

The opposition has won the elections in Georgia

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1 October saw parliamentary elections in Georgia, which were unexpectedly won by the opposition Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, centred around Bidzina Ivanishvili. The election results have not been challenged by any party, which indirectly indicates their genuinely democratic nature; despite pre-election tensions, the poll itself went off smoothly. And so despite widespread fears, both Georgia and the ruling elite centred around President Mikheil Saakashvili have passed the democratic test.

The election result means the end of the dominance of the United National Movement (UNM) and President Mikheil Saakashvili over Georgia's political scene, a dominance launched by the 'rose revolution' in 2003, and which resulted in a profound transformation of the Georgian state. The formal end of this period will be marked by the presidential elections in the autumn of 2013, in which the current president cannot stand. Then amendments to the Constitution will come into force to replace the current presidential system with one based on the rule of a parliament and cabinet.

Before the election, GD declared that it would continue the country's pro-Western policy in both international and domestic dimensions. In practice, it is expected to establish and develop cooperation with Russia, and on the domestic stage it will attempt to marginalise the UNM's elite, including taking action to bring about early presidential elections and exclude President Saakashvili from political manoeuvrings. After a tumultuous election campaign and its electoral breakthrough, Georgia is entering a new, possibly acute phase of internal conflict, and is beginning a process of serious political redefinition.

The elections

According to preliminary data from the parliamentary elections on 2 October, the opposition Georgian Dream won 55.8% of the votes for party lists (the ruling United National Movement won 40.14%), as well as the majority of seats in single-mandate constituencies. No other group which stood in the election passed the 5-percent threshold. The turnout was 60.8%. The preliminary results give GD a parliamentary majority, but at the moment neither the number of seats or the composition of the next parliament can be accurately determined. The opposition's victory was acknowledged in a televised speech by the country's President and leader of the UNM, Mikheil Saakashvili. Despite some shortcomings, the elections have been recognised as democratic in the preliminary communiqué from the OSCE; the results and the democratic nature of the outcome have not been challenged by the groups

participating in the election. The new parliament will meet at the new seat of parliament in Kutaisi 19 days after the official results are announced by the Central Election Commission.

‘Georgian Dream’

The winner of the election is the opposition bloc Georgian Dream, which includes the Georgia’s Dream/Democratic Georgia party (by far the predominant party on the electoral lists), the Republican Party, Our Georgia/Free Democrats, the Conservative Party, the National Forum, and Industry Will Save Georgia. The bloc is made up of parties with various political features (they appeal to democracy, nationalism, and social questions), politicians of various backgrounds (including former associates of Saakashvili) – who in many cases have been at loggerheads with each other – and even people new to politics (singers, sportsmen and others). Their unifying factor was their dislike of President Saakashvili and their recognition of Ivanishvili’s authority, because of his financial backing, which was essential to conducting the election campaign.

The Georgian oligarch and billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili (he has about US\$6-7 billion of his own assets) entered the Georgian political scene in 2011. He made his fortune – in a very opaque and controversial manner – from Russian privatisation in the early 1990s (including in the banking and metal industries). In recent years, most of his assets have been invested in Russia. This served as justification for the accusations (especially from the UNM) that he has strong personal ties with organised criminal structures and security forces in the Russian Federation. Since moving to Georgia in 2004, Ivanishvili has presented himself as an extremely generous benefactor and philanthropist – to the Georgian Orthodox Church, the intelligentsia, but also to some rural areas – but he has presented his political views in a cautious and vague manner.

Georgian Dream ran under populist slogans calling for the removal from power of President Saakashvili’s team and the UNM, which was accused of taking over the state and flagrantly violating democratic standards. GD has declared that it will hold to account and punish the guilty; it has appealed in general terms for the democratisation of the state and the stimulation of socio-economic development, and insisted that it wants to continue Georgia’s pro-Western policies, including pro-Western domestic transformation. In contrast to the UNM, Ivanishvili’s bloc has also signalled greater openness to dialogue with, and a willingness to improve relations between Georgia and Russia.

GD’s electoral success was based on several different factors. These included some of the public’s general fatigue with the president; the reforms that have been forced through for nearly a decade, and demonstrations of arrogance and abuses of power; unresolved social problems; a generational change (including the activation of the Europe-oriented university students who did not participate in the revolution of 2003, and do not remember Georgia before Saakashvili’s rule); and GD’s expansive and attractive electoral campaign. The campaign’s turning point, it seems, was the broadcast by opposition TV channels on 18 September of shocking reports illustrating the brutality of guards at a Tbilisi prison.

Conclusions and prospects

Contrary to widespread fears expressed in both Georgia and the West, the election result and the government's reaction to it confirm that basic democratic standards do indeed apply in Georgia. It is hard to question the fundamentally democratic nature of the system and mechanisms in the country, or the strength of civic attitudes in Georgian society. A ruling camp has not been changed by means of democratic elections in the South Caucasus in the last 20 years, and is a rarity in the post-Soviet area.

The UNM's electoral defeat ends an important stage in the transformation of the Georgian state. The UNM under President Saakashvili developed, and to a considerable degree implemented a consistent and comprehensive programme of reforms in the country. It also fleshed out an ambitious foreign policy programme (including the implementation of Georgia's pro-Western aspirations, and political and economic independence from Moscow, at the cost of war with Russia and the *de facto* loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), which has created a new generation of Westernised political leaders and officials.

Ivanishvili has not questioned Georgia's achievements in recent years, nor has he announced any strategic review of internal policies. However, the entry of GD (which includes politicians representing different perspectives) into the system and the institutions of government, adapting the system to their own political purposes and using it efficiently, will be a difficult task, which may adversely affect the performance of state institutions and the implementation of reforms.

Although Ivanishvili has announced a continuation of the pro-Western foreign policy, we may expect an increase in the importance of the Russian factor in Georgian politics. Russia will gain a partner in political dialogue; this will in turn make economic cooperation possible (which Russia broke off as being an ineffective instrument for putting pressure on Saakashvili). This will increase the likelihood of Moscow influencing Georgia (temporarily in the economic and social spheres, and thus politically as well), especially if political tensions rise in the country, as is expected. Yet it seems that the threat of a new armed conflict between Russia and Georgia is receding.

Despite Georgia's electoral breakthrough, the situation in the coming months will be far from stable, both because of constitutional considerations, and the scale of the tension between the main political forces in the country. Under the current constitution, which is in force until 2013, authority in the country is concentrated in the hands of the president (including the appointment of the prime minister and the cabinet, and the final say in matters of security, foreign and economic policy), which obliges the winning party to engage in 'cohabitation'. In addition, the UNM will have a strong representation in parliament; so we may expect to see attempts to break the GD bloc's unstable cohesion in parliament (as well as attempts by Ivanishvili to break up the UNM). Meanwhile, since the elections, GD's leader has not only reaffirmed that his party will hold the UNM to account for its 'authoritarian' practices and punish the guilty, but he has also called for the president's immediate resignation. Nevertheless Saakashvili's voluntary departure seems unlikely, as there is currently no legal basis for his impeachment. GD will not have a constitutional majority in the parliament, and the dispute may be extended until the presidential election scheduled for autumn 2013. An alternative for Ivanishvili – which he will probably employ – is to appeal to the enthusiasm

of his own electorate, and to start mass street protests (which are frequent in Georgia), provoking a strong reaction from the police. The coming weeks and months will lead to an escalation of tensions and the polarisation of society in Georgia; this will be another test for the Georgian state, and for GD and the UNM, as they appear in their new roles.

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