

Beyond the Elections in Georgia

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Sunday's local elections in Georgia were predictable, both with regards to the outcome and the statements by international election observers. President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) won solid victories in every local council in Georgia while Gigi Ugulava, the UNM candidate handily defeated Irakli Alasania, the leading opposition figure, in the race for mayor of Tbilisi. Meanwhile the [OSCE/ODIHR election report](#) declared that the "The 30 May municipal elections marked evident progress towards meeting OSCE and Council of Europe commitments. However, significant remaining shortcomings include deficiencies in the legal framework, its implementation, an uneven playing field, and isolated cases of election-day fraud." This is the election observation equivalent of a gentlemen's B.

This election had been the focus of a great amount of media attention in recent months and was viewed by many in the West as the latest test of Georgian democracy. However, this focus on the election drew attention away from other political developments in Georgia that will probably have a longer term impact than the outcome of an election which occurred in a climate where the absence of media pluralism and the liberal use of administrative resources by the ruling party precluded a genuinely democratic exercise.

The recent decisions around Georgia's new constitution as well as the government's overtures to Iran likely will play a greater role in Georgia's future and the future of Georgian democracy than Sunday's elections for city councils around the country and mayor of Tbilisi will.

The [proposed constitutional reforms](#) which will be the framework for the discussions will, beginning in 2013, move Georgia away from its current strong presidential system and towards a parliamentary system. At first glance, this seems like a reasonable direction for Georgia as concentration of too much power in office of the president has been a major obstacle to Georgia's democratic development in the last few years. However, this proposed reform may be less about structure of the Georgian government than it is about finding a way for President Saakashvili to remain in power after 2013 when he is constitutionally barred from running for a third term as president. It is not known whether or not Saakashvili will seek to become Georgia's prime minister under Georgia's new constitutional arrangements in 2013, but this proposal keeps that possibility alive.

It was not entirely unexpected that Georgia would explore switching to a parliamentary system with the effect of having Saakashvili's continue to lead the country after 2013. However, the [recent strengthening of the relationship between Iran and Georgia](#) was more of a surprise, particularly given President Saakashvili's ongoing efforts to align his country as closely with the West, primarily U.S., as possible. The two

countries have discussed energy sector cooperation, high level diplomatic visits and other bilateral ties. While Iran is an important regional power, the US enmity for the Iranian regime is no secret. It is hard to imagine how Georgia, a country which has expressed increasing concern about the extent of U.S. support in recent months could possibly improve its relationship with the U.S. by bringing themselves closer to Iran.

Georgia's proposed new constitutional arrangements and recent interactions with Iran could be important signposts for the future direction of Georgia, but is too early to know what this means exactly. It is certainly possible that should Georgian switch to a parliamentary system, Saakashvili will not run again for president and that Georgia Iran relations will not grow closer over time. Events of the last couple of months, however, suggest that this cannot be taken for granted. Therefore it should at least be considered that Georgia would instead of moving toward becoming a Western style democracy will further consolidate its strongman regime through constitutional pyrotechnics beginning in 2013. If that happens, building closer relationships with other strongman regimes such as Iran would not be unexpected.

In this context, the significance of local elections in which, as almost all Georgia watchers anticipated, the party that has dominated Georgian politics for six years continued its domination, and where Georgia once again demonstrated that it remains in that gray area between democracy and authoritarianism, should not be overstated.