

Anti-government protests continue in Georgia

Andrea Peters**25 May 2011**

Ongoing anti-government protests in the country of Georgia, located in the southern Caucasus mountains and astride the Black Sea, have resulted in confrontations with police and the arrest of oppositionists. Opponents of President Mikheil Saakashvili have promised to stage a “day of rage” on Thursday and disrupt a military parade planned for Friday to mark Georgian independence day.

Last Saturday, 10,000 people gathered in the capital city Tbilisi, demanding the resignation of Saakashvili. The event was organized by the “People’s Assembly,” formed from a coalition of opposition groups. Nino Burdzhnadze, former speaker of the parliament from 2001 to 2008 and a previous ally of Georgia’s president, made populist denunciations of the government, pointing to widespread social misery in the country.

“Two thirds of the population of Georgia lives below the poverty line, and Georgia occupies the first place among European states in terms of the level of child mortality,” she said.

Burdzhnadze said that the event was just the beginning of a “revolution” that would result in the overturn of Saakashvili’s government. There is a clear attempt to cast these events as part of the mass popular upheavals taking place in the Middle East and North Africa.

Saturday’s protests in Tbilisi were accompanied by smaller demonstrations in the port city of Batumi, where 2,000 gathered as part of a coordinated action.

Anti-government demonstrations continued into Sunday. Early in the morning a dozen protesters in Tbilisi attacked a police car with sticks. Skirmishes continued throughout the day, culminating in a full-scale police crackdown against the predominantly peaceful crowd. Police used rubber bullets, truncheons and teargas to disperse about 2,000 protesters demonstrating in front of Tbilisi’s public television

station.

In Batumi, police arrested oppositionists on Sunday evening, raiding an apartment affiliated with the “People’s Assembly” in what government critics have described as a “pogrom.” Official sources claim around 10 people were detained. However, oppositionists say the numbers held by the state both here and in Tbilisi number in the hundreds.

On Monday and Tuesday, smaller crowds continued to demonstrate outside the public television station in Tbilisi, with many having camped out in the area since Saturday.

The crowds that descended on the country’s capital on Saturday were a mixture of activists from within the country’s opposition movement and ordinary citizens. The BBC reports that some are describing the protest as “the silver revolution,” due to the participation of a sizeable number of elderly people, who are fed up with low pensions and the rising cost of living.

The protest was smaller than expected by oppositionists, who predicted crowds of 50,000. They claim that the government blocked roads into Tbilisi to keep the numbers down and rounded-up activists in the lead up to the event. Saakashvili’s opponents insist that many are afraid to take to the streets for fear of state retribution. In 2007, 500 people were injured when the government unleashed force against anti-government protests.

Georgia’s various opposition parties do not command a mass base of support within the population. Splintered into numerous competing factions, many are tainted by their longstanding relations with the political establishment, ties to the wealthy elite, weak “democratic” credentials, and maneuvering between various imperialist powers.

Burdzhnadze, for example, was a leading figure in the US-backed “Rose Revolution” that brought Saakashvili to power. She parted ways with his

government relatively recently. In particular, she is highly critical of the Georgian president's poisonous relations with Russia, and has denounced the government for provoking the Kremlin's assault on the country in 2008, when the two nations ended up in a military confrontation over the breakaway region of South Ossetia. In 2010, Burdzhanaadze met with Vladimir Putin in a well-publicized visit to Moscow. Despite her claims to the contrary, she is widely viewed as the pro-Russian counterpart to Saakashvili, who maintains the closest ties to the White House.

For its part, the Russian government has criticized Saakashvili for repressing freedom of speech and assembly in its crackdown over the last few days.

Irakli Okruashvili, another leading oppositionist, is a former minister of defense under Saakashvili and held many top posts in the "Rose Revolution" government for years. He has been accused of bribery, money laundering, extortion and other crimes. In exile in France, he promised to return to Georgia on May 25 and lead a military insurrection against Saakashvili.

Despite the dubious machinations of the various official "opposition" forces in Georgia, there are many genuine and longstanding social grievances in the country. The "Rose Revolution" has not brought either the prosperity or the democracy promised the population, the vast majority of whom live in poverty and under an increasingly autocratic regime. In 2009, the level of income inequality in the country, as measured by the Gini coefficient, a standard statistical measure of stratification, stood at 40.8—the same level as in Tunisia.



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