

Georgia Votes in Election Overshadowed by Prison Scandal

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Ivanishvili and his wife, left, praying in a church in Tbilisi on Monday. **Georgy Abdaladze**

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's ruling party claimed victory over the opposition Georgian Dream coalition in a parliamentary election Monday, despite exit polls pointing to a close race.

An exit poll predicted billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream would win more than half the ballots cast on a party list allocating 77 of the 150 seats in the former Soviet republic's parliament.

But Saakashvili's United National Movement said that it believed it had done well in voting to individual constituencies that fill the remaining 73 places in parliament and that it was on course to retain power.

The rival claims could open the way to a post-election standoff. Any instability would worry the West because of the Caucasus country's role as a conduit for Caspian Sea energy supplies to Europe and its pivotal location between Russia, Iran, Turkey and Central Asia.

Monday's election was overshadowed by a prison abuse scandal that has fueled accusations of government repression.

Saakashvili, who swept to the presidency after the Rose Revolution of 2003 and led his country into a disastrous war with Russia in 2008, says Ivanishvili would move the former Soviet republic away from the West and bring it back into Moscow's orbit.

Ivanishvili, a billionaire tycoon with a fortune nearly half the size of Georgia's economy, hopes the prison scandal will convince undecided voters that Saakashvili has become an undemocratic leader who tramples on rights and freedoms.

The West, which has praised Saakashvili as a reformer and opponent of corruption, is watching the election closely.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in Brussels that the election was "a litmus test of the way democracy works in Georgia."

Before the vote, video of torture, beatings and sexual assault of prison inmates led to street protests after it was aired on two television channels opposed to Saakashvili.

The furor undermined Saakashvili's image as a reformer who had imposed the rule of law and rooted out corruption.

"I'm voting against violence and abuse. How can I do otherwise after what we have all seen on TV?" Natela Zhorzholiani, 68, said outside a polling station at a school in the capital, Tbilisi.

She said she was voting for the six-party Georgian Dream movement led by Ivanishvili, who has reshaped the political landscape by uniting the usually fractious opposition since entering politics less than a year ago.

About 1 million of Georgia's 3.6 million eligible voters live in Tbilisi, the capital, where opposition support is strongest. Lines formed outside some polling stations in the morning, and the Central Election Commission said turnout in the first four hours of voting had surpassed 25 percent.

Saakashvili, 44, must step down after a presidential election next year, when reforms weakening the head of state and giving more power to parliament and the prime minister are to take affect.

If his United National Movement retains dominance of parliament, it may give him a way to remain in charge of the country of 4.5 million, an important gas and oil transit route to the West.

If not, Ivanishvili could become prime minister and Georgia's dominant politician.

"Besides being a contest for parliament, it is also a shadow leadership election," said Thomas de Waal, a Caucasus expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Georgian Dream said Monday's voting was marred by incidents of electoral violations and

violence. It alleged that an assailant attacked a coalition member on a precinct electoral commission in Tbilisi with a baseball bat, breaking her leg.

The Central Election Commission said the chairman of a polling station in the town of Rustavi was wounded in a separate attack but that overall voting was taking place in “a calm environment.”

“We cannot observe or detect any grave violations at this stage,” Tamar Chugoshvili, head of Georgian Young Lawyers Association, an independent NGO that has been critical of the government, said hours into the voting.

If Georgian Dream wins a majority in parliament, it would mark the first transfer of power from one party to another by means of a vote in Georgia since the Soviet breakup.

“We will replace the government through an election today for the first time.” Ivanishvili said.

The 56-year-old has a spectacular glass and metal home overlooking Tbilisi where he displays art works by Damien Hirst and Roy Lichtenstein, but until recently he was so reclusive that few people knew what he looked like.

Saakashvili, who cast his ballot with his Dutch wife and their young son, suggested his party was Georgia’s best chance for democracy and reforms. Without referring directly to Moscow, he hinted the opposition would bring Georgia back to its Russian-dominated past.

“The fate of our country’s statehood is being decided today,” Saakashvili said.

The election would affect “not only this nation but what happens to the European dream,” he said.

Saakashvili’s supporters accuse Ivanishvili, who made much of his money in Russia, of being a Kremlin stooge.

Ivanishvili denies that and says he would continue to pursue integration with the West. But he says he would be better at handling ties with Moscow than Saakashvili, whose rule has seen the severing of diplomatic relations over the 2008 war and Russian bans on Georgian wine and mineral water.

Many Georgians just want political and economic calm. The economy, hit by the 2008 war and the global financial crisis, has been growing again since 2010 but inflation is likely to hit 6 to 7 percent this year.

“I voted for peace and stability,” said Georgy Ugrekhelidze, 76. “I want this government to carry out what it has started.” ☒

(Reuters, AP)

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