
Georgia Holds Parliamentary Elections in Dangerous Security Environment

By Vladimir Socor
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Georgia is holding parliamentary elections on May 21 against a backdrop of Russian military threats and economic and transport blockades, amid overall Western passivity in the face of those pressures.

These parliamentary elections are the latest challenge in the series of challenges that have befallen Georgia in rapid succession from autumn 2007 to the present: 1) the opposition's regime-change campaign and aborted putsch, bankrolled by the billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili; 2) the pre-term presidential election in December 2007-January 2008; 3) Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections in December 2007 and April 2008, with their destabilizing effects on Russian policies toward Georgia; 4) Moscow's retaliatory moves in Abkhazia, following the international recognition of Kosova's independence; and 5) the escalating Russian pressures following NATO's consideration of a Georgian membership action plan at the alliance's April summit.

The Georgian government had anticipated this series of potentially overwhelming problems and was aware of the limitations on its own means to respond adequately on multiple fronts. The disproportion between these simultaneous challenges and the government's meager material and personnel resources is key to comprehending Georgia's situation at this time. No country in Europe or the formerly Soviet-ruled territory from 1991 to date has had to conduct elections under such complicated circumstances.

Twelve parties and electoral blocs -- or more than 20 parties, counting those grouped within blocs -- participate in these elections. At stake are 150 parliamentary seats, including 75 seats to be contested by lists of parties and blocs on the basis of the proportional system and another 75 seats to be contested in as many single-mandate electoral districts in first-past-the-post races. The parliamentary representation threshold is 5 percent for the party lists and 30 percent for the first-past-the-post candidates in single-mandate districts (runoffs will be held in those districts where the winners garner less than 30 percent).

Georgia's 3.47 million eligible voters can cast their ballots in 3,430 voting precincts in the country and 47 polling stations abroad. The Central, District, and Precinct Electoral Commissions consist of 13 members at each level: six of them are politically unaffiliated, professionally trained electoral observers and the other seven are representatives of political parties (one from each of the seven parties represented in the current parliament).

More than 5,000 domestic observers from 37 Georgian NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and some 1,300 international observers from nearly 60 international organizations have registered to monitor these elections. These are exceptionally high numbers reflecting exceptionally high benchmarks, set specially for this country by outside observers.

The most recent professional survey was made public by the United

States-based Greenberg Quinlan Rosner opinion research firm on May 5 (GQR press release, May 5). It shows the governing United National Movement (UNM) as a distant front-runner against a deeply fractured opposition. According to the survey, UNM has 44 percent support among eligible voters, 53 percent among the likely voters who have already made up their minds for whom to vote, and 57 percent by adding UNM's likely share of the still-undecided voters.

The same survey shows opposition parties' support among eligible voters as follows: United Opposition Council (consisting of nine parties), 12 percent; Christian-Democrat Movement, 11 percent; Labor Party, 7 percent; Republican Party, 4 percent; other parties, well-nigh negligible percentages; and undecided voters, 16 percent. These support levels are not much different among the likely voters and among those who have already made up their minds: There, the United Opposition would take 16 percent, Christian-Democrats 9 percent, with Labor and the Republicans constant at 7 percent and 4 percent, respectively.

Based on face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 1,200 voters country-wide (excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and with sampling error margins of plus or minus 2.8 percent to 3.9 percent (for eligible and for likely voters, respectively), this government-commissioned survey was completed on April 20 on the ground. Intervening events may have had an as yet unquantified effect on voter preferences. These events include Russian military moves in Abkhazia, Parliament Chair Nino Burjanadze's decision to drop out of the UNM's electoral list, and the growing intensity of both UNM's and the opposition parties' electoral campaigns in the country.

Thanks to its own popularity rating and the opposition's internecine rivalries, the UNM is projected to win between 50% and 67% of the parliamentary seats (Messenger, May 14). In the vote on party lists, UNM will pick up a few additional seats at the expense of parties that fall below the 5% threshold. In the single-mandate districts, several opposition candidates compete against each other almost everywhere, often combating each other more intensely than they would combat the government. Some opposition leaders accuse each other of colluding with the government and not being a -real- opposition.

Opposition parties may, however, win a majority of the votes in Tbilisi, where they are far stronger than in the country at large. The capital is home to a number of social groups that lost out in the 2003 regime change and post-2003 transition to the liberal market economy. In addition, the United Opposition Council's leader Levan Gachechiladze (runner-up in the January 2008 presidential election) and some other opposition leaders can count on sizeable voter support from their native neighborhoods in Tbilisi.

(Civil Georgia, The Messenger, Rustavi-2 TV, May 1 to 18; Niklas Nilsson and Svante Cornell, -Georgia's May 2008 Parliamentary Elections: Setting Sail in A Storm,- Policy Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute/Silk Road Studies Program, May 2008)
