neighbors, and the never-ending difficulties with Russia create a complex context for consolidating democracy. However, these challenges are in many respects less daunting than those confronted by many other democratizing countries, almost all of which have difficult relations with their neighbors, an authoritarian legacy of one kind or another, problems regarding ethnic or regional autonomy, and, with the exception of the oil-producing countries such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, poor economies.

Many of these other democratizing countries face problems that Georgia does not. Georgia has no existing or recently concluded violent ethnic or civil conflict. While there is poverty, there is no widespread starvation, nor is the spread of HIV/AIDS as serious as it is in much of Africa or even Russia. There is no radical religious movement or any other antidemocratic political force with military or political power, gaining supporters as a viable alternative to liberal democracy. Finally, Georgia has no oil or any other great natural wealth that could make it easier for non-democratic rulers to stay in power.

Among Georgia's other advantages, it is strongly pro-Western. Both the leaders and the people of Georgia see the West as the model for political development. The Rose Revolution demonstrators waved American flags while calling for the resignation of the Shevardnadze regime. Within weeks of Shevardnadze's resignation, a billboard was erected in downtown Tbilisi with the words "Thank you, USA" on it. Like many others around the world, Georgians often see democracy as an idea from the West, but unlike in many other countries, in Georgia there is virtually no negative sentiment attached to that view. No ideology competes with the Western democratic model in Georgia. There is little nostalgia for the Soviet Union, no fundamentalist religious model, and Asian or corporatist development models have no traction at all.

Georgia's pro-Western outlook is buoyed by its leadership. Many of Georgia's new leaders, beginning with President Saakashvili, a one-time Muskie Fellow at Columbia University, are Western-educated. Many cabinet members, MPs, and other key leaders were at least partially trained in the West. Some came back specifically to help rebuild Georgia after Saakashvili made an appeal for them when he became president. Few, if any, countries in the democratizing world boast a group of leaders who have as much Western education and training as Georgia does. This Western-trained leadership has been explicit with domestic and international audiences that its goal is to make Georgia a modern democratic state.

Georgia is relatively ethnically homogenous. Over 85 percent of the population is ethnic Georgian, with the two largest minorities being ethnic Azeris and Armenians. While tension certainly exists between these groups, it is not a driving force in Georgia's political life. Although it continues to be

difficult for Georgia's government to incorporate these minority groups into the country's political life, there is no violent conflict between different groups.

Georgia is overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox Christian, with small Muslim and tiny Jewish minorities. Other Eastern Orthodox Christian countries, most notably Greece, have adapted well to democracy. Georgia's agriculture-based economy relies for its growth on increasing trade, tourism, and foreign investment, not simply selling off natural resources. For this reason, Georgia's economic future will greatly benefit from strengthening democratic institutions such as rule of law and an open society. Moreover, almost all of the democracy-assistance resources Georgia receives from the United States come in the form of direct governmental assistance, rather than support from NGOs. This indicates a high level of confidence in the democratic intentions of Georgia's government in Washington.

Democratic Consolidation in Georgia

Upon coming to power in November 2003, Georgia's new government inherited a battery of daunting problems, including troubled relationships with Russia, the nagging presence of strongman Aslan Abashidze in the southwestern region of Ajara, a society ravaged by massive corruption, a disastrous energy sector, and an economy in ruins. Under the leadership of Saakashvili and the late Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, who died in February 2005, the government has been more efficient and less corrupt than it was under Shevardnadze. Saakashvili and his colleagues can point to real success in areas such as defeating Abashidze and reducing police corruption. However, on democracy-related issues such as building democratic institutions, ensuring government accountability, and cultivating a strong civil society, the new government's record has been uneven.

Fair elections are now the rule, but in many other respects democratic consolidation has stalled. The constitutional reforms which occurred shortly after President Saakashvili was elected in January 2004 resulted in a great deal of power being concentrated in the president. The president appoints the prime minister and the cabinet, as well as several mayors and numerous lower ranking officials, including positions like university provosts. He can disband parliament if it rejects his budget twice, and he exercises control over an executive branch of government that dominates the weaker legislative branch. Saakashvili enjoys more formal power than Shevardnadze ever did.

The process by which the new constitution was passed is equally disturbing. It was rushed through parliament in the two weeks between Saakashvili's election and his taking office. There was no opportunity for public input or review. Members of parliament were reportedly coerced to support the amendments, which themselves changed several times during this period, making it difficult for any real debate in the media or civil society to occur.

In addition, Saakashvili's ruling United National Movement (UNM) party has made little effort to strengthen the distinctions between ruling party and government that are essential in a democratic state. Support for the ruling party, albeit a new ruling party, is still viewed as a prerequisite to any position of power in Georgia. The party's leadership speaks of itself as the only democratizing political force in Georgia and openly questions the need for an opposition party. Controlling well over two-thirds of the seats, the UNM dominates parliament, where it is loyal to the president, since many MPs were hand picked by him to be on the party list for the 2004 elections. Even parliamentary chair Nino Burjanadze serves at Saakashvili's pleasure, as he controls enough votes to force her out of the post if, for example, she is too critical of him. The adaptation of the UNM party's flag as the new Georgian flag shortly after Saakashvili came to office encapsulates the blurring of the lines between ruling party and state and the threat of one-party hegemony.

Shevardnadze's Georgia was a place where civil organizations and a vibrant free media played valuable roles in political life. This has changed somewhat under Saakashvili, as NGOs no longer play a leading role as government watchdogs and critics. Ironically, in some respects Georgia has a less independent media and fewer opposition voices than it had three years ago. Many of the leaders of Georgia's civic and NGO community during the Shevardnadze years have been brought into government as cabinet ministers, MPs, or other positions. Their replacements have generally been reluctant to criticize the government. The changes in the media have been even more disturbing. Shortly after Saakashvili assumed the presidency, a number of lively, often critical, political television programs were taken off the air.² When they were reinstated, many Georgians found them to be substantially watered down from their previous form. A number of formerly independent media outlets, most notably the television station Rustavi Two, have become far less independent in their reporting since the revolution. Shifts in the U.S. democracy assistance strategy in Georgia have inadvertently contributed to this, as support for independent media from USAID has all but disappeared since the Rose Revolution. Some of Georgia's leading intellectuals expressed their concerns about the press in an open letter to President Saakashvili in October 2004, on the eve of the revolution's first anniversary. The letter addressed the threat of one-party dominance and asserted that "leaders and officials of the ruling party constantly use labels. . . such as the enemy of the nation, traitor, the fifth column, etc." for those who disagreed with it.³

² See Freedom House 2005 report at www.freedomhouse.org.

³ Open letter to President Saakashvili from Ghia Nodia, Davit Usupashvili, et al., Oct. 18, 2004, at www.civil.ge. The full English-language text of the letter can be found on www.civil.ge. Both Nodia and Usupashvili were active opponents of Shevardnadze's and supporters of the Rose Revolution.

Obviously, then, democratization can be a challenge even under excellent circumstances. Nonetheless, some effort should be made to determine how much of the problems of democratization in Georgia are due to lack of government will or action and how much are due to factors that are out of the hands of Georgia's generally reformist government. Both causes seem to be at work in Georgia, and both will need to be addressed if Georgian democracy is to develop.

Some of Georgia's issues, such as those concerning the media, could be ameliorated through relatively straightforward government action. The government can, without much difficulty, create a climate of free media by encouraging debate and seeking to exert less influence over the media. Similarly, it could revisit some of Georgia's constitutional arrangements to create more balance between the legislature and the executive and limit the president's power. The government could also create clear barriers between party and state.

Georgia's new government clearly is not the old government with a new face, and the country's problems are not so entrenched that no government can change them. The new government's success in instituting fair elections and reducing government corruption demonstrates this. Rather, while there is a commitment to democracy in Georgia, it is not a top government priority, given all the problems the government inherited.

It is impossible to disaggregate Georgia's current efforts toward democratization from the person of Saakashvili. He was elected in 2004 with 96 percent of the vote in an election broadly seen as free and fair. It was he who gave the Rose Revolution both its symbol and its name and who burst into parliament on November 22 and dramatically drank the cold, unfinished tea left by Shevardnadze when he was hustled out of the room, a clear gesture of triumph. In the international setting, Saakashvili's foreign language fluency, charm, humor, intelligence, and passion have made him the most visible reformer in the former Soviet Union. But he has been a state builder first and a democrat second. Georgia needs to build both democracy and a modern state. Under Shevardnadze, the regions of Ajara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia were all essentially written off. Saakashvili has regained Ajara and is working toward reincorporating the latter two, which has helped create a stronger Georgian state. His efforts to create a strong and less corrupt government able have also helped strengthen the state.

Domestically, Saakashvili often cultivates a comparison between himself and David the Builder (1089–1125), who is remembered as the greatest of Georgian kings, the unifier and builder of the nation. Saakashvili has also, for foreign audiences, identified Ben Gurion, De Gaulle, and Ataturk as role models.⁴ He could have mentioned Havel, Walesa, and Jefferson. His choice instead of people famous for building modern states, rather than for being

⁴ See Arkady Ostrovsky "How to be a Founding Father," *Financial Times*, July 10, 2004.

democrats, is revealing. The post-election changes to the constitution also evidence this preference for state building over democratizing. Concentrating power in the executive, creating an appointed prime minister, and weakening the legislature are what governments do when they want to get things done more quickly and efficiently, not when they want to democratize.

Democracy-Promotion and Georgia in Context

The success or failure of democracy in post-revolution Georgia is a test for a number of assumptions central to the U.S. notion of democracy-promotion. The global democracy environment President Bush stepped into when he assumed office in 2001 was one where the rapid spread of democracy seemed to have slowed precipitously after the mid-1990s as the “third wave” began to ebb. The holdouts from the community of democratic states included numerous Middle Eastern countries, most of the former Soviet Union, the last remaining communist regimes (Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos), and several post-conflict or conflict-ridden African states. These countries represent the greatest challenge for democratization.

After 9/11, the Bush administration took this challenge up, making democracy-promotion the centerpiece of its foreign policy. Naturally, this newfound belief in spreading democracy has been met by suspicion both at home and abroad. To some, it seems dissonant that an aggressive military policy could be coupled with a belief in spreading democracy. For others, suspicion arises because U.S. interests and democracy assistance frequently seem to be intertwined. This may be why President Bush has stressed the moral and ethical reasons for supporting democracy, claiming that it is a divinely given right. Iraq, of course, has become the most visible and controversial case for this project, but democratization has taken a greater place in American foreign policy throughout the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and other regions as well.

Central to this policy is the belief that democracy—or “freedom” as President Bush generally refers to it—is universally desired and achievable anywhere, regardless of culture or geopolitics. President Bush has stated this repeatedly in an effort to undermine beliefs that some cultures are simply not ready for democracy. However, recent events—including the Winter 2006 elections in Palestine, in which Hamas won control of the legislature, violence in Iraq, and the firing of two post-revolutionary governments in Ukraine—raise concerns about the stop-and-go nature of democratization.

Outside Iraq, the Bush administration has used means other than the force to nurture democratic growth, building on efforts initiated by President Clinton. The Bush administration has increased spending for democracy programs through organizations like the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and Freedom House and pressured

numerous governments to conduct fair elections. But Georgia raises the question of how closely the United States is willing to look at the democratic shortcomings of its allies.

Conclusion

Many hurdles remain for Georgia's democratization. For the United States, the importance of its success in negotiating them has grown since the revolution. Washington has poured in financial support, assisted Georgia in international negotiations, and sent numerous senior officials on visits to show their support for the new democracy. But it has not determined how to respond to the country's democratic shortcomings. U.S. officials have made concerns about the pace and character of democratization known to the Georgian government privately, but this does not have the same impact as public statements. In his May 2005 visit, President Bush made only favorable comments. By failing to publicly pressure the Georgian government to deliver more fully on their promise of democracy, and by not supporting Georgia's NGOs and independent media, Washington has implicitly approved the steps Georgia has taken, both forward and backward, in its path towards democratic consolidation.

The challenge for the United States is to support Georgian democracy in a way that, while supporting the consolidation of gains to date, makes it clear that it expects more consolidation. Failing to do so will, in the long run, hurt the nascent democracy in this country that is far ahead of its neighbors. Georgia is, with the possible exception of Turkey, the most democratic country in its region. Helping to recreate the vibrant civic life that characterized the late Shevardnadze years and made the Rose Revolution possible and supporting independent and critical media in Georgia are two ways the United States can help reinvigorate democratic reform in Georgia.

