

## **Georgia Shaken by Speaker's Departure**

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Governing party election campaign damaged by resignation of its top candidate.

The hottest topic of conversation in the Georgian election campaign at the moment is a candidate who is not actually standing. The abrupt withdrawal of the speaker of parliament, Nino Burjanadze, has stirred fevered debate about what one of the country's most popular politicians plans to do next.

Burjanadze made her move only minutes before the governing National Movement party was due to submit its list of candidates for parliament – with her name at the very top – to the Central Electoral Commission, CEC, in Tbilisi.

Although her resignation was not unexpected, its timing threw her political allies into confusion.

The speaker called a press conference at 5.45 pm on April 21, shortly before the deadline by which parties had to submit their candidate lists, saying she would not take part in the May 21 election and was quitting political life for the time being.

Burjanadze will remain in her post until a new parliament is elected.

Opposition parties said the National Movement was forced to submit an “empty list” to the electoral commission, and only presented an updated document the following morning.

The opposition Labour Party filed a legal bid to have the National Movement excluded from the election on the grounds of incorrect submission.

However, the CEC ruled that the National Movement had acted legally.

When the party's new list was published, it was headed by Foreign Minister David Bakradze. This makes him the most likely contender to take over as speaker, assuming the National Movement wins a majority.

Bakradze himself was in the United States when the list was submitted, and was apparently unaware of what was happening in Tbilisi.

Burjanadze's departure as speaker leaves President Mikheil Saakashvili as the only political survivor of the original triumvirate who led Georgia's “Rose Revolution” of 2003 that swept away former president Eduard Shevardnadze.

The other member of the trio, the then prime minister Zurab Zhvania, died in an accident in 2005.

Saakashvili said he was disappointed by Burjanadze's decision.

"I understand why she took this decision, but naturally I am not pleased by it," he said. "I want to say that Nino is an extremely important figure for me. Despite her decision to leave politics for the time being, we hope that she will return to active politics and that she will be one of the most important figures for a very long time to come."

Many critics of Saakashvili are convinced that Burjanadze will go into opposition against the president – although she herself denies this.

"Nino Burjanadze's tone did not suggest that she was planning to go back to her teaching duties at Tbilisi State University tomorrow. She has other plans," said David Usupashvili, head of the Republican Party. "In the mean time, Burjanadze remains speaker of parliament and the elections are a long way off."

Former president Shevardnadze told the Internewspress news agency, "I don't think that Burjanadze will collaborate with the current opposition, but it is quite possible that President Saakashvili will acquire in her a new and quite strong opposition politician."

An anonymous source in parliament backed this view, saying, "It's a question of time. Closer to the municipal elections, which are due in 18 months' time, Burjanadze will found her own party."

In her resignation statement, Burjanadze did not directly criticise the president but made it clear she had disagreements with other members of the ruling party.

"Georgia is developing in the right direction, but many things ought to be changed at a tactical level, and political processes need correcting," she told journalists on April 21.

Before the last parliamentary election in 2004, Burjanadze gave voice to displeasure that several individuals had been removed from the National Movement's party list.

In September 2007, she publicly complained that she had not been consulted about a government reshuffle, in particular the appointment of a central bank governor. She was also openly critical of the government's new programme.

Some observers expected her to resign on November 7, when the government ordered the break-up of a demonstration in Tbilisi and declared a state of emergency. By opting not to do so, she kept her distance from the opposition, which has made the November crackdown the centrepiece of its campaign against Saakashvili.

Some say Burjanadze now has the potential to emerge as a third force in Georgian politics.

"As soon as Burjanadze takes even one step to distance herself from the current team in power, the public will immediately perceive her as the leader of the opposition," said political analyst Ramaz Sakvarelidze. "Because of her moderate, unaggressive character, she could be really successful."

Archil Gegeshidze, an analyst with the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, predicted that Burjanadze's resignation would weaken the National Movement in the forthcoming election.

"Some people who have not quite decided how to vote will opt for the opposition now that Burjanadze has gone," he said.

Another analyst, Soso Tsintsadze, said that when it came to election candidates, "the authorities don't have anyone of Burjanadze's stature".

He said that the choice of Bakradze as the National Movement's top candidate was "an enforced step and, to put it mildly, not one that is greatly to their benefit".

Then again, said Tsintsadze, "Bakradze did not have too many rivals for this position. He is good at articulating what they tell him to say."

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