

# ELECTIONWATCH

## GEORGIA



### Georgia Pre-Election Watch: May 2010 Local Elections

Following the war with Russia in August 2008, Georgia's political opposition ordered street protests beginning in April 2009, as they had in November 2007 when protesting allegations of corruption and cover ups made against President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The opposition demanded Saakashvili's resignation, this time over his mishandling of the war and failure to further democratize Georgia. Unlike the protests of November 2007, the government did not take action against the protestors, even as they blocked the main streets in Tbilisi with mock prison cells and took up long-term vigil. With the exception of occasional minor clashes, the demonstrations continued unmolested until July 27 before they were officially called off by the opposition on the grounds that they needed to regroup and rebuild their resources.

Several opposition leaders, primarily Levan Gachechiladze and Nino Burjanadze claimed that the protests had been successful while others, including David Gamkrelidze, admitted that they had borne little fruit other than the promise of local elections and a directly elected Mayor of Tbilisi. By that time, President Saakashvili, Speaker of Parliament David Bakradze and others in the administration had met with opposition leaders on several occasions and worked out a rough plan to have local elections early in 2010, which would include the direct election of the mayor of Tbilisi. Part of the deal to end protests included the establishment of two commissions - one to revise the electoral code, and the other to revise the constitution.

The Electoral Code Working Group concluded its work in December 2009, reaching unanimity on all items except for the threshold required for a mayoral candidate to be declared the winner. The threshold was eventually set at 30 percent after the Alliance for Georgia walked out of the final discussions over that matter, having wanted a higher bar. Other items included the realignment and expansion of the Tbilisi city council to 50 members, the resignation and appointment of a new chairman of the Central Election Commission, and the reapportionment of government/opposition seats on the CEC and on district and precinct commissions. In February, the government allocated roughly \$700,000 from the state budget to political parties for use in checking voter lists. Twelve parties received these funds, allocated equally, based upon the results of the previous local elections in 2006. Finally, on March 30, 60 days prior to the proposed election date, the Georgian parliament declared local elections as required by law.

### Political Environment

As Election Day approaches, most of the focus both within Georgia and internationally has been on the Tbilisi mayoral race. This is somewhat understandable, as the city is home to

roughly one-third of the country's 4.6 million people. Currently nine candidates are registered in that particular contest. Of those, five are expected to win more than a few percent of the vote. These include:

**Gigi Ugulava, United National Movement:** Ugulava is the incumbent mayor and the favorite to win a new term. He was an instrumental figure during the Rose Revolution in 2004 and has remained one of the most important politicians in Georgia. His main focus is on reducing unemployment.

**Irakli Alasania, Alliance for Georgia:** Alasania is the former Georgian Ambassador to the United Nations and an outspoken critic of Saakashvili. He was seen as a strong challenger early in the race, but has since seen a decline in popular support. He is running on a platform of solving unemployment and establishing a fund for offering direct loans to small businesses.

**Giorgi Chanturia, Christian Democratic Movement:** Chanturia is a former Shevardnadze-era official, and one of the architects of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. He is running on a platform of lowering taxes and increasing employment.

**Zviad Dzidziguri, National Council:** Dzidziguri is leading the ticket for a coalition of the Conservatives, Peoples Party, and the Movement for a Fair Georgia. His slogans invoke struggle against the current ruling party and Saakashvili. His coalition has been criticized as being pro-Russian by the government and pro-western opposition following highly publicized visits to Moscow by Fair Georgia Chairman and former Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli.

**Gogi Topadze, Industry Will Save Georgia:** Topadze is the owner of the Kazbegi beverage company and is running for mayor for the second time. His Industrialist party did well in the previous local elections, finishing fourth. His platform is also based on resolving unemployment.

These five candidates participated in the first live, televised debates in Georgia on May 9, discussing such issues as employment, social benefits, infrastructure and taxation. While this is not the only race in the country, it features as the most prominent.

On May 30, 3,616 precinct polling stations will be open nationwide, 741 of which are in Tbilisi. Twenty-six political parties submitted the necessary 30,000 signatures to be registered by the April 23 deadline. Some of them will be running in blocs, most notably the Alliance for Georgia (New Rights, Republicans, Our Georgia-Free Democrats and Georgia's Way), a bloc led by the Christian Democratic Movement which includes We Ourselves and the Christian Democratic People's Party, and the National Council (Movement for Fair Georgia, Conservatives and Party of People).

Most of these parties, however, are operating almost entirely in Tbilisi and have focused little on races in the regions, with the notable exceptions of the United National Movement, Christian Democratic Movement and a few others. All the focus on the capitol's races means that there is a reasonable expectation that the elections there will be free and fair. It also raises concerns that in the regions there will be a much greater application of pressure on voters, particularly from the ruling party through the use of administrative resources.

Speaking to the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC on April 16, President Saakashvili was asked about the use of administrative resources, answering that "we are going to use whatever resources we have to improve peoples' lives, even if they (critics) say we are abusing it." However, on May 10, the Central Election Commission warned local governments that additional funds which had been provided at the beginning of the year to boost operating budgets ought not to be used during the election period to start new projects or else such projects would be declared election violations. Despite this, the May 11 report issued by Transparency International indicates that while the situation is better than in the past, the use of government resources to sway votes is still in evidence.

## IRI in Georgia

One of the crucial elements in furthering democracy building in Georgia is creating and maintaining well-organized, stable political parties. After the Rose Revolution, all major political parties that did not enter the new government had lost credibility with the electorate and needed to re-build their organizations from the ground up. IRI has worked steadily since 1998 to strengthen the internal party structures of all parties, whether they are aligned with the government, parliamentary opposition or non-parliamentary opposition.

Following the presidential election in January 2008, IRI began working with several new or resurgent parties to help them build their structures and compete in the May 2008 parliamentary elections. Since the end of the 2008 election cycle, IRI has held trainings for both leadership and functionaries from nearly all major political parties in Georgia. IRI has also assisted several major parties in establishing strong women's chapters to advocate for women's issues within the party structure and the government. IRI has a long-standing relationship with major youth organizations and party youth organizations in Georgia, which it uses to train young party activists in everything from political campaign techniques and management skills to election observation. This nation-wide network of young political and civil society activists provides the backbone for future party development.

Since May 2003, IRI has conducted nationwide polling and focus groups with the aim of informing the development of governance, party platforms and ideologies based on issues of importance to the electorate.

In September 2008, IRI started a new governance program in the regions which aims to increase the capacity of regional and municipal elected officials to effectively manage their mandates, increase local government transparency, and communicate with their constituents with a greater degree of autonomy from Tbilisi.



JOIN OUR  
MAILING LIST



Facebook



Twitter

Email Marketing by

