
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE HEADS TO ROUND TWO IN GEORGIA

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Georgias new president will be elected in a second round of voting, according to initial results from Sunday's polls, the country's election commission has announced.

According to the website of Georgias Central Election Commission, the vote counting was completed, and while government-backed independent candidate Salome Zurbishvili won 38.64 percent of the vote, Grigol Vashadze -- backed by former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili -- got 37.74 percent.

Speaking on the election results, Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili called on voters in the country to cast ballots in the second round, set to be held before Dec. 2

Georgia's presidential election will go to a second round runoff between two of the country's former foreign ministers after no single candidate won outright in the first round of voting, the country's Central Election Commission (CEC) said on Monday. After all the votes from Sunday's first round of voting had been counted French-born former diplomat and foreign minister Salome Zurbishvili had secured 38.7 percent of the vote, while Grigol Vashadze, also a former foreign minister, had won 37.7 percent of the vote, the CEC said. With neither managing to get more than 50 percent of the vote necessary to win outright, a runoff between Zurbishvili and Vashadze will now be held sometime between now and Dec. 2. Constitutional changes have weakened the power of the presidency, handing most authority to the office of prime minister. But the post is still seen as important for the image abroad of a country which is strongly oriented towards the West and fearful of Russia, which fought a short war against Georgia a decade ago after which it recognised the independence of two breakaway Georgian regions. The country of 3.7 million people is Washington's strategic ally in the Caucasus region. It also hopes to eventually join the EU and NATO. Pipelines carrying Caspian oil and gas to Europe run across its territory. FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER Tamar Zhvania, the head of the CEC, said that there were some irregularities, but that no serious violations had taken place during the election. Zurbishvili was backed by the ruling Georgian Dream Party, while Vashadze was running on behalf of a new platform of 11 opposition parties led by former president Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). Opposition parties complained about alleged pressure on voters from government officials, reported attempts to bribe voters, and irregularities during vote counting. Zurbishvili, 66, a former French career diplomat, was born to Georgian emigre parents in France and served as French ambassador to Georgia before becoming Georgia's foreign minister in 2004. Supporters say she would bring

international stature to the presidency, while opponents criticise her for statements that appeared to blame Georgia for war with Russia in 2008 and remarks about minorities that some saw as xenophobic. Her rival Vashadze, 60, a diplomat and businessman, served as Georgia's foreign minister from 2008-2012. Losing candidate David Bakradze, a former parliamentary speaker, said he would support Vashadze in the runoff.

On Oct. 28, Georgians went to the polls to hold the last popular election for the nation's president, with lawmakers to choose the leader from now on, heralding a shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system of government in 2023.

Under constitutional changes approved last year, the presidential post will be more symbolic than powerful.

In Georgia, presidential elections are held every five years, with a limit of two consecutive terms for a single candidate.

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