

The political realities of “democratic” Georgia

By Tom Eley
18 August 2008

One of the constant themes in the US government and media presentation of the conflict in the Caucasus is the depiction of Georgia as a bastion of democracy. The Bush administration has increasingly invoked the terminology of the Cold War by referring to “democratic Georgia” as a symbol of the “free world” and its struggle against authoritarian Russia.

The reality of political life in Georgia is far different than the media image.

Only last November, in the midst of mounting protests against his regime, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili employed dictatorial methods against his opponents. On November 2, opposition demonstrations began in Tbilisi, demanding democratic reforms and the ouster of Saakashvili. These protests, while organized by billionaire media tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, gave vent to grievances against government repression and the desperate living conditions of the population. They attracted tens of thousands to the streets of Georgia’s capital city.

The demonstrations continued until November 7, when the state police, acting on orders from Saakashvili, used tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons and truncheons to disperse the protesters. More than 600 required medical attention after the crackdown. On the same day, Special Forces raided Patarkatsishvili’s broadcasting corporation Imeldi, beating journalists and disabling equipment.

Saakashvili declared a state of emergency, suspending democratic rights such as freedom of expression and assembly. Independent broadcasting was halted even before the state of emergency was declared, and only the state-controlled television station was allowed to broadcast for a period of fifteen days. Imeldi was taken off the air indefinitely.

During the crackdown, Saakashvili called for snap elections to be held less than two months later, on January 5. The elections, held under conditions of political intimidation and repression, placed the opposition at an enormous disadvantage.

All media were under the de facto control of Saakashvili. In addition, two opposition leaders, Konstantin Gamsakhurdia and Shalva Natelashvili, were declared “wanted for treason.” The government accused them of conspiring with Russia to overthrow the government.

Patarkatsishvili, who likewise faced a government

investigation for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government, began his campaign from Israel. He withdrew from the elections after the government released a recording of him attempting to bribe a police officer.

Patarkatsishvili died suddenly last February in London at the age of 52. Authorities attributed the death to a massive heart attack, but Patarkatsishvili believed the Georgian authorities were targeting him for assassination.

The early elections eliminated two other serious rivals for the presidency—former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili and lawyer Tinatin Khidasheli—both of whom were just shy of 35 years of age, the minimum, at the time of the vote.

Okruashvili fled the country shortly after the crackdown in what ABC News called “mysterious circumstances.” He had accused Saakashvili of corruption, but after being placed under arrest he was apparently forced to retract the allegations.

During the campaign, election observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported that the credibility of the election had been placed in doubt by allegations that Saakashvili had used state money, blackmail and vote-buying. With rivals under arrest, under police investigation, in exile or legally barred from running for office, it is little surprise that Saakashvili won reelection. After his victory, the opposition claimed that the vote had been manipulated. His vote total surpassed by 20 percent that which had been projected by an opinion poll released one week earlier.

The Saakashvili regime faced international criticism from foreign capitals and human rights organizations for its assumption of dictatorial powers. Though the level of repression Saakashvili employed exceeded the measures that had been taken by his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, against the so-called “Rose Revolution” that brought Saakashvili to power in early 2004, criticism from the United States was much more muted.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew J. Bryza, a close ally and personal friend of the US-educated Saakashvili, acknowledged that the State Department was “hearing more and more reports that people were grabbed from stores or that passers-by were beaten,” but concluded merely that “Things got out of control.”

NATO head Jaap de Hoop Scheffer responded with little more than a wrist slap against the Georgian government, which was seeking NATO membership. He limited himself to the observation that “the imposition of emergency rule and the closure of media outlets” were not in line with “Euro-Atlantic values.”

In fact, the “excesses” of Saakashvili in putting down peaceful protests were not mere aberrations. The US State Department, in its 2008 “Country Reports in Human Rights,” listed the following in relation to the Georgian government: “at least one reported death due to excessive use of force by law enforcement officers, cases of torture and mistreatment of detainees, abuse of prisoners, excessive use of force to disperse demonstrations, poor conditions in prisons and pretrial detention facilities, impunity of police officers, continued overuse of pretrial detention for less serious offenses, lack of access for average citizens to defense attorneys, lack of due process in some cases, and reports of government pressure on the judiciary.”

The report went on to state: “Respect for freedom of speech, the press, assembly and political participation worsened, especially during the fall crisis. Other problems included reports of government pressure on the judiciary and the media, restrictions on freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, and corruption among senior-level officials. Despite government efforts, trafficking-in-persons continued to occur.”

The so-called “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004-2005) did not represent the spontaneous will of the masses. They were political coups orchestrated from Washington, with the aide of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) subsidized by the US government and private foundations.

Chief among the NGOs involved in Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” was the Liberty Institute, which was funded by the United States Agency for International Development’s Eurasia Foundation as well as billionaire financier George Soros’s Open Society Institute. The Liberty Institute’s co-founder, Giga Bokeria, took a Soros Foundation-funded tour of Serbia in February 2002 to learn how the Otpor, or “Resistance,” student opposition had ousted Slobodan Milosevic following a disputed election in the autumn of 2000.

Another US government outfit involved in the ouster of Shevardnadze was the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a center of international intrigue and subversion set up under the Reagan administration and relying heavily on the services of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. The Democratic Party wing of the NED, known as the National Democratic Institute, in the words of *Wall Street Journal* columnist George Melloan, “helped introduce Mr. Saakashvili to the methods insurgents in Serbia used to depose dictator Slobodan Milosevic.”

Saakashvili’s reelection last January was based politically on an appeal to rabid Georgian nationalism. The central plank of

his campaign was a pledge to restore Tbilisi’s authority over the pro-Russian breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They had established de facto independence as a result of bloody fighting with Georgian government forces that followed the revocation in March 1991 of the autonomy guaranteed them under the Soviet constitution.

Within months of his reelection, Saakashvili was assuming unprecedented powers in what the *Manila Times* called “a distinctly undemocratic one-party state.”

Saakashvili is the representative of one faction of the Georgian ruling elite. Including in its ranks former officials of the old Stalinist regime, the new financial oligarchy emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union, amassing its wealth by plundering the formerly nationalized economy.

In contrast to Western tributes to the economic growth and modernization of Georgia under Saakashvili, his government oversees a miserably poor and highly polarized society. Formerly one of the wealthiest Soviet republics, in 2007 Georgia ranked 108th in the world in per capita gross domestic product (GDP), below countries like Bhutan, Ecuador and Guatemala. Its GDP ranks 114th in the world, below that of Equatorial Guinea.

If it were a US state, Georgia’s GDP would rank at the bottom, equaling about one-third of Vermont’s. The official unemployment rate in Georgia stands at nearly 13 percent. More than one half of the population lives below the official poverty level. Over one quarter lives on less than \$2 per day. Last year the average monthly pension was \$30.

But Saakashvili’s pro-Western, “free market” economic policies have fostered the growth of a small but growing wealthy elite. Georgia earned the World Bank’s 2008 designation as “the number one economic reformer in the world” because it improved in one year from 112th to 18th in creating what is euphemistically called “a friendly business environment.”

What this means in practice is the scrapping of all regulations and encumbrances limiting the exploitation of the working class and the accumulation of personal wealth by a rapacious financial elite. In 2004, Saakashvili’s first year in power, his government abolished the progressive income tax and replaced it with a 12 percent flat tax.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>