

Georgian Poll Scramble Begins

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A parliamentary election that may hasten the end of the Shevardnadze era is getting underway.

Ahead of a crucial parliamentary poll in Georgia later this year, the opposition remains splintered and may have missed a chance to capitalise on the unpopularity of President Eduard Shevardnadze's governing administration.

The pro-presidential alliance, For a New Georgia, by contrast combines nine different organisations and is competing as a united group.

On September 21, twenty-four electoral groupings were registered for the November 2 election, including nine political blocs and 15 individual parties.

They will be competing for 235 seats in parliament, 85 of them in individual constituencies, the rest apportioned out amongst parties, which get seven per cent or more of the vote.

The parliament in Georgia is more lively and powerful than in either of the two other south Caucasian countries and the results of the election are expected to determine the political future of Georgia ahead of presidential elections in 2005.

Shevardnadze is almost certain to step down then and the competition has already begun for his successor.

So this poll marks the beginning of the end of the Shevardnadze era, an almost unbroken period of 30 years in which he has been the dominant figure in first Soviet Georgia and then the independent state of Georgia.

Three groups are leading the field to win seats in parliament and set the agenda for the 2005 presidential election.

For a New Georgia has chosen a name which signals it wants to be seen as looking forward, not back. As well as government loyalists, it has attracted previous opposition figures to its ranks.

The central organisation in the bloc is the Citizens' Union of Georgia created by Shevardnadze in the early Nineties. It also contains the National Democratic Party, which was a fierce opponent of the CUG until earlier this year.

Irina Sarishvili-Chaturia, formerly one of the leaders of the opposition, is the bloc's main spokeswoman and can be relied upon to bring in many votes. The other members of the coalition are all linked in one way or another to the government and include socialists, former state minister Vazha Lordkipanidze and Tamaz Nadareishvili, the head of Georgia's Abkhazian government-in-exile and the leading hardliner on the Abkhazia issue.

Political analyst Nugzar Molodinashvili, who is sympathetic towards For a New Georgia, says it is bound to do well, partly due to the natural financial and administrative advantages of a governing party and in part because the opposition parties have seen a dip in their ratings as they squabble amongst themselves.

Furthermore, Molodinashvili said, many voters will support the bloc on the grounds that "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't".

The second prominent grouping is Mikhail Saakashvili's National Movement. Saakashvili, who is still only 35, has already served as the leader in parliament of Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union. In 2001 he resigned, making strong accusations of corruption against his fellow ministers, formed his own party and is now leader of the Tbilisi city council or sakrebulo.

Saakashvili uses his current position to launch savage attacks on Shevardnadze and does not disguise his own presidential ambitions. His poll rating, very high a year ago, has now fallen but he is expected to win a fair number of seats in parliament.

Saakashvili has already said that he will use the new parliament to seek either to limit the constitutional powers of Shevardnadze or to seek his early retirement.

The third main grouping is entitled Burjanadze-Democrats and is led by two other former Shevardnadze associates now in opposition, a former and current speaker of parliament, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze.

Zhvania, who stepped down as speaker in 2001, is the former leader of the United Democrats party and has only been saved from political oblivion by the rising popularity of his new ally, Burjanadze.

"Zhvania's knowledge of political technologies and Burjanadze's growing poll rating will help the party reach the seven per cent threshold," said Gochi Tskitishvili, head of the IPM Institute for Sociological and Marketing Research.

A few other groups are expected to cross the threshold and gain representation in parliament. They include the Democratic Revival Union, party of the leader of Ajara Autonomous Republic Aslan Abashidze.

Abashidze governs Ajara as a fiefdom close to Russia and semi-independent of Tbilisi. Most experts agree that votes in Ajara alone will guarantee that his party will easily make the seven per cent mark. Abashidze has already announced that no foreign observers will be allowed to monitor the elections in his republic because "elections in Ajara always proceed in a democratic environment as it is".

Two other groups that may perform well are the New Rights party and the movement Industry Will Save Georgia, both of which have roots in business although their political orientation is very different.

According to political analyst Ramaz Sakvarelidze, "the New Rights favour a system typical for a post-industrial economy; they lean towards the West and try to use their contacts with US Republicans to form a party with a similar platform."

The industrialists draw their support from more traditional industry, oppose the influence of multinationals in Georgia and have good links with Russia.

Finally, the Labour Party of Georgia, which performed very strongly in last year's local elections, is also expected to do well.

Overall, the electoral registration process in Georgia went relatively smoothly. There was only one real scandal, which erupted in late August when former state security minister Igor Giorgadze attempted to join the race. The Georgian government has an arrest warrant out for Giorgadze, who has lived in exile since 1995, when he was accused of being behind the attempted assassination of Shevardnadze.

In his registration documents, Giorgadze claimed he had lived for the last two years on the territory of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia and thus fulfilled the right requirements to take part in the poll. Although Tbilisi has had no jurisdiction over South Ossetia for the past 12 years, it is still regarded as part of Georgia. It also turned out that there was no court decision confirming charges against Giorgadze.

In the end, however, the central electoral commission rejected his application, citing information from security agencies, which said he had never returned to Georgia since he fled the country.

Most experts anticipate that no one grouping will have a clear majority in the new parliament, meaning that November 2 will lead to a new scramble for power and influence inside the new assembly once the votes have been counted.

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