

Georgia ruling party set to install loyalist president amid constitutional crisis

AFP- Georgia's ruling party is set to appoint a far-right loyalist as president on Saturday in a controversial election process, as thousands of people again prepared to take to the streets in pro-EU protests.

The Black Sea nation has been in turmoil since the governing Georgian Dream party claimed victory in contested October parliamentary elections. Its decision last month to delay EU accession talks ignited a fresh wave of mass rallies.

Rallies are scheduled for Saturday morning, when Georgian Dream is set to install former footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili as president in a controversial election process.

Thousands of pro-EU demonstrators filled the streets of the capital Tbilisi on Friday, rallying in a dozen different locations before gathering outside parliament, an AFP journalist witnessed.

A marching band paraded along Tbilisi's main avenue, carrying a giant Georgian flag overhead and accompanied by a chorus of whistles and drums, as the protest concluded shortly after midnight.

"Since the parliament is not legitimate, these elections are also illegitimate... we are not really taking it seriously", lawyer Ketil Makharashvili told AFP at the rally.

Another protester, Dariko Gogol, said that Georgian Dream "rigged the election, and they are just dragging us towards Russia".

The 53-year-old pressed for new polls and urged current President Salome Zurbishvili to stay in office "and somehow

guide us in this really difficult situation”.

A former diplomat, Zurabishvili is a hugely popular figure among protesters, who view her as a beacon of Georgia’s European aspirations.

– ‘Unprecedented constitutional crisis’ –

The opposition has said it will boycott Saturday’s indirect vote in parliament, insisting Zurabishvili remains the country’s sole legitimate leader.

She has refused to step down and is demanding new parliamentary elections, paving the way for a constitutional showdown.

“What will happen in parliament tomorrow is a parody – it will be an event entirely devoid of legitimacy, unconstitutional and illegitimate,” Zurabishvili told a press conference on Friday.

Opposition groups accuse Georgian Dream of rigging the parliamentary vote, backsliding on democracy and moving Tbilisi closer to Russia – all at the expense of the Caucasus nation’s constitutionally mandated bid to join the European Union.

Kavelashvili, 53 – the sole candidate for the largely ceremonial post – is known for his vehement anti-West diatribes and opposition to LGBTQ rights.

Georgian Dream scrapped direct presidential elections in 2017.

With Zurabishvili refusing to leave office, opposition lawmakers boycotting parliament, and protests showing no signs of abating, Kavelashvili will see his presidency undermined from the onset.

One author of Georgia’s constitution, Vakhtang Khmaladze, has argued that all decisions by the new parliament are void.

This is because it ratified the mandates of newly elected lawmakers before the outcome of a court case filed by the incumbent president contesting the elections, he explained.

“Georgia is facing an unprecedented constitutional crisis,” Khmaladze told AFP.

It remains unclear how the government will react to Zurabishvili’s refusal to step down after her successor is inaugurated on December 29.

– Macron address –

Police have fired tear gas and water cannons during more than two weeks of demonstrations and arrested more than 400 protesters, according to the Social Justice Centre NGO.

On Friday, Amnesty International said protesters had faced “brutal dispersal tactics, arbitrary detention, and torture.”

There have also been raids on the offices of opposition parties and arrests of their leaders.

As international condemnation of the police crackdown mounted, French President Emmanuel Macron told Georgians their “European dream must not be extinguished”.

“We are by your side in supporting your European and democratic aspirations,” he said in a video address.

Earlier this week, Macron called Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili – the tycoon widely considered to be Georgia’s real power broker.

His decision to call Ivanishvili – rather than Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze – is indicative of the West’s hesitancy to recognise the legitimacy of Georgian Dream’s new government.

Washington has also imposed fresh sanctions on Georgian officials, barring visas for around 20 people accused of

“undermining democracy in Georgia”, including ministers and parliamentarians.

AFP