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Georgia's Vote Shows Democracy in Action

By Paul Rimple

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In 2003, Georgia rose up and nonviolently deposed President Eduard Shevardnandze under a common banner of "no more corruption." People thought that with Shevardnadze gone, Georgia would be like Switzerland overnight. But people soon found out that it just doesn't work like that.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili understood. He made the same assumption in 1990 when communism began to crumble. This explains why Saakashvili and his United National Movement party have moved so remarkably fast to rebuild the country. He knows how impatient Georgians are.

To achieve these lightning-quick feats, the United National Movement has had to trample on many of the democratic principles that were its calling card to power. The message has been: "You are either for progress or against it." It really means: "You are with us or against us," with "against us" meaning "for Russia."

During these past eight years of impressive commercial development, opposition movements have come and gone. Regardless of whether they dissipated naturally or by means of the police baton, their major weaknesses were a lack of understanding of the democratic process. While the people have a right to demand the president's resignation, they forgot they had voted for him. You can't go around deposing every president who angers you. Let him finish his term. Then vote him out.

"But this is not a democracy," people say. "He'll steal the elections."

While democracy is a process, in the former Soviet space it's also an experiment. To make it work, you have to keep plugging away. The incumbent may steal the election today, but it may not be so easy next time if you keep the pressure on.

In January 2008, Saakashvili won snap presidential elections with a mere 53 percent of the vote. Before last week's prison abuse scandal, the United National Movement had popular support of 37 percent. Thus, slightly more than one-third of the population supports the regime.

When billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili announced his bid to challenge the ruling party last year, the United National Movement used its huge resources to thwart the opposition. But Ivanishvili has $6.4 billion, which has leveled out political playing field.

Sadly, Georgian elections have never been about policies, but personalities. What is different is that Georgians have participated in elections with an unpredictable outcome. The victory for the opposition Georgia Dream coalition in Monday's parliamentary elections show democracy in action. And that is progress.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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