

Georgia's Response for Democracy: Political Dynamics of Current Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is a product of a long struggle for rights and participation. It directs equality in every sphere of life. In the case of Georgia, democracy comes as a response to the Russian. They shaped the character of the struggle as well as the nature of democracy of Georgia. This article is an effort to understand the democratic process of the Georgian state in changing dynamics of world politics. How has Russia as a part of shaping the history of Georgia has influenced political processes in Georgia?

Key Words : Democracy, Current crisis, Political institutions

INTRODUCTION

Georgia had to tackle the political institutions and structures that the Soviet Union had bequeathed, especially the three autonomous regions that were set up premised on the recognition of a specific nationality. This status gave privilege to the titular nations of these autonomies providing them institutional resources and also as legitimacy as nations (Roeder, 1991: 196–232, Treisman, 1997: 212–49). For example in Abkhazia, the Parliament passed its own legislations, which was confirmed by the Parliament of Georgia.

Further, given the process of electing republic officials, there was a need for these officials had to be acknowledged as legitimate representatives of at least part of the state's population. While negotiating the status of Abkhazia with Vladislav Ardzinba (Chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet), 'Eduard Shevardnadze, placed in office following the coup that overthrew Zviad Gamsakhurdia who was elected democratically, recognized the legitimacy of Ardzinba as the leader of Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet and the fact that he represented the population of that republic. However, Shevardnadze stayed loyal to the belief that Abkhazia

was an important chunk of Georgia.. During each decade of Soviet rule, there were nationalist challenges. However there took place in the 1930s, and 1940s, friction due to language scripting and concerns over education, couple with historical debates over the first settlement in Abkhazia which began mushrooming in the 1950s, 1960s and successively in the 1980s. When viewed from perspectives of national minorities, the trappings of the formal and informal institutions of the republic seemed to favour the majority Georgians. In Georgia post-soviet disputes began due to a feeling of insecurity among the minorities that the Georgia which was newly independent would encourage the practices during the Soviet era of providing more privileges to the "Georgians" at the expense of other ethnic groups,. The sentiments from the Soviet era as most of Georgia's national minorities viewed Georgia as a domain of institutionalized Georgian ethnic privilege, where politicians in the centre tried to define an exclusivist idea of national identity that continuously brought about a sense of "a Georgia for Georgians". In this frame Gamsakhurdia can be perceived as a culmination of discernment and processes that were already beginning to take place (Bower, 1997: 282). Tensions were already apparent among the national

minorities, particularly the Abkhaz, much prior to the phase of free elections and Perestroika. The year 1978 was an imperative low point when the Georgian government failed to review the Constitution of Georgia. In a bid to decrease anxiety, it was decided by the government that they would do away with a clause that recognized Georgian language as the Republic's sole official language. This move led to a mass uproar of the Georgians who explicitly protested against this move and Shevardnadze, the then First Party Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (1972–85) was forced to step down and behold the clause. On the other hand, this pissed off the non-Georgians who viewed this measure in a negative way and a deliberate attempt in increasing national chauvinism of the Georgians (Hamburg, 2004: 119).

The majority of the Georgians felt scared of being entrapped due to this same incident played by the minorities, whose guardian and backer was seen to be Moscow. This 1978 Constitutional debacle incited Abkhaz elites to seek Moscow's protection. There were many grievances and letters were written regarding the issues of concern and also removal of Abkhazia from the jurisdiction of Georgia was pleaded for and directly subjugated to the Russian Republic. Abkhazia's separation was not supported by Moscow but was successful in getting Georgia to take up a plan for improving the cultural and economic scenario in Abkhazia.

Likewise, South Ossetia wanted merger with North Ossetia to make a single polity within Russia, efficaciously break away from Georgia in 1989. The demand of 1989 was solely negated and led to belligerent skirmishes between the Ossetians and the local Georgians (who thought that this would lead to amalgamation with Russia and they did not want it). There was swift rejection by the Georgian Supreme Soviet of the South Ossetian 'Declaration of Sovereignty' and at the same time got rid of its autonomous status in toto. There was a declaration of a state of emergency: demonstrations were outlawed, there was suppression of newspapers, and the official language was declared as Georgian. Ossetians countered by declaring their language as the official language of the Oblast. The annulment of autonomous status of South Ossetia and the foisting of language were both instances of a strive to deinstitutionalize the Soviet bequest, which in turn gravely aggravated relations between South Ossetia and Georgia.

On 28 October 1990 Georgia went into parliamentary elections. There were six Georgian nationalist blocs in

toto that rivaled against the Communist in the elections. The total percentage of vote turn out was 68 per cent (Abkhaz and Ossetian party candidates were prohibited from running) and the party that emerged victorious was Gamsakhurdia's Round Table-Free Georgia bloc who managed 155 out of 250 seats. The second to finish was the Communists with 64 seats. The Chairman of the Supreme Soviet who got elected was Gamsakhurdia and he formed the first non-communist government from his Round Table Free Georgia coalition with Tengiz Sigua as Prime Minister. The entry of Gamsakhurdia in politics disturbed the national minorities. Gamsakhurdia's writings which were dissident in nature generally brought about an image of an endangered Georgian nation, the demolition of its culture, land and language. He held the minorities and Moscow accountable (Slider, 1997: 170-1).

The election of Gamsakhurdia had taken place on a platform that advocated a Georgia that was independent, with a free market economy, a legal and multiparty system that safeguarded every citizen's rights. It also gave it's support to make stronger the Georgians rights, impeded immigration and safeguarding the Georgian language. This was not uncommon to all the parties competing in the elections (Jones, 1993: 297). South Ossetia's autonomous status had been already scrapped in the December of 1989, and along with it Ajaria's status was also endangered. The policy of abolition was justified by Gamsakhurdia by stating that Ossetians had the right to self-determination only in those areas that was the native land of the Ossetian nation, especially in North Ossetia. South Ossetia, like Abkhazia and Ajaria, was Georgian land and by extension, Georgian homeland.

Hence, by 1990 when first democratic elections came took place, national discord were hardened enough. For e.g. electoral laws. It was laid out in Article 8 of the laws with regards to the election that all registered parties needed to have a reach nationally. Since in Georgia, national minorities supported parties whose reach was limited, they received threats of being non participant in the political process. To worsen matters further, the Communist Party which appeared to support the rights of the minorities, added a clause in its platform which affirmed its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity. The minorities had only one option of voicing their views and that was by boycotting the elections. In a span of a week, Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet declared itself a

sovereign Soviet Socialist Republic. However, the Georgian Supreme Soviet rejected this declaration (Mirskil, 1997: 81).

With regards to South Ossetia, the fate of Abkhazia was partly linked to the structures that were inherited from the Soviet Union as during the Soviet era Abkhazia was subordinate to Georgia. It was claimed by Georgia that it has to stay as a subordinate. However, the situation of Abkhazia's was not the same as South Ossetia. In that there was also an institutionalized precedent for its independence from Georgia, as codified in its Constitution of 1925. Depending on the date, "the claims of either side regarding Abkhazia" had clear institutional limits that were equally legitimate and compromised as Georgia sought to shake off Soviet institutions.

As soon as the transition of Georgia began and its first election, there were varied challenges regional as well as ethnic faced by Tbilisi. Even though the population of the Georgians were two-thirds, one-third was not and this population viewed a Georgian state as an eminent danger to their own ethno-national interests. However, these minorities were seen as a threat by the Georgians. They had taken over borderland regions adjoining Russia and had also directly requested for help from Moscow and had expressed their desire to be part of the Russian Federation. On one hand the minorities were scared of a continued Georgian imperialism and on the other hand Georgians were concerned of Russia's imperialism and seeming aid for the minorities of Georgia, particularly for Abkhazia.

Ajaria which was the other autonomous area in Georgia stayed mainly calm, although there were issues that would yield to war and violence. In Ajaria's case, calls for greater independence were initially heavily criticized and were protested from Tbilisi. On the other hand, however, the issues of "autonomy" for Abkhazia were not questioned except that the extent of autonomy was questioned. With regards to Ajaria, there were proposals put forth in Tbilisi for scrapping Ajaria's autonomy completely (Fuller, 1990: 13–14). The main proponent of scrapping Ajaria's independence was by Gamsakhurdia only.

The Ajars even under Perestroika, were anxious about the idea that as Georgia advocated and stepped forward for greater autonomy it was also advancing towards a more exclusionary idea of what it implied to be a Georgian. Moreover, the Ajar Republic's status came under direct and public threat. During the

Supreme Soviet elections of 1990, Gamsakhurdia's Round Table received only 24 per cent of the vote, while the party that stood first was the Communist Party with 56 per cent of the vote. The corollary was the opposite of the holistic Georgian election result which gave 62 per cent to the Round Table and 26 per cent to the Communists.

The results of these elections overpowered the view of Gamsakhurdia that the autonomous status of Ajaria should be scrapped. Soon after these elections, there was a retreat of Gamsakhurdia. Scrapping of the autonomy of Ajaria's would now have to be locally catered. When the period became tensed due to confrontations between Tbilisi and Ajaria, Ajaria was charged of trying to bring in separatism. But the evidence shows that Ajaria as a matter of fact did not demand independence. The dispute centered on the autonomy of Ajaria (Fuller, 1990: 14). Regardless of the rhetoric of Gamsakhurdia, the concern was one of territorial autonomy and not ethno-religious dissimilarities. What accounts for this conflict and its resolution? The previous bone of contention between Tbilisi and Batumi emanated from the nature of Georgian nationalizing policies which drew its attention on Georgian identity 'that was overtly tied to Christianity. The reason was that the Ajars were Muslims and hence they were perceived as not being part of national identity and hence, a danger to the union and the authority of the newly independent state. However, the Ajar viewed this religious distinction with very little importance: Ajars believed themselves to be Georgians and their homeland was seen as an important part of Georgia. The leader of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze, quite often stated his loyalty to maintain Georgia's territorial integrity: "Our republic is an administrative unit where members of various nationalities live, but all are citizens of Ajaria, and that means of Georgia as well. We have never had, and never will have, any territorial claims against Georgia ... Ajaria is historically a part of Georgia, and there has never been an instance in history in which Ajaria has created problems for its motherland" (Nezavisimaia Gazeta, 27 June 1992: 3).

Abashidze opined that instead of concentrating on religious contrasts, it is important to instead focus on the imperativeness of evolving the Republic's economic interests. This can be seen being reverted in the slogan embraced by his political party, Ajarian Revival: "Wealthy people mean a wealthy state". This was opined by him

in an interview to “a wealthy state is a strong state” (Ibid.).

Although there was resentment in Batumi over the dominance of ‘Christianity’ in Georgia, the conflict hinged on an institutional issue, namely the region’s autonomous status. There was extreme limitation on separatism, if not totally fictitious. For example in 1989, Guram Chigogidze (the then Chairman of the Ajar ASSR Council of Ministers), while delivering a speech to the Supreme Soviet of Georgia alerted the people a separatist organization that was functioning in Ajaria. However, he said that the organization was only a six person organization and hence wasn’t the representation of the larger populations view. Likewise, Pridon Khalvashi, the head of the Ajar Branch of the Georgian Writer’s Union, stated that “no separatist inclinations of any kind exist in Ajaria” (Fuller, 1990: 14).

There are two important dissimilarities in the dispute with Ajaria, Abkhazia and Ossetia. First, Ajaria continued stay committed to the aim of Tbilisi which was keeping in tact the honour of the state of Georgia. Ajaria showed no signs of supporting or aiding any kind of secessionism by anyone else. This was because even though there were differences based on religion and a “Christian nationalist Georgian state” was perceived as a danger Ajars saw themselves and their homeland as an important piece of Georgia. Safeguarding the integrity of Georgia meant safeguarding the integrity of Ajar.

Second, the dispute between Tbilisi and Ajaria over a period of time showed to Tbilisi and Christian Georgians that the Ajars unlike the Abkhazi had not in fact put forth their demands for more independence as a first stride towards separation. Ajaria’s political aim was to safeguard its institutionalized regional status. No doubt that there were concern related to ethnicity, and religion in this case religion but the dispute was mostly regional rather than being ethnic in nature. Tbilisi over a period of time viewed the Ajars as how the Ajars saw themselves – as loyal Georgians who wanted more than anything else the re-institutionalization of their autonomous status.

When it came to the Abkhaz-Georgian relationship, neither Abkhaz nor the Georgians refused that the Abkhaz were a separate nation with a marked culture and language which could track down its roots to lands surrounding present Georgia (Bower, 1997: 282). The point of disagreement was when it came to the fate of Abkhazia, the territory. This piece of land was seen by

both as their homeland. This elucidates the question of who were the first settlers?, Was it the Georgians or Abkhaz?, This had become a sensible has issue, prior to the transition and when transition took place. What remained the same was the dynamics of the dispute with Ossetia except that Georgia denied acknowledging the territory of South Ossetia being Ossetian homeland. The Ossetians were rather perceived as intruders who actually belonged actual to the north. In these two cases, leaving Georgia was seen as the best course of action, although it signified owing allegiance to Moscow.

Conclusion:

Emergence of Georgia was the product of ethnic struggle and thus ethnic identity and politics dependent on it has a great role in Georgia. Russia has a great role in Georgia in terms of influencing ethnic conflicts and historical roots. Georgia has to deal with structure and institution that was borrowed from Russia. Globalization and regional powers have influenced economic policies and regional politics. The strategic location of Georgia is another factor that is giving opportunity for world powers to play a role in internal politics. There is a demand between ethnic groups to restructure political institution that help solve the problems of Georgian people. In this way we can say that the Georgian democratic process for autonomy and for a bigger role in this region is still continuing.

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