



The Cambridge Security Initiative

GEORGIA: COUNTDOWN TO 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS RAISING TENSIONS

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Georgia goes to the polls on 31st October, following an election campaign that has emphasised the highly polarised nature of Georgian politics. The elections will be held under a new electoral system, after changes to the constitution were approved in June 2020. The previous system, a mix of proportional representation and single-mandate majoritarian constituencies, was perceived to unfairly favour the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), which holds over 75 per cent of seats in the current parliament despite winning only 48 per cent of the national vote in 2016.

In the upcoming elections, 120 parliamentarians will be elected from party lists via proportional representation (up from 77), while the number of deputies from single-mandate majoritarian constituencies will be reduced to 30 (from 73). The electoral threshold for PR seats has been reduced from 5 per cent to 1 per cent, an amendment that it is hoped will see smaller parties gain seats and enter a coalition government. A party has to win at least 40 per cent of the vote to form a government.

In spite of efforts to establish viable alternatives - such as the [Lelo party](#) set up by businessman Mamuka Khazaradze – the political landscape continues to be dominated by Georgian Dream and United National Movement (UNM). The ruling GD coalition began 2020 under fire for its moves to pack the Supreme Court with GD appointees, as well as tightening state control over the media, which prompted unease about attempts to stifle any political dissent in the run-up to the elections. However, the government's early success in tackling COVID-19 in March 2020 with a series of stringent measures was hailed as a model for others and boosted popular support for GD across the country. The political dividend the ruling coalition reaped from its initial successes has been undermined as the economic costs of lockdown have become clear and public tolerance for strict measures has waned, even as cases of COVID continue to rise across the country.

The leading opposition party, UNM, appeared to score an own-goal last month when it named former president Mikheil Saakashvili as its candidate for prime minister. Criminal charges were filed against Saakashvili in July 2014, but he has been living in exile since 2013 and faces arrest if he returns to Georgia where he remains a highly divisive figure. Twenty-six per cent of Georgians [polled](#) said they held a positive impression of him, with 39 per cent expressing a

negative view (these figures were very similar to that of current Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, 27 per cent positive, 34 per cent negative).

The highly polarised nature of Georgian politics was further highlighted last month with public brawls between supporters of different political parties in several areas across the country, including [Marneuli](#) and [Bolnisi](#). There is a general sense of distrust and disappointment in the country's political elites, a sentiment that is not unique to Georgia. Disputed parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan earlier this month triggered widespread demonstrations and political turmoil. Georgia itself witnessed similar scenes during the 2003 Rose Revolution, when allegations of vote-rigging in favour of the incumbent Shevardnadze regime triggered popular protests. If there is any hint of manipulation or vote-tampering at the end of October, there is little doubt that people will take to the streets to protest.

OUTLOOK

2020 is proving to be a challenging year for Georgia: in addition to the on-going pandemic, the resumption of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh threatens to destabilise the wider South Caucasus. On October 15, with cases of COVID rising across the country, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced restrictions in Tbilisi and Imereti region, but ruled out another national lockdown, stressing that the parliamentary elections would go ahead as planned.

While current polls suggest that GD is likely to win the largest share of the vote in the upcoming elections, the large number of still undecided voters could yet cause political upset. It remains to be seen whether GD secures enough votes to form a government, raising the prospect of opposition parties, including UNM, uniting to form a ruling coalition. If GD does win and form a government this will be a significant moment in Georgian politics, as no party has held power for more than two consecutive terms.