
Election Test for Georgian Democracy

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Young, energetic and friendly to the West, Mikhail Saakashvili became a symbol of democratic reform in the former Soviet Union in 2003 for leading street rallies that ousted a graying veteran of the Communist era and catapulted him into power.

Now the 40-year-old president's own commitment to democracy is being tested in a presidential election Saturday in which he is accused of silencing critics and restricting independent media.

Despite sinking approval ratings, the U.S.-educated hero of Georgia's Rose Revolution stands a good chance of winning a second term against a fragmented opposition.

But Saakashvili's reformist credentials have been weakened by charges that his supporters are pressuring people to vote for the president and leaning on businesses to help fund his campaign.

There is concern that Georgia could follow other former Soviet nations, including Russia, in abandoning or weakening democratic reforms. "Georgia's Western allies are viewing the election as a test for Saakashvili's commitment to democracy," said Ana Jelenkovic, a Georgia analyst at Eurasia Group, a U.S.-based firm that advises on geopolitical risks. "The U.S., in particular, is in a position in which it cannot overlook massive electoral fraud should it occur."

Opposition leaders are vowing to take to the streets if they judge the vote unfair.

Georgia, a South Carolina-sized country of 5 million people on the Black Sea, is important to the West. It's close to Iran, and a pipeline runs through it carrying oil from the Caspian Sea to Turkey.

Saakashvili was once an overwhelmingly popular figure, winning the January 2004 election with more than 96 percent of the vote. He still tops the seven candidates in opinion polls, but now he gets only about 20 percent in polls, according to one study. If no candidate tops 50 percent, a runoff becomes necessary.

Georgians praise Saakashvili for seeking to integrate Georgia into the European Union and NATO, and for striving to break out of Moscow's orbit. But Saakashvili's popularity has been dented by his inability to defeat corruption and widespread poverty; the average monthly salary in Georgia is a meager \$225.

He has also failed to make progress in bringing two separatist provinces back under Georgian control and returning tens of thousands of refugees to their homes.

Many who supported Saakashvili in street demonstrations four years ago felt betrayed when police used tear gas, rubber bullets and truncheons to break up protests in Tbilisi, the capital, in November. The images brought condemnation from Western capitals, and Saakashvili called the early vote to defuse the crisis.

The government also silenced a leading independent television channel for

more than a month, denying the opposition a key platform in the midst of the brief election campaign. Saakashvili dominates TV coverage of the election. He has focused on the economy, greatly increasing social spending and raising monthly pensions from \$24 to \$35 in recent weeks with a promise to bring them up to \$100 over the next two years.

The opposition, on the other hand, seems to lack a coherent message of its own. One opposition contender is Levan Gachechiladze, a 43-year-old legislator whose business is winemaking. Another is Badri Patarkatsishvili, a 52-year-old billionaire. He is accused of plotting to overthrow the government and has campaigned from outside the country, fearing arrest.

Many government-paid workers, including doctors and teachers, say their bosses have told them they could be fired if they don't vote for Saakashvili. Marina Gelashvili, a Tbilisi language teacher, said the principal told the faculty that they should "give their vote to the person who promised to raise your salaries" or look for another job.

Some business owners say members of the president's party have pressured them to fund Saakashvili's campaign.

Election observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said the campaign has been soured by allegations Saakashvili has used budgetary funds, unequal campaign conditions, intimidation and vote-buying. The OSCE mission said it "has received information and firsthand accounts, which indicate some of these claims are credible."
