

INCLUSION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES  
IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN THE  
CONTEXT OF 2018 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTIONS OF GEORGIA



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The inclusion of ethnic minorities in the societal and political life is one of the most important indicators that determines the level of integration of these groups into the Georgian society. Historically, the participation of these groups had been problematic as the political competition in the regions populated by ethnic minorities was very low; the incumbent traditionally received close to 90% of the votes, and the opposition parties did not put any significant effort to contest the dominance enjoyed by the government. The situation started to change after 2012 Parliamentary Elections where the ruling United National Movement (UNM) lost the majority to Georgian Dream Coalition (GDC) that translated to the first peaceful transfer of power through electoral process. At the same time, UNM continued to exist and operate as the viable political force - another new development for Georgia - and had been able to mount significant challenge to the incumbent in consequent elections. Still the electoral process in these areas is believed to be less democratic and government is suspected to use more administrative resources and pressure to obtain positive outcome than in the other parts of the country.

The present paper aims at exploring whether this statement holds true. It examines the trends regarding to voting behavior in the 2018 Presidential Elections in the districts where minorities comprise at least 1/3 of the population and compares it to other districts' data that do not have this characteristic. It also looks at the reports and observations produced by local and international organizations that monitored the elections to establish if there were more instances of serious violations in the ethnic minority regions.

The 2018 elections turned out to be another new development in Georgian politics - for the first time in history the victor was not determined in the first round and the runoff elections came to be necessary. These were also the last elections where the President was to be elected by the popular vote as the modified Constitution envisions the elections of the President by the Parliament and a special council elected solely for this purpose. For many observers, this change signifies the full transformation of the country to a parliamentary republic. At the same time, given the predominance of the incumbent in the current political context both academics and practitioners criticized this change, noting that stripping the Presidential Office of popular support would further undermine already weak checks and balances in the country.

25 candidates were registered by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), but only 7 of them managed to receive at least 1% of the popular vote.<sup>1</sup> The frontrunners who continued into the second round were GD supported Salome Zourabichvili who received 38.64% of the vote and UNM coalition candidate Grigol Vashadze who garnered 37.74% of the total ballots cast.

1. CEC. <http://cesko.ge/geo/list/show/114182-2018-tslis-28-oqtombris-saqartvelos-prezidentis-archevnebstvis-saarchevno-subieqtebis-mier-tsardgenili-prezidentobis-kandidatebi>

The difference between them in absolute terms was less than 15,000 votes overall. In the second round, however, the voter participation increased by as much as 21% and the incumbent favorite won by a favorable margin of 19% and more than 367,000 votes. In effect the winning candidate received around 50% more votes in absolute terms in the runoff elections.<sup>2</sup>

While the elections in general was marred by negative campaigning and personalist attacks in general, the number of violations and acrimonious nature of campaign increased dramatically before the runoff. The public and media was especially alert regarding the rule violations in ethnically diverse districts as historically minority groups are considered to be more pliable to administrative resource abuse. The data provided below shall cast some light whether voting patterns in these districts were significantly divergent from nationwide trends.

The country is divided into 73 electoral districts (plus the votes from abroad) that largely coincide with administrative division. In 9 of these districts the minority population is over 33%; 4 of them are situated in Samtskhe-Javakheti province – Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Aspindza, and Ninotsminda where principal minority is Armenian, and 5 are in Kvemo Kartli province – Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetritskaro, and Tsalka where Azeri population is main minority group in the first three of the districts, while Armenians constitute the principle minority group in the last two.

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Overall in the first round the major contenders received quite a different portion of votes compared to nationwide ballot. GD received 52.5% and UNM 31.2% of the ballots clearly denoting significant deviation from the overall result as predicted by our model. In the second round, GD received 61.5% and UNM 38.5% – the result – that is more in line with the nationwide performance but still favoring the incumbent. As it is likely that in urban areas the use of administrative resources is more restricted due to higher exposure by the population and the presence of the election observers it is important that we compare the data with the nationwide results that excludes Tbilisi, and the other self-governing cities – Poti, Batumi, Zugdidi, and Rustavi. Even in this case the nationwide distribution of votes in the first round of elections between GD and UNM is 42.2% and 37.2% respectively that is dramatically different from the results obtained in the minority districts. In the second round, excluding the urban areas we find that the votes garnered by the GD and UNM amount to 60% and 40% essentially mirroring the nationwide results. Thus, the coincidence of voting patterns in the second round between minority regions and overall results can be explained by the fact that most of the new votes for GD came from the cities in the second round. This also explains why more violations were reported in the second round of the elections – administrative resources had to be used more extensively in the urban areas this time leading to increased exposure and reporting.

Thus, the data analysis demonstrate that ethnic minority areas are significantly more affected by the use of administrative resources than other parts of the country. The analysis of the reported incidents by the international and local observers also confirms this supposition.

Assessing the first round of elections International Society for Elections and Democracy (ISFED) in their report mentioned only two cases where verbal altercation occurred in the precinct commission's premises and one of them involving a precinct in Akhalkalaki District Electoral Commission

2. CEC. <http://results.cec.gov.ge/>

3. ISFED. Preliminary Report on the First Round of Elections. [www.isfed.ge/main/1435/geo/](http://www.isfed.ge/main/1435/geo/)

(DEC).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the violent physical altercation was reported on two occasions by the ISFED in the second round of elections one of them occurring Marneuli district.<sup>4</sup> Transparency International – Georgia (TI) provided reports that are shorter, and do not tend to mention specific localities, nonetheless, in the second round the violations in Marneuli and Akhalkalaki districts were noted in their report.<sup>5</sup> Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA) also regularly mentions violations in Marneuli, Akhalkalaki and some other minority districts in all of the reports produced throughout the electoral period.<sup>6</sup> OSCE-ODIHR in their preliminary reports mention numerous violations in the minority districts.<sup>7</sup> In all of these reports it is apparent that minority regions are mentioned more frequently than any other regions overall.

Thus, it seems that the data analyzed confirm the supposition that democratic processes are more undeveloped in the regions where the ethnic minorities constitute significant portion of the population, and their inclusion in the political process of the country is problematic. The level of competition has improved when compared to the past decade, but considerable challenges remain that are to be overcome. Political parties, media and civil society should focus more on these areas if we are to see any significant improvement in the policy relevant future and current level of effort seems inadequate.

4. ISFED. Final Report on the Second Round of Elections. [www.isfed.ge/main/1457/geo/](http://www.isfed.ge/main/1457/geo/)
5. TI Georgia. Report on the Second Round. <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/final-assessment-28-november-second-round-presidential-elections> and <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/second-interim-report-monitoring-campaign-finances-and-administrative-resources>
6. GYLA. 2018 წლის პრეზიდენტის არჩევნების კენჭისყრის დღის ზოგადი შეფასება. <https://gyla.ge/ge/post/2018-tslis-prezidentis-archevnebis-kentchisyris-dghis-shefaseba-zogadi-shefaseba#sthash.sBbEZ06q.dpbs>, <https://gyla.ge/ge/post/2018-tslis-prezidentis-archevnebis-me-2-turi-saias-sadamkvirveblo-misia#sthash.Z4ZaLRiN.dpbs> and <https://gyla.ge/ge/post/2018-tslis-saprezidento-archevnebis-meore-turis-tsinasaarchevno-garemos-shefaseba#sthash.KR4XA150.dpbs>
7. OSCE. ODIHR - Georgia, Presidential Election, 28 October 2018: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/401369> and Georgia, Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 November 2018: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642>

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