

Georgia Approves Power Shift

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TBILISI, Georgia — Georgia's parliament approved a system strengthening its own and the prime minister's powers in a third and final reading Friday as part of reforms that the president's critics say will allow him to rule after his term ends in 2013.

The constitutional reforms change the country's strongly presidential system to a "mixed" one with a more powerful prime minister and parliament, starting in 2013 when President Mikheil Saakashvili's final term as president expires.

The amendments require the president to consult parliament and the government on issues from foreign policy to top military appointments. The president is barred from holding a leadership position in a political party. The amendments, which will be phased in through 2013, also include changes to the judiciary and the country's property rights.

The reforms answer calls from Georgia's Western allies for a more balanced system with a stronger parliament. They were drafted with assistance from the Council of Europe's advisory body for legal affairs, the Venice Commission.

"From now on, the government will be elected not solely by the president, but by the people's

chosen parliament, allowing the government to be more effective," Saakashvili told reporters in Tbilisi on Friday.

The president retains the power to order troops into combat as commander in chief, as Saakashvili did in August 2008.

Lawmakers passed the amendments in a 112-5 vote.

Georgia's parliamentary opposition supported the proposals, but more radical opponents say Saakashvili plans to keep the reins of power as prime minister. They say Saakashvili is copying his Russian nemesis Vladimir Putin, who stepped down as president to become prime minister in 2008 and is widely seen as Russia's paramount leader.

Saakashvili said last month he did not wish to cling to power. The government argues that under the constitutional change no single official will have ultimate authority.

"We achieved two main goals. We will have a balance between branches of power and will secure more stable work of the government in the future," David Darchiashvili, a ruling party lawmaker said at the session.

Saakashvili's critics are not convinced.

"Saakashvili and his administration are just strengthening the position of prime minister while having the parliament as weak as it was," said Irakly Alasania, an opposition politician.

"Saakashvili does not serve the constitution. He uses the constitution to serve his ambition," he said.

(Reuters, Bloomberg)

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