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Mikheil Saakashvili is back

The comeback of Mikheil Saakashvili has taken Georgia by surprise. Now jailed and on hunger strike, he calls for a new revolution

In the Georgian language there is a proverb that goes something like this: 'The donkey hated the mint, but he still clung to it'. This accurately describes former President Mikheil Saakashvili long-held promise to return to Georgia. He had failed to fulfil his promise for a long time. That is precisely why his comeback on the eve of the local elections on 2 October 2021 took both his supporters and the government by surprise. Now, as he sits in jail on hunger strike to demand his release or to allow him to stand trial, Saakashvili is undoubtedly influencing political developments in Georgia – even if he is not directly involved in them.

Many experts agree that Saakashvili's return and arrest on the eve of the first round of local elections helped mobilise supporters of the United National Movement (UNM). As a result, in the first round, the ruling party Georgian Dream won 46.75 per cent of the nationwide proportional votes, while the UNM got 30.67 per cent. Notably, the two parties combined received more votes than in the 2020 parliamentary elections (then the figures were 48.22 per cent and 27.18 per cent respectively).

Other parties trying to find an independent position between the two poles suffered from this polarisation. For instance, Giorgi Gakharia, who resigned as prime minister and left Georgian Dream, and his new party For Georgia received only 7.81 per cent of the vote nationwide, although polls predicted its result to be well above 10 per cent. The elections also ended disappointingly for other smaller parties. Nationally, Lelo, the party of banker-turned-politician Mamuka Hazaradze, came in fourth place with 2.71 per cent, while support for other parties fell below 2 per cent.

A harsh contest

The UNM made gains in the western region of Samegrelo, its traditional

stronghold, as well as in the major cities of Kutaisi, Batumi, Rustavi, and Poti. In a key race in Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze (according to polls, the most popular Georgian Dream politician) failed to win in the first round and faced the UNM's Nika Melia in the second. 17 of the 20 mayoral contests in the second round were a contest between Georgian Dream and the UNM.

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Georgian Dream's political rhetoric, coming mainly from Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, has become steadily harsher since July, when violent mobs were mobilised to attack LGBTQ supporters resulting in journalists being injured. Saakashvili's return and the fear of unprecedented mobilisation by the UNM prompted Georgian Dream to focus on the desire to 'end the evil that the National Movement represents'.

In particular, Garibashvili forcefully spoke out about the risks of violence if opposition candidates won the second round. He also stressed that Saakashvili will 'fully serve' all six years of his imprisonment. Garibashvili has also used harsh rhetoric towards Members of the European Parliament who have expressed concern for Saakashvili. The UNM, on the other hand, tried to allay fears of political retribution in the event of victory, emphasised coalition politics and spoke of reconciliation.

Saakashvili's call for revolution

In the second round on 30 October, according to the official results, Georgian Dream won in 19 municipalities out of 20, including in all key cities – although in some cases by a narrow margin. Despite significant progress in Tbilisi, Nika Melia still lost to Kakha Kaladze who received 55 per cent of the vote. The affluent central districts of the capital predominantly voted against the UNM. In western Georgia's largest cities, Kutaisi and Batumi, there were reports of vote rigging, bribery, and intimidation, which apparently helped the ruling party to snatch victory from the UNM.

The opposition hastily declared the second round 'invalid' and called on its supporters to take to the streets. A large rally took place on 6 November in Tbilisi. The UNM is also picketing the Rustavi prison, demanding the release of Saakashvili, who has called for 'taking power away' from Georgian Dream. Referring to the 2018 Armenian revolution and the Ukrainian Maidan, he said 'the same should be done here as well, since the idea of such revolutions was born in Georgia after all'.

How far is Saakashvili willing to go?

The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2024. While Georgian Dream approves, the opposition is going to protest. Georgians have indeed willingly rallied in the streets at difficult times – in 2007, 2011, and also in 2019, although there were no elections in those years.

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Ukraine, however, has so far been rather timid in demanding the release of its citizen Saakashvili. This is not surprising since relations between Kyiv and Tbilisi have only recently begun to improve – after a year-long hiatus when Saakashvili became head of Ukraine's Executive Council of Reforms.

Now, Saakashvili's hunger strike creates difficulties for both the authorities and the opposition. The ruling party has derided the 'fake hunger strike' but cannot prove that the ex-president is cheating. 'The Georgian people voted to keep Saakashvili in prison,' one MP cheerfully wrote after the second round, hinting that Saakashvili's imprisonment was political, not criminal. And some believe he is willing to die if need be. If so, will his supporters dare to embark on a new revolution? And if he survives, will the people consider that he has atoned for his sins and deserves forgiveness?



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