

Can Georgia Become A Multiparty Democracy?

By Cory Welt, Washington

Abstract

Georgia's October 2012 parliamentary elections were historic. They marked the first time in Georgia's independent history that a ruling party acknowledged electoral defeat and handed over power. The question now is whether the victorious Georgian Dream coalition will end up being democrats in practice. The Georgian Dream is a decentralized and diverse grouping of parties, which will take office with a slim majority in what will be a parliamentary system of governance after constitutional reforms take effect in October 2013. The leadership of the outgoing party of power, the United National Movement, appears to be committed to playing a substantive role as the parliamentary minority. While much could still go awry, the intra-coalition dynamics of the Georgian Dream, the UNM's transformation into an opposition force, and mutual political tolerance after the election bode well for the consolidation of Georgian democracy.

Historic Elections, Then What?

Georgia's October 2012 parliamentary elections were historic. They marked the first time in Georgia's independent history that the country's ruling party acknowledged electoral defeat and handed over power. Georgia has thus embarked on a path previously blazed in post-Soviet Eurasia by the Baltic states, Moldova, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.

But will the end result of this democratic election be democracy? To assess whether democracy has been consolidated, political scientist Samuel Huntington famously proposed a "two-turnover test," whereby power *twice* must change hands via democratic elections.¹

In post-Soviet Eurasia, the "two-turnover test" of democracy is a good idea. Among Georgia's neighbors, democratic turnovers have often led to authoritarian governments. Belarus' president Alexander Lukashenko won a democratic election in 1994 and went on to establish the "last dictatorship in Europe." Moldova's Communists won democratic elections in 1998 to rule in semi-authoritarian fashion until they gave up power at the ballot box in 2009–2010. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution of 2004 ground to a halt in 2010 when the revolution's loser, Viktor Yanukovich, was elected president and imprisoned his political opponents.

In Georgia, some fear that the democratically elected victors might also end up governing through undemocratic means. Skepticism revolves around the figure of incoming Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire reportedly worth half of Georgia's GDP and a man used to getting what he wants. Like most tycoons who made their fortune in Russia's rough-and-tumble 1990s, Ivanishvili was successful in a murky business environment. Some observers, following the electoral rhetoric of

the outgoing government, have speculated about possible links to crooked businessmen and organized crime.² Since Ivanishvili entered politics, his instincts toward at least one critical element of democracy—media freedom—have not inspired much confidence.³

Such concerns have been ameliorated, however, by Georgia's pending shift away from a strong presidential form of governance—traditionally bad for democracy in post-Soviet Eurasia—to a parliamentary system established as part of a 2010 constitutional reform. After a transition period that will extend through the October 2013 presidential election, Georgia's parliament will be responsible for directly electing the prime minister, who will be the top executive official in the country. The directly elected president will remain commander-in-chief and serve as kingmaker between the parliamentary majority and government, in the event a rift arises between them.

A parliamentary system does not guarantee democracy. Submissive parties of authoritarian-leaning leaders can achieve victory in parliamentary elections just as their leaders may be elected to strong presidential posts. Given a substantial enough victory—or even just control of the courts—such parties could continue to govern as they would under a strong presidency and even make constitutional changes that formally return the country to more authoritarian rule.

Favorable Signs for Democracy

In Georgia's case, the critical difference is that this election has not just swung the pendulum from one hegemonic ruling party to another. The intra-coalition dynamics of the victorious Georgian Dream, the strong showing of the ex-ruling party, the United National

1 Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993 [1991]): 266–67.

2 <http://georgiaonline.ge/interviews/1348955811.php>

3 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24822>; http://www.foreign-policy.com/articles/2012/10/02/the_new_titan_of_tbilisi

Movement, and their mutual post-election tolerance may be just what Georgia needs to consolidate its democracy.

First, the Georgian Dream coalition is not a monolithic bloc. It comprises six main parties, who occupy 81 of the 85 parliamentary seats (out of 150) that the coalition has won, plus a handful of individuals representing smaller parties. These six parties are an ideologically diverse lot that coalesced around Ivanishvili on the basis of their shared anti-government sentiment and the tycoon's draw as a center of opposition gravity. The eponymous Georgian Dream party, headed by Ivanishvili, has at its helm a mix of academics, professors, journalists, cultural and sports figures, and ex-government workers. The two strongest junior partners of the Georgian Dream, the Free Democrats and the Republican Party, are parties with established reformist and pro-democracy profiles. Another, the Industrialists, represent business interests who formerly supported the government of Eduard Shevardnadze. The last two, the Conservatives and National Forum, are more nationalist-minded parties.

The coalition's diversity has persisted since the election. The differences between the parties and their leaderships are well known. The Republicans, led by new parliamentary chairman David Usupashvili, and the Free Democrats, led by ex-UN ambassador and incoming defense minister Irakly Alasania, have formed their own separate factions in parliament. The Georgian Dream may find it difficult to govern as a bloc over time, but its diversity could also help keep the new authorities on a democratic path. The Free Democrats, Republicans, and possibly others in the coalition can be expected to resist any potential attempts by Ivanishvili to govern in more authoritarian fashion.

This would not matter that much if the locus of executive power remained the presidency, but in Georgia's new parliamentary system, the Georgian Dream's coalition partners have more leverage over their patron. The defection of just one or two parties can upend the government. Of the coalition's 85 seats, just 46 (54%) belong to Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party, while 20 belong in total to the Free Democrats and Republicans.⁴ If the Georgian Dream loses just 11 allied deputies, its control of the government would be at risk: after next year's constitutional reforms, a simple majority of deputies (76) will be able to pronounce no-confidence in the government. This will not automatically lead to the latter's resignation, since it is the president that will have the authority to dissolve the government. Even if the president refuses, however, a 60 percent majority can

override his decision. And over the next year a no-confidence vote is even simpler to obtain, as the president may remove the prime minister at any time. Ivanishvili will thus not be able to alienate his coalition partners without putting his own authority at risk.

Second, the determination of the UNM to remain a serious political force can also help prod Georgia forward on a democratic path. Well before final election results came in, President Mikheil Saakashvili not only conceded defeat but declared that the UNM—with its 43 percent of parliamentary seats—was prepared to enter parliament as a real opposition. He and other top party leaders—outgoing prime minister and new party secretary-general Vano Merabishvili and National Security Council chairman Giga Bokeria—have repeatedly stressed the “fundamental differences” that persist between UNM policies and those of the incoming government. Bastions of UNM authority have shored up their security: the Tbilisi City Council established its own security service while the president transferred authority of agencies in charge of secure communications and maintenance of official residences to the Special State Protection Service, subordinated to the presidency. If the UNM survives, it has a chance to become the most well resourced institutionalized opposition force Georgia ever had.

Finally, the incoming and outgoing authorities have agreed to respect each other's political legitimacy. After meeting with a mild international uproar, Ivanishvili walked backed from his early “suggestion” that it would be best if Saakashvili were to resign. While coalition leaders have said that serious crimes committed by former government officials will be prosecuted, they have openly rejected talk of retribution. After a post-election meeting with Saakashvili, Ivanishvili insisted that “we will treat our opponents not how they deserve, but how our country...deserves.”⁵ In his first speech as parliamentary chairman, Usupashvili declared that “those times when winners had the right to do everything and losers were left to their fate should now be over.”⁶ For his part, Saakashvili included a specific message to the UNM in his opening address to the new parliament: “I wish the [parliamentary] minority to agree with government when the government is right and to be constructive, but also to be restless and irreconcilable when you disagree, but on the condition that you will never be in opposition to your own country.”⁷

4 http://www.geowel.org/index.php?article_id=81&clang=0; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25375>

5 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25333>; <http://dfwatch.net/saakashvili-meets-election-winner-ivanishvili-76182>.

6 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25376>

7 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25373>

Challenges Ahead

Much can still go awry. The Georgian Dream may yet go after UNM members with a vengeance. The temptation to persuade (or bribe) opposition legislators to defect may also prove strong. Indeed, the UNM may still disintegrate or suffer defections to the new ruling party. Senior party officials—the ex-ministers of defense, internal affairs, and justice—left their posts (and the country) while still in office. In the Tbilisi City Council, where the UNM controls nearly 80 percent of fifty seats, five UNM representatives have already defected to the Georgian Dream. And like the Georgian Dream, the UNM has divided into three parliamentary factions,

formally to secure certain procedural advantages, while five of its deputies have refused to join any faction. If the UNM loses just 15 seats to the Georgian Dream, the latter will end up with a two-thirds majority, able to change the constitution at its whim.

Nonetheless, almost a month after Georgia's first democratic electoral transition, the indicators for a consolidation of Georgian democracy are pointing in the right direction. Georgia is at the halfway point of Huntington's "two-turnover test," but the odds that it will complete this test in the years to come are now much better than they were several weeks ago.

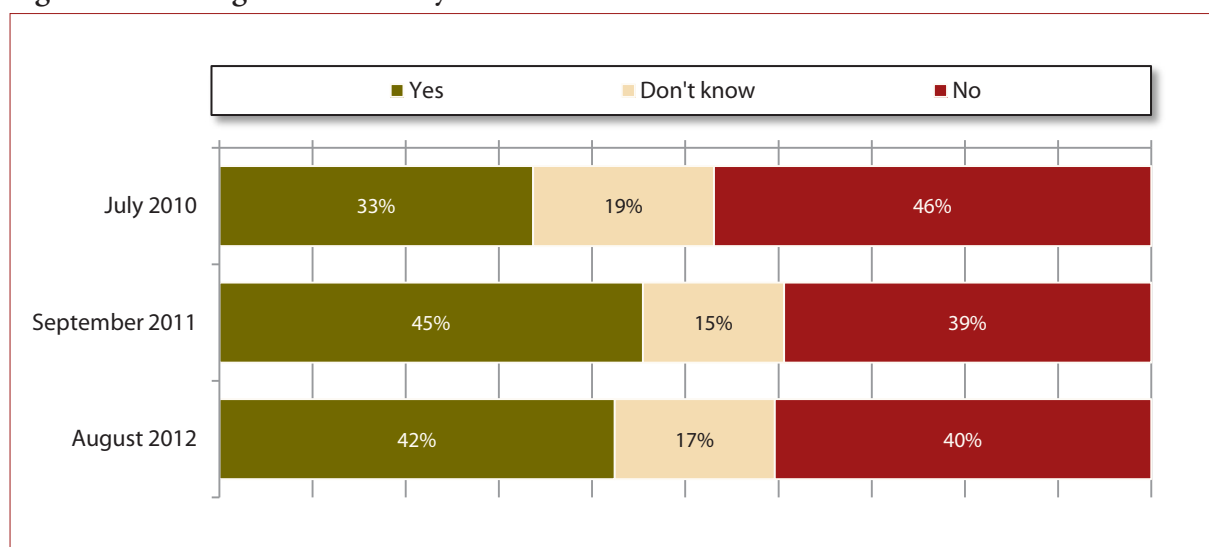
About the Author

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OPINION POLL

Georgian Public Opinion on the Quality of the Parliamentary Elections (August 2012)

Figure 1: Is Georgia A Democracy Now?



Source: Luis Navarro, Ian T. Woodward: *Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of an August 2012 survey carried out by the Caucasus Resources Research Center, NDI (National Democratic Institute), available online at <http://www.ndi.org/node/19283>*