

Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

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Assassination attempt casts shadow over Armenian election.

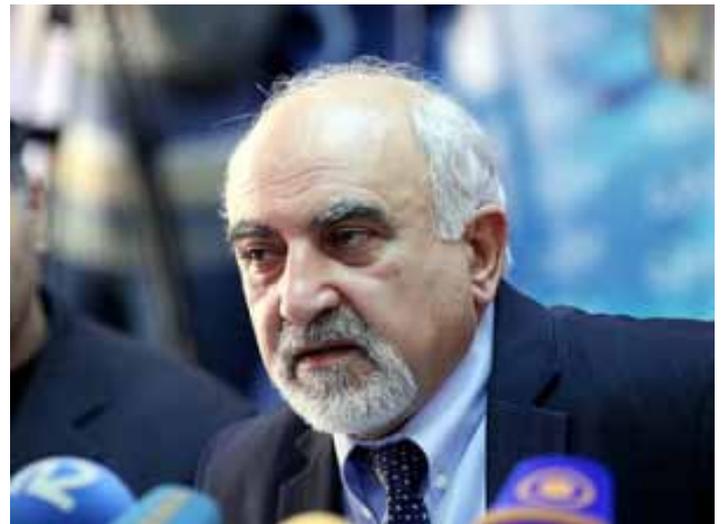
On Friday evening, 1 February a gunmen shot and wounded Armenian Presidential candidate Paruyr Hayrikyan casting a shadow on what had so far been a lacklustre election campaign. Hayrikyan is not one of the front runners in the campaign, but is a respected and recognised figure in Armenian society. He was a dissident in Soviet times and served time in prison for his political views. Hayrikyan was operated on the following day and a bullet removed from his shoulder and is now recovering satisfactorily.

The assassination attempt however reminded Armenians of the level of violence in their political life in recent years. In October 1999 several senior members of the Armenian government were killed in cold blood in an incident inside the Armenian Parliament. They included the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament.

In 2008 eleven people died in incidents on the streets of Yerevan as protestors questioned the results of the last Presidential election which brought the current incumbent Serzh Sargsyan to power.

Such violence in a country of such a small size and which is mono-ethnic is unprecedented and has left the Armenian body politic scarred. Big questions remain around both the 1999 incident in the Armenian parliament and the 2008 street protests, and the assassination attempt against Hayrikyan is likely to be added to the list adding to speculation of sinister forces at work.

Up to this point pro government politicians had been going to great lengths to project the election as business as usual despite the fact that a number of major political forces have distanced themselves from it. The assassination attempt however opened up a series of questions about the state of Armenian politics, and where it was heading, and about forces at work behind the scenes. Many young Armenians are also completely disillusioned by politics and refuse to be engaged with it. Since coming to power in 2008 Serzh Sargsyan has tried to deal with some of the issues, including the role of quasi criminal business interests in the political process, but critics say that too little was done too late and that a more thorough clean sweep was necessary.



Armenian Presidential candidate Paruyr Hayrikyan, whilst considered an outsider in the Presidential election contest, is a respected and recognised personality in Armenia due to his past as a dissident in Soviet times. The attempt on his life cast a shadow over what had so far been a lacklustre campaign.

Some of the candidates in the election announced that they were suspending their campaigning until Hayrikyan is able to return to his campaign. Candidates, including the incumbent president visited Hayrikyan in hospital and all political forces condemned the attack describing it as an attack against Armenia and its institutions. There is some speculation that the election may have to be postponed by two weeks because of the incident. This will happen if Hayrikyan petitions the constitutional court and if the court agrees.

The incident was an unwelcome development for President Sargsyan who is keen for a proper election process to re-enforce his legitimacy. Western governments and international organisations issued statements condemning the attack and calling on all Armenian political forces to continue operating within the constitutional order. ■

CEW staff team with local media.

Caucasus Elections Watch is a specialised weekly publication focusing on elections related processes in the Caucasus, with news and analysis compiled by experts with long experience of the region.

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Another prominent activist in Azerbaijan detained.

Prominent Azerbaijani activist, Ilgar Mammedov was arrested in Baku on Monday, (4 February) and charged with instigating unrest in the town of Ismaili. During several days of rioting in Ismaili in January a hotel and several cars were burnt by angry crowds protesting against corruption by local officials.

Ilgar Mammedov is Chairman of the Real Alternative, Movement for Social Change.

It is not yet clear how Mammedov has been implicated in the affair. Ilgar Mammedov is a

well known activist, considered cautious and considerate in his criticism. Writing on her facebook page, prominent female activist Khadija Ismailova said that "his arrest is a signal to those who think there is a safe of doing opposition politics. There is no safe way."

The arrest of Mammedov is considered as a sign that the Azerbaijani government is upping the stakes in its "cat and mouse" game with opposition forces ahead of presidential elections in October. ■

Source: CEW Staff



Ilgar Mammedov being detained in Baku on 4 February 2013.

Georgia marks the eight anniversary of the death of Zurab Zhvania - father of the modern Georgian Parliament.

Dennis Sammut looks back at the life of one of the most outstanding politicians in the Caucasus in modern times.

On Sunday, 3rd February Georgia marked the 8th anniversary of the death in mysterious circumstances of Zurab Zhvania, a liberal and progressive politician who is best remembered for his work to establish the Georgian parliament as a credible and model institution, in the mid-1990s.

Zhvania started his political career as an environmental activist in the last years of the Soviet Union, and in the years of perestroika set up the Green Party of Georgia which became a focal point for many similarly minded young Georgian intellectuals. In 1992 he was appointed a member of the State Council, a body that had been created after the end of the 1991-2 civil war. Zhvania became an ally of Edward Shevardnadze after the latter returned from Moscow to head the State Council and lead Georgia out of the chaos in which it had found itself. In 1993 he became the head of the Citizens Union of Georgia, a broad based political force which aimed to support Shevardnadze's endeavours for reform and stability.

In November 1995 Zhvania was elected Chairman of the Georgian parliament. In a very short period of time he managed to introduce a parliamentary tradition in the post-Soviet country, justifiably earning for himself the title of father of the modern Georgian Parliament. He steered Georgia's membership to the Council of Europe, which it joined in 1999, well ahead of its neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Georgian Parliament in this period was considered a model not only for other post-Soviet countries but for parliaments in other transition countries far beyond. He was well respected in European and North American political circles, as well as in the region for his visionary ideas that combined with astute pragmatism. His belief in Georgia's European vocation was never at the exclusion of its Caucasian roots.

Zhvania was however well ahead of his times, and in 2001 was forced to resign under pressure from corrupt elements within the Citizens Union and young nationalist elements who considered his path to reform as too slow. The latter formed the nucleus that was later to become the United National Movement.



Zurab Zhvania, an outstanding Georgian and Caucasian politician.

Zhvania was a reluctant participant in the 2003 Rose Revolution. He did not believe in revolution and would have preferred a different approach to bringing change to Georgia. He however risked being completely marginalised, and in the aftermath of the flawed 2003 elections joined forces with Mikheil Saakashvili to bring down the ailing government of Edward Shevardnadze. He was appointed Prime Minister of the new government in 2004. Many looked at him as a restraining force in a government full impulsive and radical members.

On 3 February 2005 his body was found in a flat in one of the suburbs of Tbilisi. The official version of events states that he died from a defective electric heater, but many Georgians and others outside refuse to believe this, and claim that he was murdered. Zhvania's brother Gogla, who is now a Member of Parliament in Bidzhina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition has led an effort to re-open the investigation. The coalition is committed to a full review of the case, and the process is currently on going.

Prime Minister Ivanishvili in a statement on the anniversary of Zhvania's death described it as a great loss for the young Georgian democracy and promised to give his family and Georgian society the truth about the case. Many feel that it is necessary to bring this matter to a closure, so that in future the anniversary will no longer be an occasion for speculation about the circumstances of Zurab Zhvania's death, but will become an opportunity to celebrate the life of one of the most outstanding Georgian and Caucasian politicians of modern times. ■

Dennis Sammut contributed this commentary to CEW

ODIHR flags up changes in constituency boundaries in Georgia as a priority.

ODIHR Director Janez Lenarcic met in Warsaw last week with Maia Panjikidze, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, at ODIHR Headquarters. During the meeting issues related to the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election monitoring mission for the 2012 Parliamentary Elections were discussed. ODIHR issued the final report of the Mission on 21 December. The report is largely technical and in some instances avoids dealing directly with some of the more difficult issues that overshadowed the 1 October elections in Georgia.

The report however lists 26 recommendations, some of which it suggests to be implemented prior to the Autumn Presidential elections, and more long term calls for a comprehensive review of all electoral laws, and of the regulations concerning campaign funding.

The first priority recommendation in the report states:

“The OSCE/ODIHR reiterates its long-standing recommendation to address the disparity of the population size in the single mandate constituencies for parliamentary elections.”

This issue could very easily have thrown Georgia into political chaos last October had the election victory of the Georgian Dream coalition not been so decisive. A scenario whereby President Saakashvili’s United National Movement would win the majority of seats in Parliament despite losing the overall popular vote looked increasingly possible as the election campaign progressed. In a controversial appearance on television a few days before election day the Head of the European Union delegation Philip Dimitrov referred directly to this possibility, and insisted that if this happened the result had to be accepted. Many were critical that the EU had not pushed for this anomaly to be corrected despite it being known for a long time. By flagging the issue up so prominently in its final report ODIHR is trying to ensure that this problem does not recur. At the moment there is no provision for ensuring that boundaries of constituencies are revised to ensure that disparity in the number of voters in different constituencies remains within bounds.

The final OSCE/ODIHR report gives an overall positive picture of the election. It states.

“The 1 October parliamentary elections marked an important step in consolidating the conduct of democratic elections in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, although certain key issues remain to be addressed. The elections were competitive with active citizen participation throughout the campaign, including in peaceful mass rallies. The environment, however, was polarized and tense, characterized by the frequent use of harsh rhetoric and a few instances of violence. The campaign often centred on the advantages of incumbency, on the one hand, and private financial assets, on the other, rather than on concrete political platforms and programs.



Janez Lenarcic meeting Maia Panjikidze in Warsaw on 29 January 2013.

While freedoms of association, assembly and expression were respected overall, instances of harassment and intimidation of party activists and supporters marred the campaign and often ended with detentions or fines of mostly opposition-affiliated campaigners, contributing to an atmosphere of distrust among contestants. The distinction between state activities and the campaign of the ruling party was at times blurred, at odds with the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document.”

A team from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) visited Tbilisi from 29 to 31 January 2013 to present the final report to different stakeholders.

The report’s findings were discussed at a roundtable meeting in Tbilisi jointly organized by ODIHR and the United Nations Development Programme, with support from the European Union. The event brought together representatives from the Georgian authorities, political parties and international and local organizations, as well as from the diplomatic community.

The ODIHR team also met separately with representatives of state authorities, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders to discuss the report’s recommendations aimed at ensuring that election-related legislation and practice are more in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards. ■

Source: CEW with additional material from the OSCE website