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Georgia's Parliamentary Elections - Democracy in Action?

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On 01 October 2012 Georgia, a small post-Soviet state on the Black Sea coast with a population of 4.6 million people, conducted its 8th Parliamentary elections since 1990. The pre-election campaign was closely watched by the West and the number of international observers monitoring the elections was allegedly the country's largest-ever. These elections were largely considered as the most crucial ones since November 2003, and were perceived by the international community as a test of democracy in Georgia. They have since been dubbed as 'landmark' and 'historic' since it is the first time that the transfer of power in Georgia has occurred through free and fair elections.

These elections saw the defeat of the government that came to power as a result of the so-called 'Rose Revolution' of 2003. Back then, Georgia's then President Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to step down in the midst of peaceful mass demonstrations that took place in the capital Tbilisi as a result of widely disputed parliamentary elections on 2 November. In 2004, at the age of 36, the US-educated leader of the 'Rose Revolution' – Mikheil Saakashvili was elected as the new President of Georgia and the new Parliamentary elections were won by his party – the United National Movement. Saakashvili was re-elected in 2008 and his party maintained the majority in the next Parliamentary elections too.

Saakashvili and his new government implemented a number of important reforms, bringing the country's notorious corruption levels down. Saakashvili also put Georgia on an increasingly pro-Western path, aiming for integration into the European institutions and vowing to make the country a NATO-member state in the near future. Under his leadership Georgia further strengthened its ties with the US, turning into the single largest per capita troop contributor in Iraq and Afghanistan. There were, however, some serious setbacks including excessive use of force by the police to disperse peaceful demonstrators and raiding of an opposition TV station in autumn 2007. Under Saakashvili's rule the relations between Tbilisi and Moscow further deteriorated, culminating in the August 2008 war between the two countries. Accused of moving towards a more authoritarian rule, his reputation as a young, liberal leader, trying to build a democratic state was increasingly damaged at home and abroad.

However, it was the prison abuse scandal that emerged days before the elections that ultimately cost his party its third victory. On 18 September, leaked video footage emerged that showed shocking images of prison guards physically and sexually abusing inmates in one of the prisons in Tbilisi. Outraged citizens protested in thousands for days across the whole country. As one Western analyst commented, this abuse was not just an isolated incident within the penitentiary system; rather, it 'symbolise[d] an underlying reality in the country'. In the end, Georgian Dream Democratic Georgia – coalition of opposition political parties founded by 56-year old billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili defeated Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) in bitterly contested elections winning 54.9% votes against UNM's 40.3% in a 60% turnout. This meant securing 85 seats in Georgia's 150-seat Parliament with the remaining 65 going to the UNM.

Ivanishvili emerged as a new opponent to President Saakashvili only a year ago, but he was well known in the country for his philanthropy long before that, personally subsidising many of the projects of the Saakashvili government itself, funding artists and scientists and some of the country's most important architectural projects. Listed number 153 by Forbes in spring 2012, his wealth is estimated at $6.4 billion. He made much of his fortune in post-Soviet Russia during the privatisation process in the 1990s. Alongside Georgian citizenship, he also held Russian and French citizenships before he was forced to renounce the latter two, when the Georgian authorities revoked his Georgian citizenship after he declared his intentions to enter politics on the grounds that the Georgian legislature did not allow triple citizenship. However, after the recent win in the elections his Georgian citizenship was restored by the Presidential decree and on 25 October he was officially approved by the new Parliament, now housed in Kutaisi – Georgia's second largest city, as the country's new Prime Minister with 88 votes against 54. The Parliament also approved Ivanishvili's new cabinet.

There is no doubt that the October elections marked a significant change and yielded to the new era in Georgia's politics. Least to say, the two previous Presidents before Saakashvili were both overthrown: Zviad Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee the country as a result of the violent military *coup d'état, while* Shevardnadze was forced to resign as a result of the 'Rose Revolution'. In this regard, Saakashvili's concession to defeat in these elections could indeed be considered as 'an extraordinary event' as one commentator put it – a 'democracy in action'.

However, it would be wishful thinking to assume that the biggest challenge has been overcome. The biggest challenges, in fact, still lie ahead. Georgia is now effectively in the hands of two rulers. In a way, as Thomas de Waal points out, this is not particularly bad news since this could be a chance for Georgia to acquire 'a genuine two-party system, rather than merely replacing one one-party system with another'. While this might indeed be the right time, the current constitutional arrangements, on the other hand, make this cohabitation of the two-party system rather difficult. Constitutional amendments that were adopted in 2010 will shift Georgia towards more Parliamentary democracy increasing powers of the Prime Minister and the government. However, these changes are due to take effect only after the next Presidential elections in October 2013 when Saakashvili's second and last term comes to an end. Until then, Georgia remains a Presidential system and Saakashvili remains the head of state for another year, while the Prime Minister serves as the head of government.

Both sides have argued that they are political rivals rather than enemies and will work together for the greater good of the country. However, the tensions between the two parties represented in the new Parliament were already well visible at the first opening session on 21 October. Further, despite claims that the new government would not seek any revenge and persecution of former political opponents, arrests of three high profile officials associated with Saakashvili's government last week raised concerns that the politically charged arrests for which Saakashvili was so criticised might continue under the new government too.

Thus, as the first post-election month demonstrates, more than the initial October elections, what would really test Georgia's democracy would be the year ahead leading up to the next Presidential elections.

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