

Georgia Ruling Party Wins Local Polls as Mass Protests Flare

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Mikhail Yegikov/TASS

Georgia's ruling party won local elections Saturday and police fired tear gas and water cannons at anti-government protesters who tried to enter the presidential palace, as tens of thousands of people rallied to the opposition's call to save democracy.

Saturday's polls were the ruling populist Georgian Dream party's first electoral test since a disputed parliamentary vote a year ago plunged the Black Sea nation into turmoil and prompted Brussels to effectively freeze the EU-candidate country's accession bid.

With nearly 75% of precincts reporting, the central election commission said Georgian Dream had secured municipal council majorities in every municipality, with more than 80% of the vote.

Ruling party candidates scored landslide wins in mayoral races in all cities, the commission said.

Ahead of the demonstration, authorities pledged a tough response to those it cast as seeking “revolution.”

Waving Georgian and EU flags, tens of thousands flooded Tbilisi's Freedom Square for what organizers dubbed a “national assembly,” an AFP reporter saw.

The normally low-key local elections have acquired high stakes after months of raids on independent media, restrictions on civil society and the jailing of dozens of opponents and activists.

Opera star-turned-activist Paata Burchuladze attended the Freedom Square demonstration to read out — to loud applause — a declaration claiming “power returns to the people,” branding the government “illegitimate” and announcing a transition.

Demonstrators then marched toward the presidential palace and tried to enter the compound, prompting law enforcement to fire tear gas and water cannon. Protesters erected barricades and set them on fire.

The crowd broke up shortly after midnight.

“Every person involved in this violent act will be prosecuted,” Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze told reporters.

The government has foiled an “attempted coup planned by foreign intelligence services,” he said without giving details of his claim.

He accused EU officials of backing an “attempt to overthrow the constitutional order” and urged the bloc's ambassador to condemn the unrest, saying the envoy shares responsibility.

The Interior Ministry said it had opened a probe into “calls to violently alter Georgia's constitutional order or overthrow state authority” and arrested five protest leaders, including Burchuladze.

Pro-opposition Pirveli TV reported that the 70-year-old, a world-renowned operatic bass and activist, was detained in the intensive care unit of a Tbilisi hospital, where he was being treated for a heart attack.

The five face up to 9 years in prison, Deputy Interior Minister Alexandre Darakvelidze told reporters.

Jailed reformist ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili had urged supporters to protest on election day for what he called the “last chance” to save Georgian democracy.

Without action, “many more people will be arrested and the rest driven out,” he warned. “Total hopelessness will take hold and the West will finally give up on us.”

“Anyone who cares about Georgia's fate should be out here today,” 77-year-old protester

Natela Gvakharia told AFP. “We are here to protect our democracy, which Georgian Dream is destroying.”

Rights groups say some 60 people — among them key opposition figures, journalists and activists — have been jailed over the past year.

Amnesty International said the elections were “taking place amid severe political reprisals against opposition figures and civil society.”

Georgian Dream has been in power since 2012.

It is controlled by billionaire former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who voted in Tbilisi early on Saturday morning surrounded by cameras.

Georgian Dream initially presented itself as a liberal alternative to Saakashvili's reformist camp.

But since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, critics say it has tilted toward Moscow, pursuing far-right policies and adopting Kremlin-style measures targeting independent media and NGOs.

Georgian Dream says it is safeguarding “stability” in the country of 4 million while a Western “deep state” seeks to drag Georgia into the war in Ukraine with the help of opposition parties.

Analysts say its blunt pitch — claiming that the opposition wants war while it wants peace — resonates in rural areas and is amplified by disinformation.

A recent survey by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis put the party's approval rating at about 36%, against 54% for opposition groups.

The European Union has sanctioned several Georgian Dream party officials over previous crackdowns on protesters.

It warned it could suspend Georgians' right to visa-free travel to the EU unless the government improves the rule of law and protects fundamental rights.

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