

Georgia: Is Democracy Delivering?

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Nationwide consultation process suggests that ordinary citizens have diminishing faith in the democratic process.

The mood in the small meeting room in the city of Kutaisi ranged from irritation to weariness, with the crowd of local government officials, civil society activists and journalists concluding that Georgia had little to show for ten years of electoral democracy.

Discussions such as the one in Kutaisi have recently been held in six Georgian regions to ascertain whether democracy was empowering the population. The broad answer, both on a local and national level, seemed to be “no”.

These meetings were conducted before Georgia’s June 2 local elections, whose low turnout, violence and successes for populist candidates standing on poorly defined programmes appeared to bear this bleak analysis out.

The consultation process, initiated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), involved roundtable discussions in Tbilisi, the western regions of Imereti and Samegrelo, the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti on the Armenian border, the autonomous republic of Ajara and the eastern region of Kakheti.

In Kutaisi, the administrative centre of Imereti, participants agreed that the issue of relations between the capital and the provinces was a crucial one. Journalist David Liklikadze said that people in the region felt neglected, as everything in the country revolved around the capital.

His colleague added that Tbilisi identifies itself with the whole of Georgia and the provinces have no representation in the life of the country.

“The Georgian population has little chance of playing a role in the country’s civil or political life,” said IDEA expert Nana Sumbadze. The absence of real power in local government coupled with economic collapse and the concentration of power in Tbilisi has led to widespread public apathy, agreed other speakers.

The turnout for local elections in Tbilisi –the only place where figures have been made public so far – was 42 per cent, a low figure for the politically active capital. But even that disguises the scale of the electorate’s indifference. In one city, a voter said that people had gone to the polls only because the mayor came up with an election-day ruse. “The mayor worked to deliver some sugar to the city, so people felt compelled to go and vote,” he said.

A major part of the problem is that voters were electing local or city councils, known as sakrebulo, while they were well aware that they have fewer powers than an unelected gamgebeli (mayor), or rtsmunebuli (governor). The mayors and governors are appointed from Tbilisi and have direct contact with the president’s administration.

In most regions, according to recent research, 60 per cent of budgetary expenditure goes on “social and cultural” and “other” budget lines, raising strong suspicions about where the money is being spent. Often, said roundtable participants, the governors punish the councils they do not like by withholding budgetary transfers. Governors generally have their own funds, which are not subject to outside scrutiny.

“The current government system is quite imperfect,” said David Losaberidze, an expert on governance issues. “In fact it is the Soviet model reshaped. So, with these elections we will not have substantial structural changes or ‘municipalisation’ in the Western meaning of this word.”

Is then electoral democracy the best way to solve these problems? Some argued that Georgia could not really be called democratic at all.

Kakha Bakuradze, who works for a local NGO in Kutaisi, argued that the country was governed by a corporate or clan system, which was better than authoritarianism, but had nothing to do with democracy. Alu Gamakharia, an internally-displaced person from Abkhazia said that the only way to make a transition to democracy was through the law and that “[corrupt people] should return the money which they earned illegally”.

“Everybody tries to have their families fed, through any means, even by encouraging corruption,” commented another speaker. “It’s not the theory [of democracy] that matters but survival.”

The lack of grassroots democracy in Georgia may lead to a growth in political extremism, social protest and xenophobia. Two symptoms of this problem are the recent rise in popularity of the renegade priest Basil Mkalavishvili - who draws large crowds for his campaign against religious minorities - and the ultra-radical parliamentary deputy, Guram Sharadze, who attracted strong support for a nationalist campaign protesting against a collection of Georgian religious artefacts being sent to the USA for exhibition.

Even the two more mainstream politicians, who performed best in the June 2 local elections in Tbilisi, Shalva Natelashvili of the Labour Party and former justice minister Mikhail Saakashvili, arguably owe their success to populist slogans and crowd-pleasing tactics.

The Georgian experts involved in the IDEA project plan to produce a "Democracy Assessment Report" by the autumn of this year and disseminate it to a wider group of people. In the mean time, the consensus is that swift change is needed to broaden the appeal of democracy to the bulk of Georgia's citizens and stop it being merely a brainchild of a narrow elite.

Jaba Devdariani is editor of Civil Georgia (www.civil.ge), Quotations and research details used in this article come courtesy of the International IDEA project in Georgia and South Caucasus (www.idea.int/georgia). Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of International IDEA.

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