

The Caucasus Election Script

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Being the leader of a post-Soviet country on the edge of Europe is a delicate balancing act.

The proximity of Europe means you are pulled towards making democratic reforms that win you greater favour in the West, larger aid programmes and potential membership of institutions such as the World Trade Organisation or NATO.

Yet you also sit at the top of a pyramid of patronage and need to fight hard not to be dislodged from it. Being in opposition in these countries is a miserable lot: ceding power to your opponents means risking being stripped of everything and perhaps going to jail or into exile. Consider that since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 in the eight countries of the post-Soviet South Caucasus and Central Asia, six leaders have been forced out of office mid-term but an official candidate has never lost a contested election to the opposition.

Elections are especially dangerous times, with the peaceful revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 all springing from disputed votes. In each case, the opposition was able to demonstrate that the incumbent had rigged the vote, orchestrate a popular uprising and force the president from office.

Post-Soviet elections have become elaborately choreographed occasions. The authorities work to organise the desired result by using what the Russians call “the administrative resource”: pressure on the media and protégés across the country to deliver the right result on election day. The opposition plans just as much for the protests the day after polling day as the vote itself. In the latest Azerbaijani elections, opposition activists headed straight for pre-prepared rallies from the polling stations.

The script is now getting so precise that we even know what the preferred winning share of the vote is for an official candidate in the South Caucasus - 53 per cent.

Twice already this year, 53 per cent has been the decisive number in the presidential elections in the post-Soviet countries of the South Caucasus, Georgia and Armenia.

In January, Mikheil Saakashvili was declared to have been re-elected as president of Georgia with 53.4 per cent of the vote. In February, Serzh Sarkisian, the Armenian prime minister and official candidate, was declared the winner of that country’s presidential election with 52.8 per cent of the vote.

In both cases, that number sent a double message: to the nation that the official candidate had soundly beaten his opponents and to the world that the margin of victory had been modest and the vote had been fair.

These elections were in fact not massively rigged. It is possible that both Saakashvili and Sarkisian might have been elected in an entirely free and fair vote. The trouble is that we will never know if that would have happened. What did take place was fairly widespread vote-rigging and heavily skewed media coverage sharply in favour of the official candidate. This in turn naturally provoked anger from the Georgian and Armenian oppositions, who complained that their elections have been stolen.

In Georgia, this triggered two months of protests, a hunger strike and domestic political turmoil. The opposition’s passions have been muted by two considerations: the widespread public perception that their candidate, a colourless member of parliament named Levan Gagechiladze, would have lost a run-off contest against the charismatic Saakashvili anyway; and the fact that they still have a good chance of reducing Saakashvili’s authority by doing well in parliamentary elections scheduled for May.

The Armenian case has been far more tragic. The vote-rigging there was more open, the divergence from democracy more blatant. The opposition candidate was also much more formidable, being Armenia’s first post-independence president, Levon Ter-Petrosian. Once the official results were announced, Ter-

Petrosian's furious supporters poured out onto the streets and set up camp in the centre of the city, demanding a re-count of the vote.

On March 1, outgoing president Robert Kocharian sent in the security forces to break up the tent camp and the protesters resisted. Street fighting broke out, with official forces using firearms and the opposition employing improvised weapons and barricades. At least eight people were killed and more than 100 opposition activists are still in jail. Ter-Petrosian was put under de facto house arrest. Armenia is now a land divided and the government has a huge legitimacy deficit.

All this is bad enough for these small countries still seeking to emerge into the European mainstream.

What makes it even worse is the role the third member of this electoral dance - the international community in the shape of election observing teams - played in letting these crises occur. Through a combination of cynicism and incompetence, western governments put an imprimatur of approval on both these elections that stoked the internal conflicts.

International election monitoring missions, generally led by the 56-member Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have become an integral part of all votes in the former Communist world since 1991.

The missions generally fall into two parts. The professional side of things is handled by the Warsaw-based arm of the OSCE, the unfortunately titled Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (because its ODIHR acronym sounds like the English "Oh Dear") which sets up a long-term monitoring mission, looking at media coverage and the campaign as a whole.

Short-term observers - frequently European members of parliament with little or no knowledge of the local scene - then fly in for a few days, travel round polling stations, give their impressions and then fly out.

In both elections, the short-term monitors, led by parliamentarians, drafted the initially mild statements that basically approved the 53-per-cent winning margin.

In Georgia in January, the monitors said the election was "in essence consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections," while going on to talk of "significant challenges" which "need to be addressed urgently". The negative nuances of the message were lost in translation, due to Georgian television coverage and an inaccurate interpreter who reportedly turned out to be a relative of a leading government official.

The Armenian statement a month later was virtually a carbon copy, with the monitors saying, "Yesterday's presidential election in Armenia was conducted mostly in line with the country's international commitments, although further improvements are necessary to address remaining challenges."

Why such haste and such soft statements, when there was widespread evidence of falsification? Partly, it seems the authorities have become more sophisticated in their tactics, putting on a much better show at the polling stations where observers are present and saving their manipulations for later counts. Partly, many of the short-term observers are out of their depth or have a misplaced desire to support "stability" in the countries they are visiting.

The world basically took its cue from the early reports. Some of the western monitors in Georgia publicly embraced president-elect Saakashvili. In Armenia, within hours of election, Serzh Sarkisian was congratulated not only by that master of political manipulation Vladimir Putin (who was, incidentally, elected as president of Russia in 2000 with 52.9 per cent of the vote), but also by French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who congratulated him on his "overwhelming success". (To be fair, Washington and much of the EU have not yet congratulated Sarkisian and are now find themselves in an awkward position).

Weeks later, the more professional ODIHR released final observation reports that were much more negative. In Georgia, it noted, "The campaign was overshadowed by widespread allegations of intimidation

and pressure, among others on public-sector employees and opposition activists, some of which were verified by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission.” It reported that there had been numerous complaints which the Georgian authorities had failed to investigate.

In Armenia, the final verdict was even more damning, noting that at some polling stations there was an “implausibly high voter turnout; results for Mr Sarkisian in excess of 99 per cent of the vote; and a very high incidence of invalid ballots...especially in Yerevan.” In one district, the observers recorded that there had been a turnout of 100.36 per cent, with almost all those votes going to the official candidate.

One election observer I spoke to put it more pithily, saying of the Armenian vote, “This is the kind of election I expected to see in some African countries, not in Europe.”

By the time of the final reports however, it was all too late: the world had moved on, both presidents-elect had claimed their victory and in Armenia the blood had flowed on the streets.

The point here is not to say that the Georgian and Armenian oppositions are pure democrats who deserve unqualified support. An ironic footnote is that the copyright to the “Fifty three per cent solution” belongs to none other than Ter-Petrosian, who by common consent stole an election in 1996, when he claimed victory in the first round with no less than 51.8 per cent of the vote.

The immediate issue is that these western-led election observation missions are now as much a part of the problem as the solution. An election report should not be an indulgent school report encouraging a laggard pupil. It should be a sober judgment on whether the election reflected the democratic will of the people. That means that if the officially declared margin of victory is small, the professionals need to take more time to deliver a verdict. In the recent elections, Georgia and Armenia did not need another “coloured revolution”, merely a recount of disputed votes with the prospect of a second round of voting.

The broader point is that by these interventions, western actors are losing leverage in these countries and the trust of large sections of the population. Some people in the Caucasus increasingly regard western governments as agents of geopolitical scheming, rather than as bringers of democracy. The danger is that if people lose faith in elections in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, they will channel their disaffection into other less peaceful forms of protest. In the long run that will further weaken these already unstable countries on the edge of Europe.

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The views expressed in this article, which first appeared on the US online journal National Interest, are not necessarily the views of IWPR.

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