

Threat of civil war hangs over Georgia

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This is the first of a two-part article on the growing tensions within Georgia.

In the aftermath of an overwhelming parliamentary election victory for Mikhail Saakashvili's National Movement, tensions remain high between the Tbilisi administration and Adjarian forces loyal to Aslan Abashidze.

In early April Georgian authorities claimed to have arrested four hit men sent from the semi-autonomous region of Adjara to assassinate President Saakashvili. Deputy State for Security Gigi Ugulava said the men were working under the direction of Adjarian security minister Soso Gogitidze.

On April 6 General Aleksandr Studenikin, responsible for Russian forces in the Transcaucasus, was slightly injured by a remote controlled explosion in Tbilisi. This is the first time since Georgian independence in 1991 that Russian forces have been targeted. Russia's garrison forces are based in the Adjarian capital Batumi and the predominately ethnic Armenian region of Samtskhe-Djavakheti. Since the election of Saakashvili the Bush administration has stepped up its pressure on the Kremlin to remove forces from Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Employing increasingly dictatorial means, Saakashvili's National Movement won every seat in parliamentary elections held on March 28. Exit polls suggested that his party had won all 150 seats up for contention. Mysteriously, the final results, which have rendered Georgia a one-party state, have not as yet been publicised. The White House has not condemned such inaction.

In the meantime Saakashvili is mixing bloodcurdling threats towards Adjara and by virtue South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with ultimatums dressed up as reconciliation. He declared that while Adjara could secure a degree of self-rule Abashidze must renounce his claim to the region's customs duties and dissolve his private army. What Saakashvili demands is tantamount to an unconditional surrender. Without access to Batumi port customs and duties and shorn of his army, the former Stalinist bureaucrat is nothing.

This rapid escalation towards a probable military confrontation so soon after Saakashvili's election was entirely foreseeable. It is the logical outcome of

Washington's predatory Eurasian foreign policy. As confirmed by the record of the Bush administration, a regime that ascends to power via anti-democratic methods is destined to rule in a likewise manner. Saakashvili has repeatedly said he owes everything to Washington, and the pupil is keen.

Last November a so-called "Rose Revolution" brought Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili to power with promises of a departure from the corruption of the Shevardnadze era. But the rose had its roots firmly planted in Washington. The usurpation of Eduard Shevardnadze has proved to be not so much a revolution, in the sense of a progressive fundamental transformation of the old society and a flowering of the new, but something much more familiar. Georgia can accurately be described as a puppet theatre of imperialist intrigue. The adversarial puppet masters are the Bush regime in Washington and that of Vladimir Putin in Russia.

The Republicans in Washington want Saakashvili to reintegrate Georgia with its breakaway republics in order to roll back Russian influence in the region and better secure the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. For their part the Russian government wish to retain their influence through the retention of troops in the region.

For Georgia's long-suffering population the Saakashvili regime represents both a continuation and a worsening of what went before. Saakashvili's policies are accelerating the already precipitous decline of Georgian social conditions and the growth of social inequality, through his strict adherence to structural adjustment measures. At the behest of Washington he also threatens to throw the country into a further civil war, the third since independence. Whilst incited by Washington to subjugate troublesome breakaway republics, Saakashvili has received no such mandate for bloodshed from the Georgian people.

The new boss in Tbilisi is increasingly being likened to the old boss. The Young Turk Saakashvili is hastily organising the very same repressive state forces and police state methods utilised by the old fox Shevardnadze. The *Manila Times* summed up the present state of affairs when it wrote that Georgia has become "a distinctly undemocratic one-

party state.”

The replacement of Shevardnadze with Saakashvili was an in-house affair, what John Laughland of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group, writing in *The Guardian*, called “a changing of the guard within an unchanged power structure.”

Until recently Saakashvili loyally served in Shevardnadze’s cabinet. He only became an opponent of Shevardnadze when he realised the old man’s time was up in Washington.

The current ruling triumvirate of Saakashvili, Zhvania and Burdzhaneladze all served in various positions in Shevardnadze’s cabinets. Prime Minister Zhvania even holds the exact same post he did under Shevardnadze during the most savage period of the latter’s rule. In addition the head of national security is unchanged. Indeed Shevardnadze’s entire entourage has joined Saakashvili’s new ruling party.

Saakashvili and his National Movement are heavily financed by Washington and to a lesser extent by Europe. These backers have become increasingly nervous as the media-created image of the “Rose Revolution” gives way to the reality of another south Caucasus dictator.

In vain human rights groups have been warning for weeks of the threat of dictatorial rule in Georgia. Saakashvili showed his true colours only weeks after his rise to power. In February he forced constitutional changes through parliament giving him unprecedented powers to hire and fire ministers at will. Two of Georgia’s popular political talk shows have been taken off air and general political discussion in the media has become tamer since Saakashvili’s ascent. Journalists at a station critical of Saakashvili say they have received death threats. In February they marched through central Tbilisi carrying a coffin to symbolise the death of Georgian free media.

In public roundups broadcast live on national television as part of what is promoted as an anti-corruption drive, the Saakashvili administration has jailed business people, former officials of the Shevardnadze government and opposition members, whilst thumbing a nose at due legal process. These measures are primarily motivated by post-election score settling and disputes between various factions of the Georgian ruling class. But they also serve to intimidate the Georgian population by showing them who is the boss.

It was just such an anti-corruption campaign that propelled Shevardnadze to power as secretary of the Russian Communist Party in 1972. He too was generously lauded as pro-Western and a trusted advocate of the free market later when he returned to Georgia in 1992, before turning to repressive methods to subordinate the Georgian population to the demands of his Swiss bank account.

Saakashvili is utilising his still substantial public support to justify his extrajudicial methods, violations of human rights and silencing of opposition voices. Refusing to alter the seven percent threshold on parliamentary representation means he effectively has the parliament all to himself. He has dismissed concerns with democratic representation, asserting he was not interested in small “interest groups” slowing his agenda in the legislature. Prior to the recent parliamentary elections Saakashvili sought to intimidate parliament by telling them “Georgia has many external and internal enemies, I do not need a second front behind my back—in parliament.”

The president is doing his level best to carry on a regional tradition by fostering a personality cult around himself. He has provocatively campaigned for his party during the parliamentary elections and his image is everywhere. Such campaigning is not only unethical, but also illegal under Georgian law.

The former lawyer has adopted his own “Rose Revolution” flag, a variation of the British Saint George flag, as the national flag of Georgia. No matter that the country had an already existing and internationally recognised flag since declaring independence from the former Soviet Union.

Saakashvili’s Dutch wife Sandra Roelofs recently told a Netherlands based magazine of how her husband sought to follow in the tradition of Georgian dictators “like Stalin and Beria.” Living up to this image, Saakashvili began his rise to the presidency with a speech before a statue of Stalin in his Georgian birthplace, Gori.

While the Georgian president is at loggerheads with the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin, Saakashvili has taken a leaf out of the Russian President’s electoral handbook of fraud. Regional commentators now refer to Saakashvili “doing a Putin”, by which they mean utilising popular support to push through dictatorial measures. But Georgia has been turned into a client state of the United States and so long as Saakashvili continues to dance to Washington’s tune he will be kept in power with imperialist benediction.

To be continued



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