

The change of the government and its echo in the periphery: local political elites in Georgia

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By 2013 independent Georgia has seen three full political transition cycles and in October 2012 in a landmark case it saw its first electoral regime change. While the (world) political implications are hard to overstate the case is of a theoretical and perhaps comparative importance internally and regionally as well. The local power groups in Georgian regions were caught off guard by the change and have reacted in various ways to the election results. Our initial question therefore was concerned with the initial knee-jerk reactions and the subsequent regional political processes: how does such type of change in the centre, first of its kind, ripple in the Georgian periphery? Second, through this reaction we set off to look at a broader question of peripheral politics and trying to pin it theoretically: can we speak of neopatrimonial structures in Georgia against the backdrop of the oft spoken about “democratization” paradigm? We attempted to look at case of one Georgian municipality to demonstrate the endurance of the patron-clientelistic relationship. The present article argues that neopatrimonial paradigm in Georgian case can be considered.

Introduction

In post-soviet domain concept of neopatrimonialism, while entertained (Fisun 2012; Robinson 2013), has been used as an alternative to a more widespread (especially apropos Georgia) democratization studies framework. The number of studies with a neopatrimonial angle, is small; the reasons of its persistence in Georgia are understudied.

Neopatrimonialism concept was surprisingly relatively often used in a research on regional politics in Georgia. Social and political life in Georgian periphery is often characterized as neopatrimonial (Wheatley 2005; Kikabidze and Losaberidze 2000). Such a characterization applies both to period before Rose Revolution (Shubitidze 2008) and to Saakashvili rule (Timm 2010). Since characteristics of neopatrimonial rule could vary depending on local context even in different regions of same country (Theobald 1984) empirical study of cases of neopatrimonialism in different regions and times particularly valuable for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Relation between democracy and neopatrimonialism is particularly important area of research (Erdman and Engel 2005). Contrary to the assertion of neo-Weberian school, it was argued that further democratization may not eventually break down neopatrimonial rule, which will sustain through facilitation of the provision of a framework for management of inter-elite struggles (Khan 2005) October 2012 elections in Georgia was regarded as important moment for democratization in country (Jones 2012). For the first time in history of Georgia, power was changed by means of democratic procedure. Such change of government in the center put local clients of central groups into a particularly vulnerable position: some have simply changed allegiance while others were ousted. Almost all major figures of local government were replaced and majority of local councilors switched their sides from old to new ruling party (Lomjaria 2012) In some cases these changes were more intricate and the drift toward the allegiance from the old central ruling power – Saakashvili’s United National Movement to the new – Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream coalition has been more gradual and therefore less flashy. We

sought to analyze a case where the local forces were visibly comparable force to the central ones. The municipality in question, Amereti¹ in Eastern Georgia was ideally placed: together with the replacement of head of local administration, chairman of local council stayed in the office; Furthermore, majoritarian MP from this municipality left United National Movement and publicly announced support for new ruling coalition². All this facts persuaded that certain agreement between local elite factions and central government could have taken place. Thus, Amereti municipality was considered as a suitable place for empirical study of influence of democratic elections on configuration of neopatrimonial rule on Georgia's periphery.

Amereti municipality

Amereti is municipality located in eastern part of Georgia. Notably, only 14% of the residents (7,000 out of about 50,000) in the municipality live in municipal center of Amereti (GeoStat data). Some villages in municipality are bigger than municipal center. Due to the good climate and abundance of water resources Amereti has one of the most productive agriculture in eastern Georgia. Like in most eastern Georgia there is little industry to speak of as all the factories (notably tobacco production) operating in municipality before independence were closed down in post-soviet period and almost all economic activity is focused on land. There are several relatively big land owners in municipality, with land plots ranging from 150 to 500 hectare. They are mostly running a big agricultural enterprise, although in some cases land is given for rent to small farmers.

Importantly, population of municipality is formed as a result of migration from Western parts of Georgia in late 19th and early 20th centuries due to short-landedness. It has been inferred by our respondent that this fact is an explanation of extraordinary importance of kinship ties in local community life. An ethnic Azeri minority is one-fourth of population, concentrated in a cluster of four villages.

The purpose of our case study was to understand influence of democratic elections on distribution of power in Amereti municipality before and after 2012 elections (May 2012 to May 2013). We were interested in what was the role of informal power relations during election campaign, what kind of groups were challenging power of local and central authorities in municipality and what were the consequences of government change on power configuration inside municipality. Our main question was – What was a role (if any) of informal structures in this political processes? These questions were further divided into following subquestions:

- What was the relationship inside local elite(s)?
- What were relations between local elites and the center?
- What groups were competing with local elites for power during that period?
- What were strategies used to neutralize competitors?
- What kind of links between local elites and community were enacted in this period?
- What were the processes going in local branches of political parties?

¹ This name is fictional, along with any other local toponyms or personal names

Methodology

The main methods of the research was interviews with local actors – former and current local politicians of all kinds, local pundits, NGOs, media and some “knowledgeable” people in the municipality.

Generally undertaking this kind of politically sensitive research on a hot topic clearly depends on the level of rapport with the local political actors as well as familiarity with the details of local political life.

Sensitivity of the issue of informal relations was one of the main problems for our research. This issue was especially sensitive in the context of small town with population of around 7000, therefore tight networks are primarily responsible for sustaining material and psychological well being of its members. From the very beginning we understood that it will be very difficult to find informants who would speak openly on topics related to our research. Our experience in confirmed that our initial concerns were valid. There was a quite good understanding among participants of what kind of behavior and attitudes can be considered appropriate from the point of view of legal – rational domination. As a result, they were confident in balancing their responses.

Social profile of our participants clearly had an influence on our findings. These were representatives of civil society, political activists and journalists were focusing mostly on informal, extra-legal characteristics of local elite’s behavior. On the contrary, representatives of elites were stressing on legality of conduct. Consequently, it was difficult to identify real balance between those two dimensions /sides of municipality’s political and social life.

One of the problems researchers confront during a study was a scarcity of sources. It was connected with sensitiveness of topic of research as well as with absence of developed public life in Amereti. Local radio station and local TV are only independent media sources. Newspapers are absent and there is only one NGO working on regular basis in municipality. This was one reason we relied basically on interviews, although records of radio programs, data from public registry and public declarations of officials were used.

Findings

Local Elites and the clan

To answer the question of a relationship between local elites one has to first describe the elite. There was a general and strong consensus among our respondents that one extended family of Tetradze and their close relatives had been – sometimes formally but mostly informally - in power in the municipality for the better part of last 30 years. Many respondents pointed to this; while some of it may be a part of a collective imagination of a grey cardinal, some of it is factually true: The Tetradze family has been holding key local positions starting from the late 70s during the Soviet times; in the 1990s, a prominent member, Davit, in his early 30s – an atypical case for the period - was a majoritarian member of the Georgian parliament. Among other things this him opportunity to build ties with politicians currently active both in Georgian Dream ruling coalition and former ruling party. Another major political actor in the municipality is the current majoritarian MP, Giorgi Balakhadze, Tetradze’s father in law. Mr. Balakhadze has been on various political positions regionally since 1990s (local deputy governor, municipal

governor, head of the municipal council, etc.), but the position of a majoritarian MP appears most influential politically. It has been pointed out that “Balakhadze’s rise was a product of the Balakhadze-Tetradze kin relationship”.³ Generally, with a certain caution it can be said that the Tetradzes along with a few other ally families, mostly members/children of old nomenclature and *intelligentsia* are at helm. They tend to strongly nurture and recreate their ties through constant intermarriage and - important in a social-religions context – baptizing of each other’s children which effectively makes them “relatives.” This “group” of people tend to be urban dwellers, “Ameretians.”

Since there are no large economic enterprises in the region, land ownership remains the main source of economic power. Many of the large landowners are current or former political figures. It is hard to trace the land owned by the (extended) family of Tetradze, because of the usage of fronts. There is a second group of large landowners who tend not to take part in the political sphere explicitly.

There is another power group that of shady criminal types – either so-called “thieves-in-law” or criminal authorities with ties with them. The research was not concerned with this part of the power structures in the region but general attitude is that people in this group are cooperating rather than rivaling with the former, especially in the time of election.

Another level of elites is the rural elites – these are businessmen, doctors, teachers/school directors, sportsmen or otherwise influential people from villages. Many of these are the village representatives in the local municipal council. While they don’t have the political power of the former group on the whole municipality, they are authoritative locally in villages.

In villages there always will be someone whose word is very strong. Some people here are politically very uneducated and they are not interested really what is happening and so a political power can win with the help of those authoritative figures who manipulate such voters.⁴

These figures may have considerable economic power (land ownership), and therefore they may liaise with the Tetradze and the group on the economic front. During election, these people are usually informally responsible for proper administration of election (and proper results). Their relationship with the Tetradze can be described as patron-clientelistic: “clan” is helping them to privatize lands or to become member of local municipal council, school director or so and they owe proper election results or other benefit.

Local Elites – Centre relationship

In a setting like this the central government found it at the same time convenient to rely on this “elite” and had no resources to counter them on the other hand. “There were members of a certain family and any power that would come to power in the center could not find an educated group of people who could replace them⁵”. One must note that the relationship is of a mutual “back-scratching” and it is hard to say which side dictates the rules.

³ Interview with a local political actor

⁴ Interview with a local journalist

⁵ Interview with a current local political actor

On one hand the Amereti people try to maintain strong personal relationship (but not explicitly political) informal relations with mid-level central political figures (not very influential MPs, deputy ministers, chiefs of staff, whoever they can find). For example, it has been reported that current governor is good friends with the spouse of one of the new political figures, MP from the Georgian Dream. One of our respondents described their relationship as “close friendship” while another downplayed it as “they have hunted couple times together, that’s about it”^{6,7}.

Political processes at election time

Election Campaign

In 2012 parliamentary election time, Saakashvili’s ruling United National Movement (UNM) held all key positions in all political offices in Amereti. Opposition MP candidate (who finally lost) was an outsider with kinship ties to the municipality from his mother’s side. Current majoritarian MP and a winner of 2012 elections, Giorgi Balakhadze, was running through UNM voting list, and the former majoritarian MP was his campaign manager. While Tetradze family and its leaders themselves did not campaign personally their support was evident to their kin, Balakhadze.

Georgian Dream campaigned through various “unhappy” and disgruntled political actors – old activists of opposition parties, and political activists or henchmen who came from outside the municipality. Even though the chief priest of the local church is related to Georgian Dream leader Ivanishvili church’s influence in this particular municipality was small.

UNM political party campaign in the villages went through the village elders. While the campaign was particularly nasty even in comparison with other municipalities in the same elections, the highlight being the “warm welcome” of the Georgian Dream leader Ivanishvili with dangerous pyrotechnic equipment. The future MP won convincingly and managed to garner more votes than ruling UNM party – a factor that a number of our interviewees assigned to the fact that he actually distanced himself from the party. As one respondent said, “the candidate himself didn’t work for the party, he would say – you can vote for me personally as a majoritarian and vote for whichever party you like.”⁸ All evidence suggests that this was not due infidelity but was a combination of two factors – candidate sought to distance himself from unpopular at the time UNM and second and more relevant – party-political games are not – and never were relevant in this particular political environment.

Few weeks after the elections Mr. Balakhadze admitted the “mistakes” he’s made during the elections, left the UNM parliamentary faction in the parliament and joined another independent one that tends to vote in line with the Georgian Dream. Similarly, the political parties/factions started to change up and some local deputies started changing sides. Finally, the chairman of the local executive branch, the *gamgebeli* (governor) resigned and a competition for a new one was announced, which was a critical for the present research and represented a juncture when somewhat fazed local elite started (re)asserting power.

⁶ Interviews with local political and social actors/journalists

⁷ The case is a demonstration of the difficulties with such research when the same factoid is interpreted wildly differently by different players.

⁸ Interview with a local journalist

Governor Selection and the conflict

The governor, head of the executive branch of the government is the second strongest local political figure in the municipality after MP and the strongest one that deals with everyday matters. The proposed shortlisted candidates⁹ were all declaring their loyalty to Georgian Dream. They were described to us as differing on the subject that they were “Dream or more/even bigger Dream.” Each of them had different political backing within different factions of Georgian Dream in Tbilisi. The selection committee consisted of members of the local council, one NGO, member, trade union person, civil society representative, a total of 9 members, most of them loyal to old leadership. The selection process itself proved messy and the decision had to be taken in a back room because of a popular protest outside and some physical confrontation within the municipal building. The commission chose a member with most ties with the Tetradze. While he had certain political pedigree, working in the governor’s office before, more importantly (and as opposed to others) he positioned himself as local from Amereti – not from Tbilisi, not from other village, but local from the ‘neighborhood’ where the big players live. When asked the reasons why he thought he was chosen this is what he had to say:

I was born here, my father was a good agronomist, well known, everyone knows him, I am on good terms with other people in Amereti, I also have a wine, have cucumbers in my garden, people see it and know me. Also, along my career, I met people so there was this personal factor. Also in the municipal council, who was deciding [on the issue of who would be the next governor] I knew people, there were my peers so this also affected the decision.¹⁰

As noted, the selection of the governor marked the “return” of the local elites into the political process. Other candidates – ones that perhaps had more ties to the central office of the Georgian Dream or had other advantages were shoved aside in favor of the “local guy”. Contrary to Kobreti case (discussed later) where the power was vested with the political Party in power, Political Party is Amereti essentially powerless. Even though the MP Balakhadze – who has switched sides and ran tried to side with Georgian Dream lost some local political capital in the process, this was not enough to sideline the local clan.

While a new Georgian polity with Georgian Dream leading is still young and changes are to be expected it is possible to claim that regionally, the groups that have been in power in Saakashvili’s times and earlier retain their political power.

Implications of the study

Our research has shown that neopatrimonial mode of domination can survive democratic changes of government. It echoes the description of neopatrimonial rule given by Erdman and Engel (2006), where neopatrimonialism can be characterized as coexistence of legal-rational and patrimonial modes of domination. Its modus operandi is that of a self-reinforcing system where

actions of state institutions or by state agents are not calculable – probably apart for the head of the state. All actors strive to overcome their insecurity, but they do so by operating on both the formal as well as the informal logic of neopatrimonialism. Ultimately, the inherent insecurity is reproduced in a systematic way. The

⁹ We interviewed four major candidates

¹⁰ Interview with the current *gambebeli*, Mr. Shavadze

relationship between the two logics of neopatrimonialism, the formal and the informal, can thus be conceptualized as a mutually reinforcing one, as a mutually constitutive cycle of reproduction. (Erdman and Engel 2006 p. 19)

We observed many instances of this interaction between formal and informal rules. For example, informal relations between different groups of local elites were playing important role in election campaign of ruling party and its majoritarian candidate. Careful selection of village and district level coordinators of UNM was aimed at including *big men* - persons influential in village. Persuasion and probably pressure on local population was exercised through these key persons who hold authorities and position to influence outcome of elections in particular village. Future majoritarian MP electoral campaign had a clear personalist overtone, downplaying party under the banner of which he ran. The fact that he received more votes than party which nominated him might point to same direction. Results of election were partly determined by voting in Azeri villages, in which ruling party and its candidate has received overwhelming majority of votes¹¹. According to some of our informants, this achieved through informal alliance with village elites, induced by (possible) material rewards to Azeri elites (smuggling). This can be corroborated by the fact that one of the village chiefs got indicted right after election on smuggling charges.

In post-election period local elite has also shown their ability to exploit possibilities arising from this interplay of legal-rational and patrimonial modes of domination. Control over structures of local self-government helped them to appoint “insider” to office of head of local government administration. Apparently, personal contacts with representatives of central authorities also played a role in this process, although other candidates also had a support from the different groups of new ruling coalition.

In this game, victory on parliamentary elections and retaining control over local self-government could be understood both as a prize and as a means for preserving a power in own hand. As some of our informants explained, by winning elections and putting own candidate into the office ruling elite was able to show central authorities that they are most reliable partner on place. According to Theobald in neopatrimonial regimes elite groups on periphery are in constant danger of losing their position as result of decision of center to change partners and with its support to other group (Theobald 1982). Therefore, to stay local elites should constantly demonstrate their ability to control situation on place.

Finally, ongoing struggle between local office of Georgian Dream coalition and local elites is presenting a new question. This struggle can possibly represent an arrival to municipality of new type of politics, based on support to ideas and social interests rather personalities. However, it can also be struggle between already established elite group and new group which want to take its place in neopatrimonial hierarchy of center-periphery relation.

Our research has contributed to understanding of varieties of neopatrimonialism in Georgia. According to Timm (2010) who explored case of Kobreti, another, larger municipality in the area, bureaucratic groups and party activists were dominating informal relationship between center and periphery during Saakashvili period. Contrary to this thesis, we have shown importance of informal group inherited from Shevardnadze period and communist rule in local

¹¹ strangely, UNM (in opposition in 2013 presidential elections) received drastically more votes in Azeri villages both in the municipality in question and country wide in 2013 president's election.

governance and its perseverance on the local political scene, which is mutually beneficial for the larger political players.

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