

## **Abkhazia: Government Poll Landslide Contested**

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The Sukhum government gains full control of Abkhazia's new assembly after the opposition pull out of elections.

The new parliament in the breakaway Black Sea republic of Abkhazia will be dominated by deputies loyal to the government, following ill-tempered elections, in which the opposition withdrew its candidates.

The leader of the opposition Leonid Lakerbaia said he will seek to have the March 2 poll to be annulled and re-run. "We are leaving, but the authorities cannot expect a calm life from us," said Lakerbaia, head of the Aitaira (Revival) movement, the day before the vote.

Revival and another opposition grouping, the People's Party, withdrew almost all their candidates three days before the vote in protest at the way the electoral campaign was being conducted.

After that it was a foregone conclusion that officially backed candidates would win all the 35 parliament seats - they ran opposed for 13 of them. There was only one major surprise when the current speaker of parliament, Sokrat Jinjolia, lost his seat to a virtual unknown named Anatoly Khashba.

The international community declared the elections illegitimate on the grounds that Abkhazia is an unrecognised state and that around 200,000 Georgians expelled from the region in 1992-3 did not have the right to vote. "A ballot cannot be legitimate as long as tens and hundreds of thousands of people who cannot return to their homes in Abkhazia are deprived of these human rights," the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Walter Schwimmer, said on a visit to Georgia on March 5.

The elections took place against a background of domestic discontent and the first real divisions in Abkhazia since the end of the war with Georgia in 1993. Six or seven years ago, there was an informal taboo on the use of the word "opposition" in Abkhazian society. Vladislav Ardzinba, who had been the wartime leader of the region, had undisputed authority and most of the population was suspicious of alternative views.

Since then, however, the population has grown disillusioned. A monthly pension is worth 30 roubles or around one US dollar, unemployment has reached catastrophic levels and the only source of income for most families has become the sale of citrus fruit on Abkhazia's border with Russia on the River Psou. Conditions ripe for the growth of an opposition movement

In an interview last month, Prime Minister Anri Djergenia, in charge of Abkhazia while a sickly Ardzinba convalesces in Moscow, dismissed the new opposition movement as insignificant, telling IWPR that, "Soon people will see that [Revival] has no role to play in our state."

During the election campaign, the official television and radio channels promoted pro-government candidates and attacked the opposition. A local journalist, Kristian Bzhanian, told viewers that Revival was being financed from Georgia - a charge the party-leaders were not given the opportunity to refute. In several villages, officials banned meetings between residents and candidates deemed unsuitable.

The final blow came when the head of the Central Electoral Commission Sergei Smyr disqualified 14 candidates, all of whom were backed by the two opposition parties. Smyr denied there was any political

motivation in his actions. "I am not aware of the party affiliation of the people removed from the electoral race," he said.

Few people in Abkhazia, a small place, where everyone knows each other, believed Smyr, particularly as the chief electoral official works in the next-door office to Djergenia.

On election day, it seemed as though Abkhazia was still living in the Soviet era. In the village of Besletka, the polling station was in the building of the old village soviet. A huge portrait of Lenin on the wall, a table draped with a red cloth, a list of candidates with only one name on it and a silent line of people queuing to vote summoned up memories of former times.

The old Soviet instincts of obeying those in power and fearing the unknown undoubtedly helped the authorities. Another factor was the spectre of instability caused by the non-resolution of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. Djergenia frequently told voters "not to rock the boat" or to cause splits in society.

In the event, the opposition did not call on voters to stay at home. "The opposition is withdrawing its candidates, but it is not calling on voters to boycott the elections," said Lakerbaia. "Everyone ought to decide for himself if he will vote." The provisional turnout was 61 per cent, although, as no one agrees on the population figures of Abkhazia, this figure was also a rough estimate.

In the short term, the opposition's failure to take part in the election has hurt their reputation, but in the long run it may benefit them. "We are going into the shadows and now the authorities have no one on whom they can pin their blunders and failures," said Tamaz Ketsba, one of the leaders of Revival. "They will be left facing the people directly."

The lack of a genuine contest, however, leaves no clue as to what happen in the next presidential elections, scheduled for two years' time - and which could happen sooner if Ardzinba steps down early.

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