

Georgia: Slow Road to Democracy

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Georgia can barely afford any more accidents on the road to democracy.

Ten years ago, Georgia's first democratically elected president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee Tbilisi after fifteen days of violent fighting with opponents of his regime left the capital's centre in ruins.

Fears of a similar feud were sparked last November when thousands of demonstrators poured onto the streets clamouring for the resignation of two senior cabinet ministers suspected of involvement in corruption scandals.

But this time the issue was speedily resolved. President Shevardnadze gave into the protests and dismissed the ministers, close allies of his, along with the rest of the cabinet for good measure.

Though Georgia has failed many challenges over the past decade, it has at least made advances down the path of political compromise. Yes, the president is still invested with far reaching powers, but he realises what he can and cannot do.

In other respects, though, little has changed since the collapse of Georgia's first post-soviet government in a 1992 coup.

Opposition politicians then were demanding the same things as they are now - resolution of domestic territorial disputes as well as root-and-branch economic reform and a crackdown on corruption.

In 1992, parliament was effectively Gamsakhurdia's governing tool and the absence of any solid parliamentary opposition meant that groups took their grievances onto the street. Power had become so concentrated in the hands of the president that his ousting spelled anarchy.

In 2001, a pro-presidential coalition commanded an overwhelming majority in the national assembly and impatient members of the opposition were suggesting that the country was becoming ungovernable.

Despite all the similarities, however, violence was averted last year. Shevardnadze agreed to protestors' demands for the resignation of the interior and state-security ministers. In so doing, he opted for democratic rather than strong-arm solutions to the crisis.

If there is a growing political maturity in Georgian politics, part of this ought to be attributed to the fact there is a new wave of younger politicians stalking the corridors of power alongside the former communist nomenklatura.

Another important development is the disappearance of a presidential party in the Georgian parliament. Shevardnadze's resignation as chairman of the Citizen's Union in September last year can only be a good thing as it decreases presidential influence in the assembly and should help the development of stronger, independent parties.

However, even if there is a reason to celebrate these developments, there are other factors which, unless tackled soon, will arrest Georgia's evolution into a truly democratic state.

Vast areas are beyond the control of central government. Two of these, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, have declared themselves independent. Others like Pankisi gorge and Ajaria are effectively autonomous. And it's estimated that up to 60 per cent of Georgians currently live under the poverty line.

Such harsh realities should ring alarm bells for those politicians who are seriously committed to a continuing process of democratisation and reform.

Georgia needs to see 2002 as a year for action. It must start to push through the social and economic reforms that have been put on the backburner for reason of political expediency. Accidents on the road to democracy have already consumed too much time and resources - the country can barely afford any more.

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Location: South Ossetia
Georgia
Abkhazia

Focus: Caucasus

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