

# GEORGIA: POLITICAL PARTIES BEFORE AND AFTER THE ROSE REVOLUTION

Ekaterine GAKHOKIDZE

*Ph.D. (Political Science),  
assistant professor, Department of Political Science,  
Tbilisi State University  
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

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**T**he country is heading toward democracy and busy consolidating its institutions, so it is paying particular attention to fair and legitimate elections and encouraging the appearance of strong political parties as one of the guarantors of democracy and stability. Indeed, an election is a political proce-

ture which allows a nation to ensure a peaceful transition of power and mobilize its citizens. It allows the voters and political forces to use their constitutional right to take part in the country's political life. At times, these forces fail to recognize their responsibility to the voters. As a result, an increasingly larger share of the country's population is becoming disillusioned by representative democracy and elections as its political institution. It often happens that far from creating public harmony, elections generate even wider political gaps or even sharper social conflicts. This was vividly demonstrated by the Rose Revolution, a direct response to the massive falsifications of the parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003. The mass actions forced President Shevardnadze to resign before his term in office expired. But very soon after that the crisis was resolved and events developed in compliance with the constitution. And great efforts were made to carry out democratic elections. Yet it is too early to say that we have achieved stability in our election and political system.

It should be mentioned that, along with the parties which accumulated vast experience of political struggle in the wake of the Soviet Union's disintegration, new political structures (or rather political clubs with no clear political platforms and no particular skills for active involvement in politics) appeared in Georgia. Some of the relatively stable parties are falling apart and/or are being split. These varied and chaotic processes were created by the circumstances and our society's current needs. There can be no ideal parties—they reflect the country's political climate. In Georgia's case, we should take into account its historical, political, and economic specifics: the democratic development level, the nation's mentality, the structure of the electorate, the level of party identification, and the accompanying contradictions and trends.

Our political system is far from stable, while many political parties are only stirred to life for a short period during the election race. Parties did not actively show their faces until the 1980s-1990s, since under the communist totalitarian regime they were necessarily clandestine structures. Some of the parties were new; others were inherited (or rather restored) from the period of Georgia's independence (1918-1921). There were several public organizations (the Rustaveli Society, the Ilia Chavchavadze Society, the Helsinki Union, etc.) which declared their aims to be Georgia's restored independence and the building of a democratic state.

The Round Table-Free Georgia election bloc won the first multiparty elections on 28 October, 1990 with the overwhelming majority of 62 percent of the votes. The Communist Party of Georgia came second with 25.6 percent, while other political forces remained outside the parliament. The elections put an end to the long period of communist domination; they brought the anticommunist national-minded coalition headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia to power. This short period can be described as the transition to a multiparty system. Political life became more active; more people came to the polls; and there were about 80 officially registered parties. The quantity, however, had nothing to do with the quality: some of the parties remained on paper, while others hardly survived the organizational period. In fact, only 4 or 5 parties remained on the scene as working structures.

At first glance, it seemed that the entire political spectrum—from right to left and from radicals to liberals—was represented, yet Georgia's political system was neither clearly structured, nor stable. It was developing haphazardly amid intense rivalry for political leadership. This, and the external factor, resulted in the collapse of power. The inefficiency of the representative bodies of power quenched public optimism during the first multiparty elections. The resulting disillusionment threatened with absenteeism. The 14 months of the bloc's rule ended in a disaster. In January 1992, the first president elected by the nation was deposed by force of arms and with the help of external forces. He was accused of trying to establish an authoritarian regime.

These were the most tragic years with no stable power and a war going on in Abkhazia. Georgia's future depended to a great extent on armed criminal groups. Still, in October 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze managed to hold parliamentary elections to legitimize his power; he gradually neutralized the privately-controlled armed groups and established elementary order. In 1995 the country adopted its Constitution. This did not mean, however, that the country acquired more or less solid democratic foundations; there was no system of political competition, while society remained polarized. Clans concentrated political and economic power in their hands; the country's political institutions—the parliament, parties, and

NGOs—were an empty shell rather than working institutions. The Citizens' Union of Georgia won the parliamentary elections of 1995 to become the parliamentary majority; and its head, Shevardnadze, was elected president of Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

The parliamentary elections of 1999 differed greatly from the previous ones: the political forces had to cope with absolutely new tasks (in particular, they tried to use the procedures indispensable to a Western-type election campaign). All more or less large parties hired image-makers to help them cope with the task.

The crowded political market forced parties, blocs, and alliances to court the voters and “sell” them their promises, slogans, and programs; they had to work hard to acquire acceptable political images in order to favorably impress the voters and win them over to their side. This urged the broad masses to act according to the political parties' interests and created an illusion of freedom of expression.

Ten years of election experience have demonstrated that the schemes borrowed from the West need modifying. The following factors influence the election results: the country's political, economic, and social situation; its historical traditions; the level of the nation's legal and political awareness, the nation's mentality, and the level of democratic development. During elections our citizens behave differently from voters in countries with developed democracies. I am referring not only to the national features, but also to the degree of democratic development. For example, in the United States, 70 to 80 percent of the voters consistently vote either for the Republicans or for the Democrats, so the real fight is for the 20 to 30 percent of undecided voters. American elections are carried out by means of smoothly functioning party mechanisms, in which local structures play an important role. Georgia does not have political parties of the Western type; it has no real political market; there is no rivalry among the political forces; and the parties are inclined to use undemocratic methods and deviant procedures. Administrative, force, and financial resources bring victory; the electorate is hardly structuralized, while the voters' legal and democratic awareness is virtually nonexistent; and the political parties are largely undistinguishable.

A developed political market, which alone can offer the best possible conditions for society's political functioning and progress, is a sine qua non of democratic election campaigns. In the West, the political sphere is secularized and acquires some of the market elements at a much slower pace than in new political systems. In fact, the post-Soviet expanse lacks a real political market and free political competition (the involvement of several political parties in elections cannot be described as such). The old system was falling apart, while a new system (democratic traditions, structures, stereotypes, and the market) had not yet appeared. Subjective and objective factors were also involved. In fact, the larger (as compared with Soviet times) number of those who claimed power triggered a reverse process: no conscious choice among the vaguely different alternatives was possible.

Georgia went through the same processes as the other post-Soviet countries. The old social and class structure of the communist era fell apart leaving behind a void; and the old and new post-Soviet elite moved into the vacant niche. Together they created a capitalist system of bureaucrats and oligarchs and pushed the rest of the nation to the wayside. This was the context in which the 1999 parliamentary elections took place. The Union of Democratic Revival<sup>2</sup> around which the opposition closed its ranks was the main, and only, rival of the ruling Citizens' Union Party. Several other political structures also ran for parliament: Industry Will Save Georgia, the Labor Party, and the National-Democratic Alliance—the Third Way, consisting of the National-Democratic and the Republican parties. The nation was mostly concerned with poverty, unemployment, and corruption; and it hoped that industry would revive. The Citizens' Union, however, tried to kindle hopes for a better future by means of international projects expected to bring prosperity to each and everyone. A stable future and prosperity were identified with Eduard Shevardnadze, the party's chairman.

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<sup>1</sup> Two other parties—the Vozrozhdenie (Revival) bloc and the National-Democratic Party—also exceeded the 7 percent barrier.

<sup>2</sup> The election bloc included the Union of Democratic Revival, the Socialist Party of Georgia, the Union of Georgian Traditionalists, the People's Party, the Chkondideli Society, and the Call of Nation Movement.

According to psychologists, the Citizens' Union used the Revival bloc to create an "enemy image" to defuse tension and rally the masses: "A dark force is trying to engulf the country to destroy everything and kindle a civil war; there will be no democracy, or any of the things we have already achieved." This strategy proved to be the right one: the Citizens' Union won by a large margin—41.75 percent of the votes against 25.18 percent cast for the Revival bloc. Industry Will Save Georgia got 7.08 percent. To everyone's amazement, the Labor Party, the winner of the local 1998 elections, did not get into parliament.<sup>3</sup> The National-Democratic Alliance failed to explain to the nation in clear terms what it meant by the third way and offer a clear alternative. The 1999 elections were held as a center/regional opposition even though, according to unofficial information, there was a preliminary agreement between them. The Citizens' Union got even more votes than at the 1995 elections. The Revival bloc (which posed itself as a nationwide opposition structure) was a regional organization which ruled in Ajaria, where it enjoyed the same rights as the Citizens' Union across the country. The victory of the Industrialists simply made their party better known and nothing else, since they could do little in the parliament and were not involved in Georgia's political life.

The Georgian economy and government system were divided among several corrupted clans. As a result of post-Soviet democratization and privatization, the Soviet nomenklatura preserved its control over the government and privatized economic privileges. These people used elections to gain a firmer grip on power by falsifying the election results. The corrupt clan system entirely appropriated the country's resources; then it started redistributing power and money, which ended in the downfall or disintegration of large political forces. In 2001, a group of successful businessmen left the Citizens' Union; later some of them united into the New Right Party, while others (headed by Mikhail Saakashvili) set up the National Movement. On the eve of the local elections of June 2002, the president abandoned his post as chairman of the Citizens' Union, while the remaining groups started a squabble among themselves: accusations of betrayal and ignoring the party's program and principles ran free and wild. After a while, another group known as the Zhvania Team left the Citizens' Union. At the local elections, it ran together with the Christian-Conservative Party (which later became known as the United Democrats).

It should be said that the range of political forces at these elections was fairly wide, while the parties concentrated on social issues, discrediting the ruling party, and revealing its impotence. The parties called on people to be actively involved in political developments. The National Movement selected "Tbilisi without Shevardnadze" as its slogan; the Labor Party called on the nation to "Deprive the Plunderers of Power;" the Christian-Conservative Party (the Zhvania Team) urged the people to "Show Them Your Power." The Citizens' Union offered the rather weak slogan of "We Act at Your Bidding." This time the nation was not easily duped: the people knew that the ruling party had failed to fulfill its promises of 1999. The Revival bloc preferred to juxtapose its interests to the interests of other political forces with the slogan of "While Others Promise—We Act!" The bloc carried little weight in Tbilisi even though it did its best to bury the myth that called it a regional or "Batumi" party. The elections to the Tbilisi municipal structure produced the following results: the Labor Party, 25.50 percent; the National Movement, 23.75 percent; the New Right, 11.36 percent; the Christian-Conservative Party, 7.27 percent; Industry Will Save Georgia, 7.13 percent; and Revival, 6.34 percent.

The opposition gained control over the Tbilisi municipality; Mikhail Saakashvili, the National Movement leader, was elected as its chairman. The ruling Citizens' Union with 2.52 percent did not reach the 5 percent barrier. We can say now that this is when the preparations for the Rose Revolution began. The victors' promises and slogans had nothing to do with city self-administration and the municipality. The fierce struggle could be explained by the fact that the parliamentary and presidential elections were not far away and the parties were preparing themselves for the post-Shevardnadze period. Nobody doubted that the opposition would carry the day at the upcoming parliamentary elections: the Citizens' Union had been completely discredited, while the Revival bloc had lost first the Traditionalists and then the

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<sup>3</sup> Its leader, Sh. Natelashvili, insisted that his party had exceeded the 7 percent barrier; this was confirmed by international organizations.

Socialist Party. In 2003, the latter ran for parliament as part of the governmental For New Georgia bloc. The country's economy and politics were in a crisis; the shadow economy flourished as nowhere else across the post-Soviet expanse; and the share of public revenues in the GNP was the lowest among the post-Soviet states. State structures were obviously inefficient; the public no longer trusted them. The nation, which felt that changes for the better were overdue, demonstrated activity at the parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003. The results did not match the popular mood (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

Table 1

Results of Parliamentary Elections of 2 November, 2003

	Share of Votes (%)	Number of Seats
<b>The For New Georgia bloc</b>	<b>21.32</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>The Revival bloc</b>	<b>18.84</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>The Labor Party</b>	<b>12.04</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The Saakashvili-National Movement bloc</b>	<b>18.08</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>The Burjanadze-Democrats Alliance</b>	<b>8.79</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The New Right Party</b>	<b>7.35</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>The Industry Will Save Georgia Party</b>	<b>6.17</b>	<b>—</b>

To preserve their posts and privileges for four more years, the pro-government For New Georgia bloc<sup>5</sup> did not hesitate to falsify the results on a mass scale and deprived voters in great numbers of their right to vote. This triggered mass protest rallies orchestrated by Mikhail Saakashvili, leader of the National Movement. Shevardnadze had to resign. The events caused by an outburst of public negativity toward the authorities' disdain of its interests are known as the Rose Revolution. It was carried out by unconstitutional methods, but the legal frames were promptly restored. The victors wasted no time: the extraordinary presidential elections that took place on 4 January, 2004 brought victory to the revolution's leader, Saakashvili. He gathered 96 percent of the votes; at the parliamentary elections held on 28 March, 2004 his party, the National Movement, won the majority of seats (see Table 2).<sup>6</sup>

The Rose Revolution radically changed Georgia's political landscape: some of the parties disappeared without a trace; and those which did not get into parliament lost much of their former influence. It should be said that this was due to the revolutionary situation: the members of the pro-government For New Georgia bloc, which claimed the victory at the parliamentary elections of 2003, were more concerned with their personal safety than with anything else. The Revival bloc, the ruling party of Ajaria, shared the fate of the For New Georgia bloc: the National Movement-Democrats toppled Aslan Abashidze's authoritarian regime and evicted him from the country.

Those opposition parties that failed to support the revolution (here I have in mind the Labor Party, the New Right, the Industrialists, the National-Democratic Party, and some others) were dismissed as "enemies of the nation." This cost them popular support at the parliamentary elections. The Labor Party lost more members than the others: they joined the National Movement. The party lost the majority of its

<sup>4</sup> [www.ccc.gov.ge].

<sup>5</sup> The bloc united the following structures: the Citizens' Union, the Socialist Party, the National-Democratic Party, the Green Party, the Christian-Democratic Union, the Party of Liberation of Abkhazia, and supporters of G. Sharadze.

<sup>6</sup> [www.ccc.gov.ge].

Table 2

## Results of Parliamentary Elections of 28 March, 2004

	Share of Votes (%)	Number of Seats
<b>The Labor Party</b>	<b>6.01</b>	
<b>The Right Opposition-The Industrialists, New Right bloc</b>	<b>7.56</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The Revival bloc</b>	<b>3.86</b>	
<b>The National Movement-Democrats</b>	<b>66.24</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>National-Democratic Party-Traditionalists</b>	<b>2.55</b>	

seats in Tbilisi's municipality. At the 2004 parliamentary elections, the rightists closed their ranks (the Right Opposition-the Industrialists bloc and the New Right Party). Their following in the country is small but stable: despite the Rose Revolution, the rightist forces exceeded the 7 percent barrier and gathered practically the same number of votes as before the revolution. Even though the New Right Party was born in 2001, it has managed to acquire a small but loyal electorate. Still, the National Movement-Democrats who launched the Rose Revolution monopolized the country's political expanse. They acquired the constitutional majority in the parliament and are now unilaterally engaged in parliamentary activities. The revolutionary upsurge in Georgia was caused by popular indignation against massive falsifications of the results of the 2003 parliamentary elections, yet it was rooted much deeper in the nation's accumulated discontent with life.

Any revolution breeds euphoria—no wonder the National Movement and its charismatic leader Mikhail Saakashvili, who gave people the hope of a better future, gained the nation's complete confidence in response. It should be said that the 7 percent barrier (which the EU and other international organizations suggested should be lowered to give the opposition a chance) contributed to the National Movement's spectacular victory. Otherwise the legislature might have been politically more varied. The opposition demanded that the elections be postponed to allow the public to sober up. In addition, the election campaign coincided with the export of the Rose Revolution to Ajaria. The de facto break-away republic was returned to the single political expanse, while the public became even more euphoric. We must admit that the National Movement-Democrats had no rivals; the political monopolist owed its victory to the euphoric masses, but this fact interfered with party development in Georgia. P. Chikhradze, one of the New Right leaders, said that the opposition could hardly function with its small and fairly poor supporting mechanisms under conditions in which the parliamentary majority had the entire parliamentary machine at its disposal. Meanwhile, a strong opposition helps to develop healthy democracy.

Still, during the fifteen years of its independence Georgia had acquired a multiparty system, albeit ineffective. All the elections demonstrated that this system could be more correctly called a one-party system in which the nation's majority supported one party. At the early stage, it was the Round Table, which was later replaced by the Citizens' Union and then by the National Movement-Democrats. The victors were rightly proud of the results, yet, after a while when the election promises remained unfulfilled and democratic principles ignored, they started working against the victors. As a result, power was changed in a violent and non-constitutional way. The Round Table was the first victim, falling apart after twelve months. The same fate befell the Citizens' Union, which had managed to remain afloat for ten years. The current parliamentary majority, which assumed huge responsibilities during the Rose Revolution, should never forget this, otherwise the unstable electorate with its unstable sympathies will deprive

the victors of its support. If this happens, the National Movement-Democrats bloc will face a similar threat. Let me remind you that the leaders of the ruling parties always obtained a huge share of votes: Z. Gamsakhurdia, 87 percent, and E. Shevardnadze, 79.82 percent. Mikhail Saakashvili gathered even more—96 percent. This means that at a certain turning point Georgian society identifies the chance of remedying the situation with one charismatic leader and pins its hopes of future prosperity on him. In other words, the political culture of the poorly structured electorate is still very low, while democratic institutions and political parties are still weak.

An analysis of the development of the party system in Georgia has identified certain problems which are preventing our country from acquiring political organizations of the Western type. Many of the parties claiming their loyalty to democracy still rely on their leaders, and not on the principle of collective leadership. These parties lack inner democracy: their leaders personally pass all the decisions. This breeds inner conflicts which might end in a split or even in the party's death.

This process creates more parties, on the one hand, while it interferes with their consolidating and functioning, on the other. Some of the parties are small, poorly organized, and poorly structured; they lack the necessary mechanisms, they have no stable following; and they cannot set up local branches. Certain parties do not have enough money to pay for efficient organizational efforts, either during election campaigns, or between them.

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It is interesting to know what leaders of political parties think about the current political processes and the future of the weak opposition. Indeed, does it intend to pool its forces, or will its structures continue functioning separately? For example, P. Chikhradze, one of the leaders of the New Right, has pointed out: "A strong opposition is a well-known postulate of democracy. It is needed for healthy competition. When a democratic majority unilaterally passes all decisions, opposition parties find it hard to function. Today, it is our main task to demonstrate to society that there are opinions different from those supported by the majority of that type and to convince the public that a variety of opinions is needed. As for pooling all the opposition forces, I can say that continued alliance with the Industrialists is our main task. We want to unite our parties because our electorate is too weak to be divided between several parties."<sup>7</sup>

Here is what K. Davitashvili, one of the founders and leaders of the National Movement who left it after the Rose Revolution, along with some of his colleagues, to create the United Conservatives Party, said in particular: "The fact that one party has more seats in parliament than the constitutional majority cannot be described as a positive phenomenon. In fact, the Constitution is being adjusted to accommodate these people and their political views. The opposition should be strengthened at the expense of this majority, since its two-thirds' predominance undermines the very much-needed balance, while parliament may make wrong decisions... So we left the party and will continue defending the ideas for the sake of which we united into the National Movement. The United Conservatives is a political structure in which broad competition is allowed. If any political force wishes to cooperate with us, we will invite it to join us, because we are convinced that different opinions strengthen a party, not destroy it. We are prepared to cooperate with any political force that shares our principles."<sup>8</sup>

The Labor Party, which lost the parliamentary elections, is one of the most radical opposition members. Its leader, Sh. Natelashvili, pointed out: "I cannot say that the opposition is weak. We are a powerful force. This was confirmed during my recent visit to the United States. Yet the victorious party did not allow us into parliament. There are two solutions: either hold early parliamentary elections, or begin a real revolution, from which we are not prepared to retreat. And this could mean an unpleasant outcome."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> An interview of 12 January, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> An interview of 30 December, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> An interview of 13 January, 2005.

### *C o n c l u s i o n*

The above suggests that Georgia has not yet acquired a stable political system. Much has been done in the past 10 to 15 years, but it takes a lot longer to embrace democratic values. Elections cannot yet fulfill their main function: recruiting the political elite and ensuring a peaceful transition of power. Therefore, the state should help political parties develop and improve the legal base, on the one hand, and all political forces should be given equal opportunities to function, on the other. This will create healthy competition among them.

Georgia will acquire party democracy and a multiparty system when all the above difficulties are overcome. The very word "multiparty" does not mean there will be an unlimited number of parties. Even two parties can create good prospects. They should be structures of the Western type, which means that they should obey inner party democracy and protect society's real interests.