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Georgia After Saakashvili

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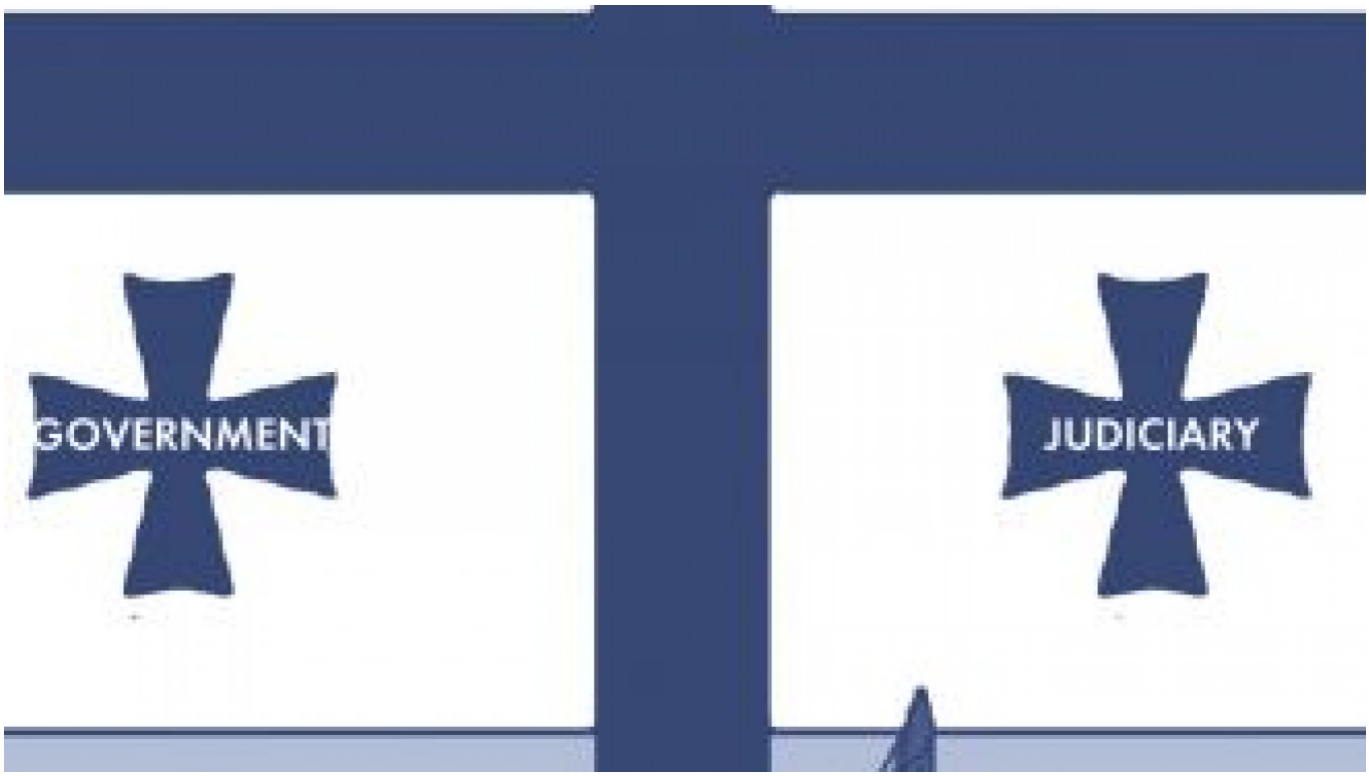

Sunday night, before the exit polls were tallied up, David Bakradze gracefully conceded defeat to Giorgi Margvelashvili in the most uneventful presidential election in Georgia's history.

"They voted just like Americans," one observer noted, although "Chicagoans" would be more accurate. But despite a scattering of minor violations, these were by far the freest and fairest elections ever held in a former Soviet state. As Georgia turns the page of history, the question on everybody's mind is how is it going to fill in the blank page?

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The presidential election on its own is rather insubstantial as the 2010 constitutional amendments that now come into effect have rendered the presidential functions to basically a symbolic ribbon cutter. And Margvelashvili did not run on his own merits. Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili appointed him to run because of his vapidity and lack of ambition. Ivanishvili wants to see a government of technocrats, not personalities. Although he holds the reins of power for the time being, Ivanishvili, the 229th wealthiest man in the world, will soon be relinquishing these to an equally inconsequential but supposedly capable figure. The inscrutable Ivanishvili says he will tell us exactly who this mystery person is next week.

The plan is to turn Georgia into a true democratic republic in which laws get passed in a pluralistic parliament. There will be no more men on white horses calling the shots — presumably including billionaires. The concept is unheard of for this part of the world. The irony, as Columbia University professor Lincoln Mitchell notes, is that all the people who thought Georgia would be in dire trouble if Ivanishvili came to power are the same people who think the country will fall into chaos without him.

People will have to get used to the fact that the government is now going to move much more slowly, which is what it is supposed to do. Outgoing Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili created a one-party, "you're with us or against us" government that jailed, blackmailed and sidelined dissenters so that it could quickly push through its brand of state-building reforms and chimeric development projects. Georgians, an impatient bunch, got used to the speed at which things were accomplished, even if they did not agree with them.

Now there is going to be debate, although we will have to stomach ludicrous proposals from homophobic, Georgian nationalists and Orthodox Christian fundamentalists, but that is part and parcel of having legitimately elected officials. Remember when Americans voted David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, into power in Louisiana as a state representative in the early 1990s. What is overlooked, however, is that Georgia has already passed laws to protect the independence of the judiciary and to ensure more transparency in media ownership.

The conservatives, liberals and xenophobes that make up the Georgian Dream majority are supposed to fall apart. It's called democracy, and when that happens it won't just be a test for Georgian democracy. It will be another milestone. Nobody said it was going to be easy, not even Ivanishvili. But it is necessary.

The question that nobody has asked yet is what will happen when somebody comes along to fill the power vacuum Ivanishvili will leave behind? Pluralism is great, but we have to be realistic. Not because this is Georgia but because Georgians are human. The most troubling issue is that Ivanishvili has warned that he may come back to set things right if his people drop the ball.

Apparently, you can't be the godfather of Georgian politics and a democrat, too.

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