Election Outcome in Georgia Leaves Many Asking: “And What Now?”

Now the votes are counted in the Georgian municipal elections there are no surprises, and the reactions are what you would have expected.

Georgians didn’t have much of a real choice between the two main political parties on Election Day, or during the runoff held on October 30. Those who came out to cast their ballots held their noses and voted for the lesser of two evils, which the voters decided was the ruling Georgian Dream (GD).

However, many more voters just stayed home, totally disillusioned. The sad reality in Georgia, once touted as a beacon of democracy by the West, is that the flickering beacon is burning out.

As one article summed up so well prior to the run-off elections (second round):

“Vote, and you’ll regret it; don’t vote, you may also regret it; whoever you vote for, you are likely to regret it either way.”
The results were very one sided, which raises many flags but was to be expected. With 100% of precincts counted, results published by the Central Election Commission show Georgian Dream candidates victorious in 19 mayoral runoffs, including in the self-governing cities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Rustavi and Poti.

The United National Movement’s mayoral candidate won in Tsalenjikha, an isolated town in West Georgia far removed from the political mainstream, as per the preliminary results. Just as the opposition were confined to a few rural outposts in the UNM’s time, so the UNM are the new vehicle for making people who don’t matter appear backward, and not deserving of the attention of the majority.

The UNM, the party of former president Saakashvili now in prison in Tbilisi, is “screaming foul” as it has in every recent election.

Nika Melia, the head of the main opposition party United National Movement and a mayoral candidate in Tbilisi, claimed that “the victories gained by the opposition in many municipalities were taken away...like they never happened.”

The UNM claims widespread election fraud and vote rigging. They should know, as they turned such practices into a fine art when they were in power.

The US Embassy is making similar allegations -

(The elections were) well-administered, but allegations of intimidation and pressure on voters persisted, and continued polarisation, coupled with the escalation of negative rhetoric, adversely affected the process. Sharp imbalances of resources and an undue advantage of incumbency further tilted the playing field. There was also concerns noted over the persistent practice of representatives of observer organisations acting as party supporters, at times interfering with the process, and groups of individuals potentially influencing voters outside some polling stations. The impartiality of the lower-level election commissions persisted. It is [worth noting] that the U.S. Embassy election observation teams witnessed similar interference and bias at several precincts.

Much of this may be true. However, a double standard is being applied. When Saakashvili and his party were in power the US government and international organisations turned a blind eye to most, if not all, such allegations, and these same generic language can be used of any election, anywhere, and was brushed off as such during Saakashvili’s time.

Georgians have become numb. They understand elections are futile, and will never be free and fair, as all the politicians need to be replaced. Totally new blood needs to be brought into government, as both the GD and UNM have failed and betrayed the Georgian people.

Much of the election campaign was more a focus on the legal fate of Mikheil Saakashvili than real issues. He had been smuggled back to Georgia in the back of a truck on 1st October, and was immediately arrested. His political antics, and legal accountability for at least some of his many crimes, are finally catching up with him.

It would have rather entertaining to have seen him parachuted in, or delivered by a German U-boat, something a little bit more bizarre, or riding a camel. But now he is back, the question remains for how long ... and for how long will he stay locked up in a Georgian prison.

Saakashvili served a useful purpose for the Georgian Dream, as a sideshow, distraction and whipping boy. He will continue to be a distraction from their own failure to deliver on their many promises, including how they are dealing with the COVID pandemic.

Saakashvili is also being used by everybody else, even some in the UNM. But the new generation of educated and patriotic Georgians would rather he stay away- out of sight and out of mind!

It is time for Georgia to move forward, and stop living in the past. Saakashvili’s billing is running out. The GD was elected because Saakashvili was a crook, but that has ceased being a good enough reason to support it. Blaming him for everything wrong with the country wears increasingly thin when you’ve had nine years to sort it out, and failed to offer a credible vision of what a non-criminal future would look like.
Not the Prodigal Son

Saakashvili knew he would be detained should he return to Georgia. His return is at the behest of larger geopolitical interests. Having worn out his welcome elsewhere, he has no choice but to bend to the will of his former friends, who let him think he was as clever as they.

It is just a matter of time before those who supported him for their own reasons totally abandon him. He has a record of not being wanted as his political stock value goes up and down. Tossed from one country to another, Ukraine to Poland and then back under the new government, Saakashvili’s checkered past precedes him wherever he goes now, and not before time.

Saakashvili still hopes that his inside knowledge of the sins of the West, especially those connected with the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, arms and drug trafficking, can be used to blackmail it, and he will somehow be able to get out of jail and pick up where he left off. But that is not going to happen, at least now, in the wake of this last ditch effort to get the UNM back into government.

He may have showed up on his own to face Georgian justice, a six year prison term, but this will not make a martyr out of him. Many locals are predicting that, once the runoff election dust settles, he will be released and then immediately tossed back to Ukraine, either on a pretext or to face his crimes there to give Georgia greater leverage to bring its own long overdue charges.

To get more attention, Saakashvili has been on a prison hunger strike for the last 30 days. But no one has noticed, other than a few foreign missions and the US Ambassador. You can read US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan say that she is concerned about Saakashvili’s wellbeing, but the fact that all she does is talk about it tells Saakashvili, and his countrymen, all they need to know.

All for Show!

Georgian PM Garibashvili dismissed the question about Saakashvili’s hunger strike by saying “the law says an individual has the right to suicide”. This comes after comments from other ruling party officials, saying that Saakashvili is not, in fact, on hunger strike and is "doing it for the show."

In a way however, such comments play into Saakashvili’s hands. He can’t survive thirty days without food no one can. So if not a martyr, he is immortal—a leader anointed with superhuman powers that alone can save the country from itself. He may also be able to get a more regular cocaine supply in prison, which he tried to disguise while president with the same sort of logic.

But sadly, there are people who wish to believe him. Georgian elections are modeled on US elections, so they are full of media spin, falsehoods and echo chambers.

PBS is already putting spin on the elections here, trying to make it look like the UNM has hundreds of thousands of protestors filling the streets, complaining about rigged election. Friends in USA are sending such links unsolicited, as if now they are deeply informed on Tbilisi politics.

Saakashvili has an American lawyer, John Sandvig, allocated as part of a cleanup operation. Sandvig is definitely not in Georgia to protect Saakashvili’s interests but to try to put a lid on Georgia’s involvement in drug trafficking during his regime, and prevent revelation of how many in the US government, intelligence agencies and DoD were actively involved.

Georgia was then the perfect conduit for drugs and weapons, many of them coming out of Afghanistan. But policies can change overnight, and denying any involvement with all this will ultimately result in Saakashvili’s US friends suddenly discovering his crimes and leading the charge to prosecute him themselves, when Sandvig has found the way to spin this.

One respondent in researching for this article shared how he had personally provided undercover tapes about some of the crimes associated with weapons trafficking to the Georgian authorities several years ago - and if Georgia wants to understand why the American lawyer John Sandvig is getting involved in the case of Mikheil Saakashvili, it is all a matter of official record, supported by his sworn testimony.

Sandvig served as Director of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency between 2013 and 2014, and he knows these details. If not, he can get into the files of ICE, Immigration and Customs; it (the documentation) is all there. The respondent is under the order of a US Federal Judge from the State of Arizona not to reveal additional

Nor is it only the Americans trying to whitewash Saakashvili’s crimes by blaming him alone. One of Saakashvili’s Georgian lawyers, Beka Basilaia, says his health condition is worrying. But how he expresses this concern reveals he couldn’t care less about protecting his client’s health, merely the official line of his time.

“It is the duty of the Georgian people, the Georgian society, and we must fulfill this duty in order to release Mikheil Saakashvili, the third president of Georgia, from being Putin's prisoner, and use the Strasbourg court,” Basilaia said. So his release would not be because he is innocent or sick, but because he was on the “right side”, and that side, rather than him, has to be protected.

**Will Saakashvili be returning to the Ukraine?**

Saakashvili’s plan for returning and jacking up the political temperature ended with a clear cut victory for the GD. Georgians do not suffer from complete memory lapses, and whatever the GD has failed to do, it is still better than reverting to what Saakashvili actually did.

Many people who still vote for the UNM actually hate it. They vote just out of protest at the failures of the GD, as a scare tactic rather than an indication of preference. In their minds, it is “just a crying shame that someone has to win.”

Where Georgia goes from here, nobody knows. The GD is a coalition of people who fell out with Saakashvili, but the only reason the UNM is still around is because it leads an unholy alliance, based on the enemy-of-my-enemy—is-my-friend, invented purely to vote the GD party out of office.

Neither side has any ideology people believe in or listen to, and this cannot be coincidental, as Georgia has had this imposed upon it ever since the president with demonstrable popular support, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was removed with the connivance of the West. Georgians aren’t allowed to have anyone they can believe in for too long, for then they will start believing in themselves, and expecting better, and only Georgians want that to happen.

The GD still trades on “good versus evil”, and has thus become more deeply rooted than ever. But what happens when someone else without negative connotations comes along, and insists the dynamic should be “works versus doesn’t work”?

Georgia’s elections are always about what sort of rubber stamp should be given to the US, and that in turn depends on what the US wants to present itself as at the time. Little wonder that Georgians themselves will, as usual, wearily put up with it all, until the system is not even worth trying to second guess, let along defend.

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