Georgia Holds Its Breath

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Summary
The Georgian electorate is torn between frustration with President Saakashvili and suspicion of the opposition's leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

TBILISI, Georgia — On a warm night last week, a crowd gathered in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi in front of the glass facade of the Philharmonia building. The crowd members were young, oppositional, and angry; disorganized but peaceful. A police car approached and was met with a cacophony of whistles, more mocking than aggressive.

The crowd had been drawn onto the street by the release of shocking videos by two opposition television channels showing systematic abuse in one of Tbilisi’s prisons. One clip, showing the rape of a male prisoner with a broom, was especially shocking for a socially conservative society. Reports of the terrible conditions in the country's prisons had flickered through Georgian households for years. Georgia now has the highest prison population per capita in Europe, with 24,000 inmates, four times as many as when Mikheil Saakashvili was first elected president in 2004. But Georgia’s leaders had ignored reports of prison brutality, trumpeting instead police reform and their successful “zero tolerance on crime” policy.

Now they were being proved spectacularly wrong and at the worst possible moment, just 13 days before crucial parliamentary elections on Oct. 1.

Saakashvili reacted quickly to contain the damage. The powerful 31-year-old interior minister, Bacho Akhalaia -- who had been in office only two months -- resigned. The ombudsman who had long been registering unheeded alarm about prison conditions was made the new prisons minister. But the president then muddied his message. Clearly someone close to the opposition had chosen to release the
videos at this moment to embarrass the government, but Saakashvili lashed out with an improbable line of attack that harked back to the August 2008 war, telling a public meeting that the revelations were part of a Moscow-orchestrated "conspiracy" against Georgia, ahead of the election, with the goal of forcing Georgia "back into Russia's imperial space."

The problem for the president is that when he said he was "shocked" and "very angry" and knew nothing about the state of his prisons, few believed him. The country's highly punitive criminal-justice system was built by a group of men who now hold the jobs of prime minister, justice minister and defense minister. The general state of Georgia's prisons, if not the graphic details, was an open secret. Most residents of Tbilisi know someone -- a neighbor or a cousin -- who has been in prison, often for a relatively small offense, such as marijuana possession or theft. A few months ago, I heard a terrible account of life inside Georgia's prisons from a businessman named Lasha Shanidze who had ended up on the wrong side of the government in a complex financial dispute and is now a fugitive in the United States. Shanidze described a regime in which he and his fellow inmates were forced to eat rotten food and subjected to nighttime beatings.

One Tbilisi taxi driver told me that his neighbor had done a four-year sentence at age 18 for theft and that he had spent three months of it in the Gldani prison, the facility at the center of the scandal. "He told me that three months there was so awful it was like 10 years of his life," my driver said. "The guards would burst into the cells at 2 or 3 in the morning and beat people randomly."

Even before the scandal, the governing party was facing a strong challenge. Now its hopes of maintaining its monopoly of power are under much greater threat.

The Oct. 1 election marks a turning point for Georgia. Besides being a contest for Parliament, it is also a shadow leadership election. In 2013, after Saakashvili's second and final term as president expires, a new constitution will take effect, transferring key powers from the president to the prime minister, who will be elected by Parliament. Whoever controls the new Parliament will get to elect the prime minister next year.

Greek scholar Ilia Roubanis has called Georgian politics "pluralistic feudalism," a competition between a patriarchal leader who enjoys uncontested rule over the country and a leader of the opposition bidding to unseat him and acquire the same. The current contest fits that description. Put simply, it is a clash of two narratives about Georgia set out by two big personalities: Saakashvili, and his main challenger, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Saakashvili has been personally leading the election campaign for the governing party, the United National Movement, even though he is not running for Parliament himself. His main message is that, like the medieval Georgian king David the Builder, he has been building a new nation and he and his team deserve to be allowed to finish the job.

In that spirit, on Sept. 16, Saakashvili formally reopened a famous medieval landmark, the 11th-century Bagrati Cathedral (rebuilt in controversial fashion, overriding the objections of UNESCO that the construction work interfered with the original medieval fabric of the church). On Sept. 27, the new airport, named after David the Builder, in Georgia's second-largest city, Kutaisi, is due to open. A new glass-and-steel sci-fi Parliament building in Kutaisi is also scheduled to be completed in October.
The opposition says that this Georgia is a Potemkin village hiding the miserable condition of large segments of the population, such as the unemployed, rural farmers -- and prisoners. Until last year, Saakashvili was in control of the script, aided by the uncritical news coverage of Georgia's two main television channels. But the countermessage now has a powerful figurehead in Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest man, estimated by Forbes to be worth $6.4 billion. Ivanishvili, who built his fortune in the metals industry during the heady privatization period in the 1990s, is an enigmatic and colorful figure, best known for his lavish philanthropy, large modern-art collection, and private zoo -- before he unexpectedly decided to enter Georgian politics in 2011, saying he planned to become prime minister and turn around the economy. He has since built a coalition of six very diverse parties named Georgian Dream after a song by his rapper son.

Both the governing United National Movement, or UNM, and Georgian Dream are loose coalitions, held together by their powerful patriarchal leaders.

Saakashvili's governing UNM combines a free market Westernizing ideology with the bureaucratic machine of a typical post-Soviet governing party. Georgian Dream is an even more diverse alliance whose constituents' only common connection is loyalty to Ivanishvili and opposition to Saakashvili. It has support in Tbilisi from urban democratic professionals who want to see the current governing party's monopoly on power broken. Outside the capital, it frequently plays on economic populism and barely concealed xenophobia. A third group in the alliance comprises former bureaucrats who evidently see Georgian Dream as their route back to power. This makes for mixed messages: Georgian Dream has attracted some of Georgia's most pro-Western opposition members and puts forward a foreign-policy platform that commits them to EU and NATO membership, while its new television station, Channel 9, has lashed out at local Western-funded organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and Transparency International for alleged covert support of the Georgian government. I saw the clash of narratives in bright colors in the Black Sea city of Batumi. Batumi has been Georgia's boomtown and Saakashvili's pet project for the past few years. The president spends as much time there as in Tbilisi and has invited a stream of foreign visitors to visit, including U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in June.

It is an impressive sight. A forest of new skyscrapers has sprung up, changing what used to be a shabby seaside resort into a modern city. Batumi now has a Sheraton, a Radisson, and a string of new casinos. Tens of thousands of tourists poured into the resort this summer.

On the other hand, I found locals much less enthusiastic than I expected. Their complaints covered the spectrum from merely disappointed ("local people aren't getting jobs") to the fully paranoid and xenophobic ("the Turks are buying up the city," "Turkey is working with Saakashvili to recapture Batumi"). Batumi was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878, and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk almost reconquered it in 1921.

Several buildings have become symbolic battlegrounds. The Georgian and Turkish governments jointly agreed to plans to reconstruct a mosque, built by the Ottomans in the mid-19th century and destroyed by the Soviet regime in the 1930s. But the project appears to have been halted after anti-Turkish protests supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church and local opposition activists, several of them...
members of Georgian Dream.

A less pious building project is Batumi’s Trump Tower. A massive billboard stands on the seafront proclaiming the spot where it will be constructed. The Donald himself has become friendly with Saakashvili and visited Batumi this April. The opposition points out that he has merely lent his name to the project, not invested any money, and calls it an empty PR stunt designed to boost the image of the government, rather than the Georgian economy.

The local parliamentary race pits Giorgi Baramidze, a long-standing Saakashvili ally and deputy prime minister, against a local Georgian Dream-affiliated populist named Murman Dumbadze. I went to see both of them.

Like most of the current Georgian elite, Baramidze still looks improbably young. (He is in fact 44.) He speaks excellent English, having studied at Georgetown University. He ridiculed the local opposition as xenophobic and made a robust defense of the mosque and the Turkish presence in Batumi. "How can we isolate ourselves from our biggest neighbor after Russia?" he asked. On the mosque issue he said, "We internationally are not apologetic on this question." The current government can be faulted on many things but not on tolerance to foreigners and other faiths.

Baramidze’s democratic tolerance did not extend to the opposition, however. One of the legitimate complaints of the Georgian opposition for years is that no television channel that criticizes the government is allowed to broadcast nationwide. Under much international pressure, the Georgian Parliament in July passed a law known as "Must Carry," obliging cable operators to carry all television channels, including the Ivanishvili-affiliated station, Channel 9. But despite the calls of many outside actors, including the U.S. government, the legislation expires on Election Day. "Why not continue it?" I asked Baramidze.

"We have to bear in mind that Channel 9 might serve as a catalyst to give Russia a free hand to act against Georgia [after the election]," Baramidze told me implausibly, spinning the idea that to allow the opposition channel airtime might be a prelude to the rumble of Russian tanks.

Dumbadze, the Georgian Dream candidate, is as gaunt as Baramidze is chubby. He has a reputation for old-fashioned Georgian nationalism and was expelled this March from the liberal-leaning Republican Party after insulting an ethnic Russian colleague.

Dumbadze has trimmed his xenophobic rhetoric, or rather repackaged it as economic nationalism. He told me that he had opposed the mosque reconstruction and that "Batum was behind me," but that he would now favor it if local Muslims wanted it. The problem, Dumbadze claimed, was that the government was discriminating against Georgians in favor of Turks, who were getting the jobs and investment opportunities the locals were being denied. As a result, Georgians are being forced to travel to Turkey as guest workers (something others confirmed for me in Batumi). "I think that a Turkish passport and a Georgian passport are not equal here," he said. "A Turkish passport is stronger." During the protests against the mosque, he promised that he would "raze it to the ground with bulldozers."
This anti-foreigner pitch may well win him votes. Throughout Georgia, I noticed the paradox that the governing party is doing badly in areas where foreign investment has been strongest, perhaps because it failed to make its case to the local population.

At Batumi’s Press Cafe, my host and guide to the city, Aslan Chanidze, helped me understand why. A journalist and nongovernmental activist, he was fielding telephone calls from his home village. A Turkish company, assisted by the Georgian government, is planning to build a new hydroelectric power station nearby. According to Chanidze’s telling of it, in classic post-Soviet style, neither of them appeared to have explained to the local population what they were doing, and villagers were being told to sell their land at deflated prices.

All this fits with what many nongovernmental reports have been saying for years: that modern Georgia's biggest problem is the absence of rule of law. In its enthusiasm to build a new Georgia, Saakashvili’s government has been cavalier in its regard for people’s property rights.

Georgia is a land of regions, each one fighting its own election. I traveled north along the Black Sea coast to Zugdidi, a small, bustling town on the border with the Russian-supported breakaway region of Abkhazia.

Nothing in this election is straightforward. In terms of the outlook of its candidates, Zugdidi is the mirror image of Batumi. Here, the Georgian Dream candidate is Irakli Alasania, a Westernized, English-speaking politician who split from the government after the 2008 war. He had served as Georgia's envoy for talks with Abkhazia, when he was then ambassador to the United Nations -- and is now talked about as a presidential candidate for 2013. The governing party's candidate here is Roland Akhalaia, the chief prosecutor and Soviet-style strongman of the region.

Akhalaia is also the father of two fierce and powerful sons, Data, the deputy defense minister, and Bacho, the interior minister who resigned over the prisons scandal. He did not want to see me, so I spent most of the day with Alasania and his supporters.

As we drove out to a village named Orsantia to see an opposition rally, we spotted Akhalaia, the government candidate, talking to a crowd of 100 or so voters on the road, but my driver was contemptuous of this as an exercise in democracy. "Look at the minibuses, one, two, three," he said, pointing to the vehicles parked behind the crowd. "They've bussed people in." (Although I was not able to substantiate the claim, it's one I heard frequently from opposition supporters around the country.)

Orsantia is a large village dotted with fruit trees and palms. Talking to some of the locals waiting to hear Alasania speak, I was struck by the fact that they didn’t mention the conflict in Abkhazia on their doorstep at all. In fact, the only time anyone mentioned Abkhazia was to say something I hadn't expected at all: that young men from the village were going to work in the breakaway region’s resorts of Pitsunda and Gagra for the summer.

The Georgian Dream opposition movement is well organized in the region. A score of volunteers in blue T-shirts had brought people out of their houses and had set up a microphone on what passed for
Orsantia's village green. Alasania arrived in a four-wheel-drive car and stood under a couple of pine trees talking to a large crowd. He talked fast and people listened mainly in silence, frowning.

On the fringe of the rally, I talked to two well-dressed elderly men, a former policeman and a former factory manager. Neither had a job anymore; both were hoping for a Georgian Dream victory in the election. When I mentioned the word "progress," one of them shot back at me, "Any progress is thanks to the West. It's because you are here."

Back in Zugdidi, I talked to Alasania in the Pizza Diadem cafe, along with two more Iraklis (confirming my long-held view that Georgia could do with a few more first names) -- one his spokesman, the other a young businessman and the candidate in the nearby town of Abasha.

Alasania said he had faced a lot of harassment and obstruction earlier in the summer, but in the last three weeks things had gotten much easier and he could campaign freely, a change he attributed to the arrival of long-term election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). He said he was confident of victory but was worried that people in the villages were conservative and might be afraid to come out and vote.

What were the main issues in the election? Jobs. When I mentioned that U.S. President Barack Obama's biggest problem was an "8-point-something unemployment rate," Irakli the businessman laughed and said, "In Abasha, it's 98-point-something." (Officially Georgia's national jobless rate is 16 percent, but a recent poll found that 34 percent of respondents were unemployed and looking for work.)

To be a voter in this election in Georgia is to be caught in an almost mythical battle between clashing titans: a government with a strong record that is widely felt to have grown arrogant and lost touch with ordinary people, and an opposition, led by the country's richest man, that has lots of energy but lacks a well-articulated program apart from "Georgia Without Misha [as in President Saakashvili]."

Traveling around Georgia I sensed a mood that was palpably more sympathetic to the opposition and the idea of change. Polls that had given the governing party a wide lead were probably misleading -- they also recorded a large number of "don't-knows" and "refuse-to-answers" -- voters more likely to cast their ballots for Georgian Dream. Yet many had given up hope in the government while not being fully convinced by Ivanishvili. I also saw that the governing party was much better mobilized. On Election Day, the UNM will be able to count on most of the support of public employees and also of the country's ethnic minorities, Armenians and Azeris, who tend to vote for the government in Georgian elections so as to prove their loyalty to the state and also because the current government has a better record when it comes to protecting minority groups.

Another important factor is that the electoral system is severely weighted in favor of the government. Almost half -- 73 of the 150 seats being contested -- are in local constituencies where the UNM is fielding official candidates who can get out the vote and many of the opposition challengers are little-known outsiders. It is theoretically possible that the governing party could emulate George W. Bush in 2000, by winning a majority despite losing the popular vote.
Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream coalition has spent much of its time campaigning with one hand tied behind its back, hit by multimillion-dollar punitive fines for alleged improper use of funds and with much more restricted access to television than the governing party. International observers have slapped the government’s wrists for this, with a team from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly saying that "the fines levied are disproportionate and apparently being levied in a selective manner mainly targeting one political subject."

If the opposition does worse on Election Day than it expects, this could be a recipe for trouble, as Georgian Dream contests the results and the government defends its victory. The opposition wants to evoke the parallel of the Rose Revolution that followed 2003’s disputed election, while the government summons up fears of the civil war that wracked Georgia in the early 1990s. Plenty of people I met in Georgia were bracing themselves for confrontation. Most were worried that it would be hard to mediate between the two warring sides.

In Zugdidi, an old friend and yet another Irakli, journalist Irakli Lagvilava, argued that Georgia has come a long way in the last 20 years, allowing him to put a positive spin on this election. "After the era of [nationalist President Zviad] Gamsakhurdia, we learned that we shouldn't shoot each other; after the Rose Revolution we learned that next time we have to choose our leaders by elections," he said. "We are making progress."

Progress, so long as the polarized forces fighting this election reconcile themselves to the idea that outright victory is unlikely and they may have to share the political space, not dominate it.

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