

# Georgia elects pro-U.S. leader

By **ALEX FRIEDRICH**  
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TBILISI, Georgia — Backed by 86 percent of the vote, pro-American candidate Mikhail Saakashvili swept Georgia's presidential elections with his promise to clean up corruption in his country and keep it oriented to the West.

The aggressive 36-year-old Tbilisi lawyer swept the exit polls, trouncing five rivals in a race predicted to be an easy win. That gives him the mandate he needs to boot the corrupt administration he inherited from Eduard Shevardnadze, the man he helped depose by storming Parliament in November's "Rose Revolution."

It should also keep Georgia, a poor but strategic country in the Caucasus, in the U.S. camp.

The United States has long been interested in Georgia as a regional democratic toehold. It also wants a stable country

through which Western oil companies can route their oil pipelines. And America has been hoping to see results for the millions of dollars in aid that has been spent to help reform the former Soviet republic of 5 million people.

"We have split forever from the past," Saakashvili told a crowd of 1,500 supporters at a victory rally at the Georgian State Philharmonic Hall.

It's a volatile past that, until recently, almost caused investors and U.S. officials to give up hope.

Once one of the Soviet Union's richest republics, Georgia has fallen the furthest into poverty. Rampant corruption and bloody factionalism left it broke, splintered and pliable in the hands of Russia, its next-door neighbor.

That was bad news for America, which is waging a low-key struggle with Russia for economic and political influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

After Shevardnadze's cronies rigged parliamentary elections Nov. 2, it took Saakashvili — backed by outraged protesters and aided by some U.S. and Russian mediation — to get Shevardnadze to resign.

Observers have been worrying that the infighting and ballot box fraud might continue Sunday. But early reports suggest the election was clean.

That clears the path for Saakashvili, who told another celebrating crowd, "We have been watched by the world."

And the watching won't stop. Saakashvili recognized the huge list of reforms he's expected to carry out. Those include cleaning out a lazy, corrupt administration, making the country safe for investors and keeping the peace in an unstable nation.

*Editor's note: Alex Friedrich is a reporter for The Monterey County Herald on temporary assignment with Knight Ridder Newspapers' Moscow bureau.*