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The State of Georgian Democracy

Interview with Professor Charles Fairbanks

Interview by Joseph Larsen, GIP Analyst

*“The greatest difficulty of attaining democracy in Georgia is the weakness of political parties.”*

**Professor Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr.** has been living in Tbilisi since 2006, where he is professor of Soviet and post-Soviet systems at Ilia State University. Fairbanks is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and previously served as a research professor of international relations and the director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies. He served as a deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of State and a member of the department’s policy planning staff. Fairbanks has also taught on the political science faculty of both Yale University and the University of Toronto.

**GIP:** *You’ve lived in Georgia since the 1990s. Could you speak about the overall trend of Georgia’s political development? Can we say that democratization is a progressive process or more of a cyclical process?*

**CF:** It’s a cyclical process. I think the western direction, which implies democracy though it does not imply clarity about what democracy would be, seems to me rather secure. It’s striking that Georgian Dream basically adhered to it ... even though there were people in Georgian Dream who were

not really attracted to the West. There is a lot of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, but nevertheless the Western direction seems to me to have tremendous momentum.

The lack of success of the Patriots Alliance, while most people were very alarmed at what they consider to be their success, that given the potential of Soviet nostalgia, Georgian nationalism, and Church politics, they weren’t very successful. So, I would say that democracy is at best a matter of two steps forward and one step back. I think this

government, though becoming more authoritarian, is still less authoritarian than the National Movement, particularly during the period 2008 to 2012. Then you had both a charismatic dictator as I would call him, though with considerable popular support, and some people like Merabishvili, who had discovered that terror works, like the confiscation of people's businesses, [the use of] torture, etcetera.

It is a really cyclical process. What Georgia has never been able to do is transcend the one-party state. There has been a succession of one-party states ever since 1918, and what has happened since 1992 is there has been a succession of genuine popular revolutions that introduced governments that were initially very popular but with no powerful opposition. That is the case now.

**GIP:** *So, in terms of genuine popular revolutions you would first mean the original nationalist movement that brought Zviad Gamsakhurdia to power. (CF: Yes.) But Shevardnadze would not count as popular, right, because it was not a popular movement that brought him into power. Was it?*

**CF:** I would say it was, though it may have been a minority. There was a huge upsurge of public opinion—particularly among the Tbilisi elite, which counts for a lot more than other people—against Gamsakhurdia after he became an increasingly authoritarian ruler. But that's the least popular revolution;

it was a military coup with considerable popular support.

**GIP:** *So, we can say that Georgia has gone through at least three, maybe four popular revolutions since the early 1990s. Do you think the state currently is stable or not? In the next elections is there a concern, to some people it would be a good thing, that there would be a total change of power to a totally new political party?*

**CF:** That's what will happen, because Georgian Dream is really unpopular, and in a way more unpopular than it deserves. I mean, people say: "they do not do anything"; that "the government is run by idiots", I mean you hear this all the time, and there is some truth in it. But it was really a great achievement to continue operating the UNM-created state without the ominous despotism of the UNM years.

But, I think UNM is still so unpopular, that that's how the last election can be explained. If that's the alternative, then people will vote for GD. Also, a lot of people don't object to the one-party state, if the government's behavior is not too bad. People don't have very high expectations of government, that's very important. They can find the government quite unsatisfactory but still vote for it. That's what government means, is to be bad.

**GIP:** *It seems that was what happened in 2016, right? Despite the party being very unpopular they still won. (CF: Yes.) But when a party is in power for a long time, more than eight years, eventually the public just gets sick of them.*

**CF:** Yes, that's very much at work. Eventually what you will see is a sudden crumbling of the popularity of Georgian Dream, and the danger is there will be that sudden crumbling with no effective or decent opposition.

**GIP:** *Do you think that there is a decent chance that this crumbling will occur before the next parliamentary election?*

**CF:** I guess. I was wrong about the last election, I thought that GD would be in trouble and that didn't happen. But I'm sure it will happen within the next eight years, and the experience of second terms in the US is very instructive. [Historically] every second term has been worse, and they were always marked by exhaustion, by running out of ideas, and usually by some major scandals ... As the specter of the National Movement fades, [Bidzina] Ivanishvili will become less engaged. He'll get tired [of politics].

**GIP:** *Let's speak about Ivanishvili for a bit. You wrote a paper three years ago in the Journal of Democracy. In your paper, you praised the decision by Bidzina to resign as prime minister.*

*But in the same paper, you warned against the dangers of informal leadership. Unfortunately, Bidzina still continues to exercise power from behind the curtain. We don't know exactly how much power because nothing is very open. But what is your assessment of the role he plays now compared to the role he played perhaps two or three years ago?*

**CF:** I don't think he makes daily decisions and I think he dislikes politics, but he feels this is his achievement and his responsibility. The appointment of Kakha Kaladze is very interesting, as a [candidate for] mayor of Tbilisi. Kaladze is a more independent politician than either [ex-Prime Minister Irakli] Garibashvili or [current Prime Minister Giorgi] Kvirikashvili, and that represents a certain loosening of control by Bidzina.

**GIP:** *Perhaps that could be a trend?*

**CF:** I think that the whole logic of the party is that it would just fall apart without Ivanishvili. Most people in the party look to him for decisions, and he can't simply fade away. He might at some point say "I'm sick of this, not going to do this any longer." But that's not close.

**GIP:** *We have a situation now where Ivanishvili continues to exercise power in an informal capacity. But in your analysis, if he stepped back from that role and he decided he did not want to*

*lead GD anymore, there will be a big vacuum and the party would crumble. In the short term, that would cause chaos, right?*

**CF:** Yes. Some people think that the state and Georgia's sovereignty are really at risk. I'm very impressed by the continuity of the state which Saakashvili built. I mean, there was really no state in the modern sense either in Soviet Georgia, because it was a Soviet republic, nor under Gamsakhurdia or Shevardnadze. So, Saakashvili really built a state and Georgian Dream took it over and, I think to everyone's surprise, has run it pretty competently. Like many modern states, it has a lot of momentum.

**GIP:** *Do you think the state is now consolidated enough? Is it independent enough that it is doesn't depend on any particular political party to pull the levers [of power]?*

**CF:** Yes, I think so. There is a huge continuity from the National Movement, particularly in local government but in lots of places. And though many of those people may have greater loyalty to UNM in theory, but the fact that National Movement people—like Democratic civil servants under [US President Donald] Trump are able to keep going and operate the machinery is a sign of the seriousness of the Georgian state.

**GIP:** *So, in this sense can we say that things have improved since the National Movement*

*era? The state and the party are not inseparable anymore.*

**CF:** Yes, I think they are not. I mean, there are things like the security services that are very political and very biased and are a political weapon, essentially. And of course, the judiciary has no visible independence.

**GIP:** *The coercive power of the state is politicized?*

**CF:** Yes, but it's used for political purposes to a more limited extent than it was by the National Movement. And a very clear sign of that is that the beneficiaries of UNM nomenclature privatizations are still going. They made deals with GD but they did not lose their companies.

**GIP:** *Do you think that the relative degree of independence that the state has now, does this have a structural cause, or this is the fact that GD has simply approached the state with a more positive attitude? They don't see it as a weapon to be wielded.*

**CF:** They're less ambitious. That's both a problem and good luck for Georgia. They didn't really have an agenda, unlike the UNM. So, they're not trying to impose that agenda through the state.

**GIP:** *Ok, so, the fact that GD does not have an agenda, as you said. They're an eclectic party*

*with the Social Democrats, social conservatives, and free marketers like Koirikashvili. Ideologically it is not clear what they stand for.*

**CF:** And Ivanishvili acted to make the party more that way by dissolving the coalition and then bringing in people like the Social Democrats, who were much more loosely connected with Georgian Dream until recently. So, his idea is that there is a single party which combines all the best elements in the nation and expresses their diverse interests, and that's not the Western European or American conception of democracy.

**GIP:** *A model like that, where you have an eclectic party with different subgroups vying for influence, do you think that's sustainable?*

**CF:** Why not? It's sustainable for a while. I think it's partly responsible for the somewhat diminished effectiveness of governance. It doesn't ultimately work as well and therefore it will ultimately prove unpopular. Nobody is fired up. Leftists aren't really fired up by the Social Democrats in Georgian Dream. They're pleased that they're there, but nobody thinks "this is our cause."

**GIP:** *Can we speak about the constitutional reforms? What I see in the draft constitution is a lot of tension between these different factions*

*within the party. What do you think of the overall product? What does it say about the party?*

**CF:** First, there is no ambitious agenda, they did not tear up Saakashvili's constitution and start over. Second, the primary purpose is GD winning re-election. That's the main vision behind the constitutional changes. Though getting rid of the majoritarian mandates is a real reform that comes from the educated climate of opinion, the most important changes are directed toward holding onto power, I would say.

**GIP:** *It does look like Georgian Dream is trying to write a constitution in which the incumbent party will have a clear advantage in parliamentary elections and the president can't be an independent counterweight to the parliament.*

**CF:** Right, though that strikes me as more tactical, just a desire to get rid of [President Giorgi] Margvelashvili eventually, rather than of fundamental opposition to the institution of the presidency, or opposition to a semi-presidential system.

**GIP:** *Do you think that GD is being a dishonest when they claim that this has an ideological purpose?*

**CF:** Yes, it strikes me that way.

**GIP:** *About the new parliamentary system, it has a provision whereby the party receiving the most votes will receive the unallocated votes from the parties that do not pass the threshold. That's a weird provision, right?*

**CF:** That's not weird. That's totally undemocratic, scandalous. Someday, someone will campaign against that and [if you are GD] how are you going to defend it?

**GIP:** *That provision is going to help whichever party receives the most votes, but there is no guarantee that that party is going to be GD. What do you think the chances are that by 2024, seven years from now and that's a lifetime away in terms of electoral cycles, what are the chances that these amendments come back to bite GD?*

**CF:** High. Somebody will build a party that is able to ride the wave of popular disgust with GD.

**GIP:** *What about the current opposition? There are three opposition parties that have seats in parliament: UNM, the Movement for Liberty-European Georgia, and the Patriots Alliance. And there is a fourth party, Dato Usupashvili's Development Movement. Do you think that any of these four opposition parties have a real chance to do anything in 2020?*

**CF:** I wouldn't bet on any of them. Perhaps European Georgia has the best chance. Because we just don't know yet how much they can shed their identification with the

Saakashvili era. I think most of the talent in UNM went to European Georgia. It's very sad; Saakashvili destroyed his own party, really, by the split. Though you would have to say they [the defectors] were already against Saakashvili privately and did not try very hard to keep the party together.

I think that none of those parties is likely to be the successful party. I think the Patriots movement, which frightens people so much, is not as right wing or pro-Russian as people think, though it's probably both, but within limits. And poll after poll, election after election have shown that its electorate is limited. In a way, it is the ideal opposition from Ivanishvili's standpoint; it frightens the West and thereby makes GD look good.

**GIP:** What about the fact that in this parliament, the Patriots of Alliance are there but the Republicans and Free Democrats were not able to get in. Both are former coalition partners of GD. Both were seen as the vanguards of pro-European sentiment within the GD coalition. They are gone now and the Patriots Alliance are in. What effect may it have on the makeup of the parliament and overall policymaking?

**CF:** Parliament, as under the UNM and under the Citizens' Union, is largely an instrument of the executive government; it is not really independent though it does influence things. I don't see a huge

difference. Maybe there was an intention of this, that when Kvirikashvili's pro-Western crowd, [Tamar] Chugoshvili, people like that, were brought into the government, the Republicans and Free Democrats were thrust out. So, you have the same kind of pro-Western, glitzy people who are attractive to the elite, but in a different place in the government.

**GIP:** *Georgia was ruled by hyper-presidentialism for about two decades. Now there's a semi-presidential system, and with the new constitution Georgia will become a parliamentary republic. The form is changing, but will the content change? Or will power continue to be closely concentrated in the hands of the executive?*

**CF:** I'm sure it will. No, I don't see the difference in the status of the president as a very major difference... The greatest difficulty of attaining democracy in Georgia is the weakness of political parties. A political party comes to power because it really represents a plurality of society. Then, the winning political party is reabsorbed into the state. One of the reasons UNM lost [in 2012] is because the party had become a kind of emanation of the state, and that's very much true of GD now. Western democracy builders don't really realize that. The overwhelming priority is to build political parties, but GD is not a real political party in the Western sense.

## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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