
In Armenia Crisis, Georgians See Echoes Of Own Political Turmoil

By Eter Tsotniashvili
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As Georgians watched reports of Yerevan's deadly March 1 crackdown on opposition supporters, many saw similarities to Tbilisi's own recent political unrest.

Now Armenia's streets are calm, the ongoing state of emergency there marked only by armed soldiers and state-controlled newscasts, but Georgians continue to muse over what many see as a crisis paralleling politics here.

In Tbilisi, authorities also came down violently-but with non-lethal force-on anti-government demonstrators on November 7. And Armenia's February 19 presidential election, Georgians widely remark, bore many similarities to the January 5 presidential election here: accusations of vote rigging; similar vote percentages for the winners and the main opposition contenders; and opposition criticism of foreign election observers.

Georgian authorities held up the OSCE verdict of an election which was "in essence" democratic to counter claims of vote fraud, while an OSCE observer team judged the Armenian election "mostly in line" with democratic standards. In both cases, opposition leaders decried the OSCE's initial findings.

And in both Yerevan and Tbilisi, the elections were followed by massive public protest, as tens of thousands turned out to demand a recount or a runoff poll. But the post-election Georgian demonstrations tapered off peacefully, in a contrast to the Armenian violence which, hardliner opposition politicians warn, is far from a given.

"There was massive vote fraud [in Armenia] as there was here, and this caused people to come into the streets in protest," Conservative MP and opposition coalition member Zviad Dzidziguri said, warning that Tbilisi could experience the same violence as Yerevan if the spring parliamentary elections are seen as rigged.

Labor member Soso Shatberashvili said Georgian politicians should get the credit for keep a lid on post-election demonstrations in Tbilisi.

"We have a better political culture; we opposition leaders always appealed to our people to solve problems peacefully, and managed to avoid some serious confrontations," Shatberashvili said, before echoing Dzidziguri's warning of possible clashes in Tbilisi after the parliamentary elections.

Government officials acknowledge that Georgia faces the same dangers as its neighbor.

"It was very hard for everyone to watch what was happening there [in Yerevan]," Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze said. "Only God and concrete steps taken in Georgia saved us from something similar. I hope the Armenian people and the authorities overcome the crisis as soon as possible."

Ethnic Armenians living in Tbilisi gathered in front of the European Commission office last week to ask for more EU involvement in the Armenian crisis.

"[In Yerevan], they cracked down on the rally not just with water and gas but with real bullets, and because of this people died," said Mariam Mikoiani, head of the Georgian Armenian Union.
