

---

## **Analysis : Is Georgian Opposition Still Force To Be Reckoned With?**

By Liz Fuller (RFE/RL analyst)  
The FINANCIAL, Georgia - 31/5/2008

---

The Georgian parliamentary elections on May 21 gave President Mikheil Saakashvili 's United National Movement for a Victorious Georgia a constitutional majority in the new legislature, but appear only to have perpetuated the political polarization that resulted from the crackdown on opposition supporters last November and the disputed preterm presidential ballot on January 5.

As in January, Saakashvili claimed victory for his party before all votes were counted, on the basis of preliminary returns and exit polls, while opposition leaders alleged that the outcome of the ballot (in which only some 55 percent of the electorate bothered to cast their votes) was falsified. Two of the three opposition parties that won parliamentary representation under the proportional system subsequently vowed to boycott the working of a parliament they consider lacking legitimacy and to establish an alternative parliament.

Meanwhile, international monitors concluded that not all problems identified during the January 5 presidential election were rectified, and termed the May 21 vote "not perfect" and not a true reflection of Georgia's "democratic potential."

The preliminary official results of the ballot, made public on May 23, gave Saakashvili 's party a total of 120 of the 150 mandates, 49 of the 75 distributed under the proportional system and 71 of the 75 single-mandate constituencies. The nine parties aligned in the United Opposition coalition won 16 seats (14 proportional, two majoritarian); the Labor Party and the recently created Christian Democratic Movement -- six proportional seats each; and the opposition Republicans - two seats in single-mandate constituencies.

That outcome represented an unpalatable defeat above all for the moderate Republican Party, which had sought to portray itself as a less radical and more constructive alternative than the sometimes strident and maximalist United Opposition coalition.

Yet both the distribution of votes and the level of voter participation loosely parallel that in the January 5 presidential ballot, in which Saakashvili polled 53.47 percent and Levan Gachechiladze of the United Opposition 25.6 percent, followed by now-deceased exiled oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili (7.1 percent) and Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili (6.49 percent). It thus seems that some opposition voters who opted in January for Gachechiladze or Patarkatsishvili transferred their support to the new Christian Democratic Movement, while others voted for the ruling party.

### **Opposition Boycott Questioned**

The nine opposition parties aligned in the United Opposition coalition rejected the official returns as rigged and announced on May 23 they would not

participate in the working of a legislature whose members Conservative Party leader Kakha Kukadze claimed were handpicked by Saakashvili , civil.ge reported. They further pledged to campaign for the annulment of the vote and the holding of new elections, as they had done, without success, in the wake of the disputed January presidential poll.

Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili said on May 23 that his party would join the proposed boycott, but one of its elected deputies, Nugzar Ergemlidze, was quoted by Caucasus Press on May 24 as saying he feels bound to protect the interests of his voters.

Giorgi Targamadze, leader of the Christian Democratic Movement, the third opposition group to win parliamentary representation under the proportional system, argued on May 22 that "We have been given parliamentary mandates by 200,000 of our voters, who cast their ballot for us and tasked us with implementation of concrete steps," Caucasus Press reported. The following day, Targamadze similarly said, "we should not go to extremes" and that "all resources should be used," meaning the chance, however slim, to influence the legislative process, civil.ge reported.

On May 28, Pikria Chikhradze, a leading member of the United Opposition, told journalists that those of its candidates who won election will nonetheless comply with all the formal requirements, including undergoing a drug test, needed to take possession of their mandates, Caucasus Press reported.

Addressing some 10,000 people who rallied outside the parliament building on May 26, United Opposition leader Gachechiladze, Saakashvili 's main challenger in the January presidential ballot, issued an ultimatum to the authorities to annul the outcome of the May 21 vote, failing which he pledged continued protests and a boycott of the new parliament. He further said the opposition "will not let a handful of criminals run the country," and appealed to the rally participants to reassemble on June 10 and form a human chain around the parliament building to prevent the new parliament convening for its first session.

But at its May 26 session, the Central Election Commission annulled the results only from 26 of the 3,604 polling stations, Caucasus Press reported. As of May 29, the results at 13 more polling stations have been annulled, according to civil.ge.

Speaking on May 26 at a joint press conference in Tbilisi with visiting Polish President Lech Kaczynski, President Saakashvili invited the opposition to engage in "dialogue," stressing that "the minority should respect the will of the majority," and that "the parliament has been elected...[and] will defend the interests of the whole of Georgia regardless of whether some people voted for it or not," civil.ge reported.

#### Lack Of Dialogue

He did not repeat his offer of May 20 to work more closely with the new parliament, and to "spare no efforts to ensure that the opposition plays a more active role in the process of ruling the country, to reduce polarization and confrontation in our politics, to make meetings and negotiations more fruitful and desirable for everyone, rather than protest rallies." Nor did he offer, as his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sarkisian did in the wake of the disputed February 21 Armenian presidential election, to forge a government of national reconciliation.

The United Opposition immediately rejected Saakashvili 's offer of dialogue: leading Conservative Party member Zviad Dzidzugiri told journalists that "we have nothing to discuss with a president who rigged the elections and deprived the Georgian people of the right to vote for the leadership they want," Caucasus Press reported.

Parallel to the boycott, the Republican and Labor parties and eight of the nine parties aligned in the United Opposition bloc plan to convene an alternative parliament, which will be based in the former election headquarters in Tbilisi of the New Rightists, who belong to the United Opposition. But Paata Davitaia announced on May 27 that the small Chven Tviton (We Ourselves) party he heads does not support the idea of an alternative parliament and for that reason will quit the opposition coalition, Caucasus Press reported.

Nor is it clear either what the opposition hopes to achieve through the alternative legislature, or how an opposition boycott will impact on the work of the parliament elected on May 21. True, the idea of a boycott is not new: several opposition parties boycotted parliament for several months two years ago. But a long-term boycott could lead to a loss of both visibility and credibility among the parties involved, as has proven the case in Azerbaijan, where the opposition Azadliq bloc refused its handful of parliament mandates to protest egregious fraud in the November 2005 parliamentary election.

The daily "Rezonansi" on May 26 quoted election-law expert Vakhtang Khmaladze, an unsuccessful Republican Party candidate in a Tbilisi constituency, as observing that a total opposition boycott would call into question the legitimacy of the new parliament insofar as it would focus attention on the opposition's motives, namely what he termed grave procedural violations on polling day. Possibly for that reason, several leading National Movement members and one government minister have slammed both the proposed parliament boycott and the concept of an alternative parliament.

Already on May 23, former Foreign Minister David Bakradze, the first name on the United National Movement party list and thus the obvious candidate for the post of parliament speaker, decried the proposed boycott as irresponsible, civil.ge reported. He added that the National Movement is prepared to begin talks with the opposition on the distribution of parliamentary posts.

On May 24, Giorgi Gabashvili, one of the National Movement's representatives on the Central Election Commission, argued that an opposition boycott would be tantamount to betraying the trust of the 320,000 voters who cast their ballots for the opposition, and that it reflects the "low political culture" of the opposition parties in question, Caucasus Press reported. State Minister for Regional Issues David Tkeshelashvili was quoted on May 27 by Caucasus Press as branding the idea of an alternative parliament "very dangerous," and he warned that it could "throw the country back 15 years."

In the final analysis, however, the opposition's options are limited, and some of its members may consider they committed a major strategic error in January in yielding to pressure from U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza to abandon their campaign for the annulment of the presidential election results and treat the parliamentary vote as a surrogate runoff between the ruling party and the opposition.

In a trenchant analysis of the Georgian political situation three years ago, commentator Ghia Nodia made two crucial points that are still relevant today. He noted that the Georgian opposition was weak not only because it was divided and had few parliament mandates, but because it lacked popular leaders and ideas capable of mobilizing the population at large. (The United Opposition's parliamentary election campaign focused primarily on the need to replace what its members consider a corrupt and inept leadership.)

Consequently, Nodia continued, the opposition pinned its hopes on, and sought to capitalize on, public dissatisfaction with government policy, a tactic that Saakashvili and Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze have countered by adopting in the wake of the January presidential ballot a government program explicitly designed to reduce poverty and unemployment.

And second, Nodia pointed to a "communication breakdown" within the political elite in which government and opposition "simply do not speak to each other anymore," with politicians instead engaging in "monologues" that frequently stoop to the realm of personal insults. In that respect, the current postelection polarization in Georgia could prove pernicious insofar as the one figure who sought tirelessly to bridge the gulf between the authorities and the opposition, former parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze, declined to seek reelection.

---