

Fierce clashes follow elections in Georgia

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Conflicts inside the ruling class have intensified following the parliamentary elections on October 1.

The party of incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili unexpectedly lost to the “Georgian Dream” party of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, which was founded in April. Ivanishvili is now prime minister, and most of his followers have taken up leading government positions.

Shortly after taking office in October, the Ivanishvili government began arresting senior Saakashvili supporters. Ivanishvili even called for the resignation of the president but then relativized this demand following heavy criticism from the West.

Among those arrested is former Prison and Interior Minister Bachana Akhalaia, one of the president's closest collaborators. Akhalaia resigned just before the election, after revelations of systematic torture in Georgian prisons. At the time, a TV station close to Ivanishvili broadcast videos showing the mistreatment of prisoners, following which there were mass anti-government protests.

Fourteen high-ranking members of the Georgian interior ministry were arrested, including the chief of staff Giorgi Kalandadze appointed by Saakaschvili on October 9. More arrests are not ruled out. Vano Merabishvili, who has held several cabinet posts since 2004, and was prime minister between July and October 2012, also faces charges.

The US, the EU and NATO have sharply criticized Ivanishvili's actions against his political opponents. European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and US Deputy Secretary of State Phillip Gordon called the arrests “politically motivated persecution.” They warned that Georgia's NATO membership is now in question.

The US and the EU initially welcomed the election of Ivanishvili as a sign of the “victory of democracy” in

Georgia. Relations between Washington and Tbilisi had previously cooled noticeably.

Ivanishvili, whose fortune is worth over half of Georgia's gross domestic product, had supported the Rose Revolution of 2003, which was largely financed and encouraged by the United States. Differences with Saakashvili first appeared between 2004 and 2007.

Many aspects of this battle of cliques remain in the dark to this day. It appears that the current differences mainly concern relations with Russia. Unlike Saakashvili, who fuelled tensions with Moscow through his militant rhetoric and prepared the army for another war, Ivanishvili tries to manoeuvre between Russia and the US.

Thus the Ivanishvili government has now taken steps to convince Moscow to lift the import ban on Georgian wine, which came into force in 2006. Wine is one of Georgia's most important exports. The lifting of the import ban would result in a significant strengthening of bilateral economic relationships.

At the same time, the Ivanishvili government takes every opportunity to emphasize that Georgia's orientation to the West is its primary concern.

In an interview with *Time Online*, the Foreign Minister Maya Panjikidze said, “No matter what government rules Georgia, none will survive for more than a day if they say they will not fight for Georgia's territorial integrity or do not follow the path of European and transatlantic integration. There is nothing better than Europe in this world, and Georgia belongs to Europe.”

There are two main reasons for the West's support for Ivanishvili.

First, it is important to the US that the situation in the Caucasus remains calm and under its control, while expanding its wars in the Middle East. However, since the war with Russia in the summer of 2008, Saakashvili has repeatedly verbally provoked neighbouring Russia,

not least in order to divert attention from the social tensions at home. Although the US is cultivating Georgian-Russian tensions, it does not want the conflict to escalate at the present. Ivanishvili's policy of accommodation is therefore more in Washington's current interest.

Second, the opposition to Saakashvili in the ruling elite has destabilized Georgia. In Ukraine, similar fierce conflicts within the elite paved the way back to power for Yanukovych, who was then overthrown in 2004 by the Western-backed Orange Revolution.

The US wants to avoid a similar outcome in Georgia by supporting Saakashvili alongside the similarly pro-Western Ivanishvili, while trying to dampen down the fighting between the rival bourgeois cliques.

The crackdown on Saakashvili's supporters by the new government clearly goes too far for the Western powers. The interior ministry members arrested by Ivanishvili played a key role in US-Georgian relations and are some of Saakashvili's closest collaborators.

During the 2003 Rose Revolution, Akhalaia played an important role as a member of the Liberty Institute NGO. After the war with Russia in the summer of 2008, he became deputy defence minister in late 2008 and then defence minister in the summer of 2009.

According to a cable dated 10 October 2009 published by WikiLeaks, despite initial concerns, the US embassy in Tbilisi soon concluded that Akhalaia was "the most active defence minister" when it came to seeking US advice and "then following" this advice. The reform of the Georgian army, initiated after the war with Russia, was led by Akhalaia in the interests of Washington.

The US and the EU also fear that Ivanishvili will provoke what his election was supposed to prevent: the destabilization of the country by rising infighting in the ruling class.

Behind the conflicts inside the Georgian ruling elite stand rivalries over the distribution of power and wealth, and the growing social tensions. These differences are exacerbated by conflicts among the major powers, especially between the United States and Russia, as well as over the escalating wars in the Middle East. A US and Israeli attack on Iran, which is located close to Georgia, would further destabilize the situation in the Caucasus and risk dragging regional powers like Georgia into a bigger war.

The circles around Ivanishvili are obviously trying to manoeuvre between the US and Russia, and to avoid taking a one-sided position. The eight-day war with Russia four years ago also played a role in worsening the socio-economic crisis in the Caucasus republic.



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