

**Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia:
Elections and Democratic Development in the Caucasus**

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Chairman Smith, Co-chairman Cardin, other distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for inviting Freedom House to testify at today's briefing and for the opportunity to provide comments on the elections process and democratic development in the Caucasus.

I would like to share brief observations on the relative performance of these three countries from Freedom House findings as it relates to free and fair elections – and then conclude with thoughts on the regional and international implications of the countries' democratic trajectories.

First, I would note that Azerbaijan performs among the poorest on the relevant Freedom House indicators and despite its already deeply repressive governance, has been trending in an even more repressive direction in recent years.

Armenia performs not as badly as Azerbaijan but nevertheless is consistently ranked Not Free in our evaluations of political rights and media freedoms. The country continues to confront a system in which the marriage of politics and business undermines reforms that could result in greater accountability and transparency.

Georgia, by contrast, is in our assessments a middle performer and is ranked Partly Free in *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom of the Press*. With more forward looking, inclusive policies by Georgia's political elites and an effort by other societal actors to create more democratic political space, one can envision in the foreseeable future a Georgia that performs demonstrably better on Freedom House's indicators than today. Conversely, policies that do not open greater space for opposition, media and civil society will result in performance closer to the region's consolidated authoritarian regimes.

Azerbaijan

The election process has been severely flawed in Azerbaijan since the country achieved its independence two decades ago. Problematically, the encroachments on electoral independence and critical supporting institutions for the elections process have intensified and become more systematic in recent years.

The most recent set of elections -- the October 2008 presidential election, the March 2009 referendum, December 2009 municipal elections, and November 2010 parliamentary elections -- have unambiguously shown that citizens in Azerbaijan have no meaningful ability to achieve a rotation of power among authentically diverse political forces.

Recent elections have been marred by an extensive list of irregularities, including the widespread use of administrative resources by the ruling party for campaign purposes, voter intimidation, harassment of the opposition, and reports of vote buying. Election day violations often include ballot stuffing, so-called "carousel voting," and systematic problems with voter lists. Impediments to election observation and monitoring, as well as marred vote tabulation, are also consistent features of the election process in Azerbaijan.

In this regard, it is important to note that the specific problems of electoral process and administration cannot be viewed in a vacuum.

Azerbaijan's overall electoral environment is crippled by systematic restrictions on political participation, a lack of political competition, and the suppression of virtually any meaningful open public debate; in this regard, a word on media freedom, which is also integral to the election process. Azerbaijan is rated Not Free in Freedom House's annual assessment of press freedom and, here, too, has been getting progressively worse in recent years. State broadcast media, which is effectively controlled by the authorities and represents the medium through which the majority of Azeris obtain their news and information, provides no meaningful scrutiny of the incumbent authorities, or alternative to its perspective or policies.

I would note that this reality makes it all the more curious that Azerbaijan is hosting the Eurovision Song Contest that begins today – as well as the Internet Governance Forum this November.

But the case of Azerbaijan is sadly part of a wider pattern in which countries with abysmal records on democratic practice, human rights and corruption are able to enjoy the privilege and prestige of hosting these events: in addition to Azerbaijan, Russia will be holding the winter Olympics in 2014; that same year Belarus is scheduled to host the European Ice Hockey Championships; and next month Viktor Yanukovich's Ukraine co-hosts the European Soccer Championship. This might represent a worthwhile briefing topic at a point in the future.

Armenia

Cory Welt is going to go into some detail on developments in Armenia, so I will simply say that the country's overall performance on democratic accountability generally and elections specifically has been poor and has stagnated in our assessments, despite repeated pledges of reform by the authorities.

Freedom House analysis finds that Armenia is not an electoral democracy. The 2008 presidential election was seriously undermined by problems with the vote count, a biased and restricted media environment, and the abuse of administrative resources in favor of ruling party candidate Serzh Sarkisian. The Yerevan municipal elections held in May 2009 also suffered from significant violations, though international observers claimed that the fraud did not jeopardize the overall legitimacy of the results. In 2011, local elections were held in several districts, but the polls were boycotted by the opposition and not observed by international monitors.

Armenia's reform ambitions are hampered by the deep relationship between politics and business, which has the effect of preventing reforms that could result in greater accountability and transparency.

Georgia

Unlike Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia has consistently been rated as a middle performer in key Freedom House assessments. The system in Georgia affords some but not all of the

institutional safeguards and accountability that Freedom House examines. It also means that unlike the deeply repressive regimes that predominate in the region, Georgia's middle position still holds promise for more meaningful reform, if the right steps are taken.

In Georgia's case, its parliamentary elections in October 2012 and presidential election in October 2013 present a test but also offer an important opportunity to move from the ranks of middle performer to a more clearly democratic performer. In the coming period it will be crucially important for the opposition in Georgia to develop more effective and mature political platforms. Mikheil Saakashvili is constitutionally barred from running for a third presidential term, but he has not yet ruled out becoming prime minister.

Conclusion

I would emphasize the point that the election process in these countries cannot be divorced from the wider context of democratic accountability. The greater the space for free media, civil society, independent courts, the greater the opportunity for elections to flourish. Conversely, in settings where these supporting institutions are systematically repressed, it is virtually impossible to have an open, competitive and legitimate election outcome.

In broader terms, I would conclude with the following observations on the importance of continuing the effort of encouraging and supporting democratically accountability in the Caucasus and wider region.

- Encouraging and supporting democratically accountable systems is essential. Authoritarian systems do not ensure stability. Instead, they steadily erode the independent institutions and safeguards that guarantee basic justice; ensure government integrity, and responsiveness; and provide for regular, peaceful transfers of power. If the uprisings of the Arab Spring have taught us nothing else, it is that authoritarians that seek to prolong their stays after the point their citizens signal a desire for change, more instability is sure to follow. This reality has significant implications for Azerbaijan, Armenia and the other consolidated authoritarian regimes in Eurasia.
- To the extent the leadership of the countries are intent on pursuing more repressive, less inclusive policies, they steadily raise the degree of risk. It is becoming clearer that the authoritarian regimes of Eurasia, which suppress legitimate opposition, obstruct the development of civil society, and otherwise monopolize political and economic life, are vulnerable to some of the same forces currently shaking the Middle East and North Africa. Policymakers in the United States and Europe should acknowledge these developments and devise policies that can effectively support democratic accountability there.

Thank you again for this invitation and opportunity to share these observations.