

Georgia on the brink - again

Robert Parsons

The very survival of a troubled polity may depend on finding a constructive way around the bitter tensions between Mikheil Saakashvili's government and a fractured opposition, says Robert Parsons in Tbilisi.

A bizarre standoff between the Georgian government and the country's increasingly desperate extra-parliamentary opposition continues. It began on 9 April 2009 - a national holiday, commemorating the killing of twenty pro-independence demonstrators by Soviet special troops on this date in 1989. So far, there is precious little evidence of either side backing down. There are, it is true, signs of division within the opposition ranks; but most of the key leaders are still insisting that the only possible subject of negotiation with Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, is his resignation. Since he appears increasingly confident that he can outlast them, there is little chance that he will comply.

But where does that leave Georgia?

It is clear that the opposition has failed dismally in its stated aim. On 9 April, thousands of people (estimates range from 20,000-60,000) rallied to their cause in the centre of the capital, Tbilisi. It was a respectable crowd, though nowhere near big enough to sweep the government away. Since then its momentum has ebbed not grown, in part because the police have chosen to keep a discreet distance. Some lessons, it seems, have been learned: in November 2007, Saakashvili turned a protest that was on the point of exhaustion into a steamroller by letting loose his riot police on a dwindling crowd (see "Georgia: progress, interrupted", 16 November 2007).

Today, the opposition brings out a couple of thousand supporters every day - not much, but enough to embarrass the government and disrupt economic activity in the centre of Tbilisi. More dangerously, their daily presence ensures that the city remains a cauldron of tension. People are being forced to find alternative routes to work, some parents have stopped sending their children to school, rubbish collection is being impeded. As nerves inevitably fray, the fear is that one small spark could be enough to start a conflagration.

The Tbilisi tinderbox

If anyone doubted the danger of the current moment, the violence that briefly erupted outside Tbilisi's main police station on 6 May is a warning.

At public television, where the opposition has organised a "picket of shame" for staff members accused of pro-government bias, the anger has been palpable. Journalists turning up for work have run a gauntlet of spittle and insults. When one responded aggressively to the taunts, a crowd of opposition supporters beat him and set off in pursuit when he tried to flee. The incident was shown in all its detail on the privately-owned Rustavi 2 TV station.

In the tinderbox that Tbilisi has now become, the incident brought Tbilisi to the edge of communal violence. When three men were detained at the city's main police-station in connection with the assault, an opposition crowd was encouraged by its leaders to march on the station to secure their release. The enraged crowd tried to batter down the fence surrounding the station, only to be beaten back with truncheons.

Within minutes, rumours were flying around the city. The police were torturing the three men; Saakashvili had ordered a state of emergency; the police were firing into the crowd. None of these seems to have been true - although there is a suspicion that some rubber-bullets may have been fired.

Peter Semneby, the European Union's special representative for the southern Caucasus, accused the opposition leaders of "irresponsibility" and urged both sides to open a dialogue without preconditions.

The spectre of civil war - no stranger to Georgia in the years since the country regained its independence in 1991 - has begun to concentrate minds, and on both sides of the political divide.

For his part, Mikheil Saakashvili - opposition claims to the contrary notwithstanding - is offering a dialogue, and on issues of genuine concern and importance to the majority of Georgians. These include constitutional reform (and with it the prospect of shifting from a presidential to a more parliamentary form of democracy); electoral reform (with the accent on a new electoral code); judicial reform; and continuing media reform.

The fact that the president is making these proposals at all is in part a reflection of the pressure from the opposition. The number of demonstrators on the street may not be large, but they represent an influential part of Tbilisi society and - through inventive use of the media - have ensured that their views are widely and constantly aired throughout the country. (This fact itself rather belies their endlessly repeated claim that there is no democracy and no freedom of speech in Georgia.)

Saakashvili's strategy this time round appears to be to exhaust rather than confront his opponents and try to detach the moderates from the radicals. There is some evidence that this is working. As it becomes clear that the rolling demonstrations in Tbilisi - now well into their second month - are not likely to precipitate nationwide disobedience, the weariness is almost palpable. It may be that Georgians are at last beginning to develop a healthy distaste for street-politics.

The opposition's flaws

The opposition faces five problems. First, there is little indication that society as a whole wants Saakashvili to go. It is not that the Georgian president has a high approval rating; it is merely higher than that of his main rivals. Most most people undoubtedly hold him responsible for allowing Georgia to be dragged into the disastrous August 2008 war with Russia, and many are disenchanted at the country's drift in 2007-09 towards a more authoritarian style of government. His use of the riot police in November 2007 to attack a largely peaceful demonstration was disastrous in public-relations terms as well as counterproductive.

Second, the opposition's claim that it now represents the voice of the people is absurd. There is simply no evidence for this. Several opposition leaders who have claimed to speak on the people's behalf have themselves failed to win more than a few percentage points of the vote in national or local elections. In fact, the lukewarm reaction of the public to the opposition's appeal for mass demonstrations suggests that most Georgians would rather the opposition focused on dialogue with Saakashvili than confrontation. Third, the ferocity - and indeed vulgarity - of some of their attacks on Saakashvili almost certainly do not help their cause. The demagogic calls by some opposition leaders for their supporters to (for example) march on the police station alarm Georgians as much as the do nervous foreign diplomats stationed in Tbilisi.

Fourth, it may be too that the opposition's fixation with the demand that Saakashvili resign reflects most of all its leaders' inability to agree on anything else. As a whole, the opposition has still to put forward anything resembling a coherent programme for political and economic reform.

Fifth, there is the question of leadership. None of its leaders have yet succeeded in establishing a profile as a genuine presidential contender. The expectation that Nino Burdzhaneladze, who defected from Saakashvili's ranks just before the parliamentary elections in May 2008, would give the opposition new drive hasn't happened. Somewhat

surprisingly, given her past reputation for moderation and calm, she has metamorphosed into one of the country's most radical politicians and categorically rules out negotiations with Saakashvili.

Burdzhanadze's own self-perception speaks volumes about how far she has moved across the political spectrum. For example, she told the pro-opposition Kavkasia TV station on 13 May: "My statements aren't radical, they're moderate. If I were a radical, I'd be calling for Saakashvili to be hanged".

The longer this struggle goes on, the wider the fissures within the opposition are growing. It is clear that some are not happy at the direction in which the more radical groups are moving. Irakli Alasania, the young former diplomat who leads the Alliance for Georgia, was disturbed enough by the attack on the police station to welcome Saakashvili's offer of negotiations; several others, too, are worried by plans to cut the country's main east-west transit arteries. The consequences of such action could be devastating to an already fragile economy.

The case for sanity

The meeting between the opposition and Saakashvili held on 11 May 2009 broke up without agreement, though the fact that it was held at all may be the first sign of a move towards compromise. Perhaps more importantly for the long term, the talks opened a breach in opposition ranks. Irakli Alasania has emerged as the most outspoken proponent of compromise. He is backed by two other figures: Davit Berdzenishvili of the Republican Party and (more surprisingly, given his past record) Levan Gachechiladze, who ran second to Saakashvili in the presidential election of January 2008.

Those who are now categorically against even talking to Saakashvili - on the issue of his resignation excepted - are Nino Burdzhanadze, Davit Gamqrelidze of the *Akhali Memarjveneebi* (New Rights Party), Salome Zurabishvili (the former French diplomat and Georgian foreign minister, now leader of the marginal Georgian Way party), and Kakha Kukava, co-leader of the *Sakartvelos Konservatiuli Partia* (Georgian Conservative Party).

If Burdzhanadze appears now to believe that anything goes bar hanging the president, and Zurabishvili has come to consider him "insane", Berdzenishvili is saying that an "all-or-nothing approach" is bad politics and unlikely to help solve the crisis. Alasania reinforced this view in an interview on the BBC's *Hardtalk* programme (13 May 2009), saying that

there is still room for negotiation with Saakashvili. But the reality is more murk than clean lines, and it would be premature to suggest that sanity is returning to Georgian politics.

The trajectory of Alasania is a case in point. When he returned from his post as Georgia's ambassador to the United Nations, many saw him as the great hope of the opposition. Thus far, however, he has mostly demonstrated his political inexperience. With no organisational base of his own, he is struggling to break free of an opposition that no longer reflects his own views on what the crisis demands. Hence Alasania's repeated insistence that the rumours of a rift in opposition ranks are not true; and Salome Zurabishvili's references to his naivety. (The problem, she told a rally in Tbilisi on 14 May, is that Alasania "does not yet believe what *nadziralebi* [scum] 'they' are".)

Alasania's calculation must almost certainly be that if he wants to sustain and build on his reputation as an emerging star in the Georgian political firmament, he must avoid becoming a prisoner of the opposition radicals.

The politics of stalemate

In these difficult and polarised circumstances, what chance does Georgia have of extricating itself from its impasse? The former president Eduard Shevardnadze - replaced by Mikheil Saakashvili in the "rose revolution" of 2003-04 - has voiced his support for a key demand of the opposition: the only way out, he has said, is for Saakashvili to go (see Thomas de Waal, "Georgia and Russia, again", 30 January 2009).

The case for this hinges mostly on the president's failure to prevent the war with Russia in August 2008; but also on the rupture within Georgian society, for which, as president and leader of the largest party (the United National Movement), Saakashvili must take his share of responsibility. At the heart of the problem lies the arrogance of the new ruling elite - and a contempt for alternative opinion (strengthened by the weakness of the opposition and crushing victories at the polls). These attitudes have alienated a large part of the Tbilisi intelligentsia, and more widely generations of Georgians raised and educated long before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

That said, the opposition's case against Saakashvili has very little to do with the August war as such. Its demands - including the insistence on the president's resignation - predate the conflict by at least a year; they led directly to the street-battles of November

2007 that in turn precipitated the snap presidential and parliamentary elections of January and May 2008.

In the former, Saakashvili was re-elected president after a ballot that the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) commended at the time as the most well-conducted in Georgia's history. His United National Movement then went on to win a crushing victory in the parliamentary elections that most felt were another step forward compared to past experiences.

True, neither election was completely fair: the presidential campaign, in particular, was heavily weighted in Saakashvili's favour by his use of administrative resources (see "Mikhail Saakashvili's bitter victory", 11 January 2008). But both elections did show that Georgia's institutions and democratic procedures were improving. A great deal more needs to be done but progress has been and is being made: certainly in comparative terms, as a glance at Georgia's experience with electoral practice in relation to neighbouring Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia will show.

The opposition's argument that the conduct of the parliamentary election has given them no choice but to boycott parliament and take their case to the street is self-serving nonsense and a betrayal of their own electorate. Its logical conclusion is the theatre of the absurd now playing on Tbilisi's streets and the political chaos that threatens to destroy Georgia's undoubted achievements of the last decade.

In any event, if Saakashvili were to go there is no guarantee of improvement in Georgia's political circumstances. Nino Burdzhanelidze declares that she would stop short of hanging Saakashvili but there is little chance that Georgia's democratic development would benefit. Yet another victory of the street over political institutions in Georgia would suggest an unbreakable habit and further weaken the state at a time when it is already shaky.

The opposition is such a disparate alliance that, after another regime-change launched from the street, it is hard to imagine it maintaining cohesion in power for very long. The already evident rivalries could very soon tear a new government apart, and there is no guarantee that it would accelerate the course of reform. Indeed, the aggression of some opposition leaders towards the media suggests things could get worse.

That said, it is part of Georgia's crisis that the present standoff clearly cannot continue for very much longer. The opposition is not strong enough to force Saakashvili to go and he

is (this time) wary of using the state's coercive power for fear of provoking just the sort of popular response that the opposition craves. In this condition, frustration is growing on all sides - including among those who themselves are not politically engaged.

The path from crisis

What now? There are five possible scenarios:

* The street-protests gain in momentum, the provinces lend their weight to the opposition, the demonstrations bring the country to a standstill. The government orders the police to clear the streets, but both the police and army refuse to get involved. Mikheil Saakashvili is left with no choice but to resign. For the reasons given above, this seems an extremely unlikely scenario at present, not least because the police and army have been among the prime beneficiaries of Saakashvili's reforms

* The street-protests gain in momentum, the police crack down hard, arrests are made. A state of emergency is declared, the media are taken under "temporary" state control; political reform comes to an end. Georgia's western friends express dismay, Georgia will lose all hope of joining Nato, the massive international aid promised in 2008 will be put on hold - and Russian observers will collapse in a fit of giggles

* Exhaustion sets in and the street-protests gradually die out. The government regains control of central Tbilisi, the extra-parliamentary opposition is marginalised, and the government is left with few friends or potential partners. Saakashvili refuses to concede on the demand for early parliamentary or presidential elections. The less radical members of the opposition begin the long process of building up a nationwide political base. The real winners of this scenario could be those opposition parties that did not take part in the street-protests - in particular the *K'ristianul-demokratiuli modzraoba* (Christian Democratic Movement), led by Giorgi Targamadze, whose ratings have soared in the last few months, and Shalva Natelashvili's *Sakartvelos Leoboristuli Partia* (Georgian Labour Party)

* Negotiations between Saakashvili and the opposition gain traction. The opposition splits, with the Alasania, Berdzenishvili, and (perhaps) Gachechiladze group prepared to talk in return for evidence of commitment from the government to serious reform of the constitution, judiciary, electoral code and media. A number of key opposition figures are put in charge of the commissions set up to oversee the reform process. This will earn both

sides international support and praise, and the gratitude of most Georgians. The street-protests will gradually fizzle out

* Negotiations get underway but Saakashvili acts in bad faith. The reform process drags on endlessly with little sign of progress. The European Union and the Council of Europe express their exasperation (not for the first time); and the opposition leaders abandon the commissions; the street-protests begun in April 2009 resume, but with far more vigour. Everyone's patience with the government is exhausted.

The good news is that the fourth and most positive scenario - of negotiations leading to cross-party operation on meaningful reform - appears to have some chance of success. But several high barriers would need to be surmounted for it to be realised. Saakashvili says - and indeed has been saying for several weeks already - that he is ready for a dialogue without conditions on all issues. But what the opposition is prepared to negotiate about is still not clear, even if there are signs that a significant part of its leadership is moving away from its previous dogmatic and zero-sum approach. A key sticking-point may yet turn out to be early elections: at the very least, the opposition want parliamentary elections by the end of 2009.

The alternatives to negotiations look bleak, although the growing popularity of the Christian Democratic Movement suggests a deeper popular urge for constructive and peaceful change. Georgians want - and badly need - a strong opposition; but they seem to prefer the parliamentary to the street variety. The electorate may be growing up faster than its politicians.

Three questions press on Georgia's wounded polity:

* Is Saakashvili prepared to concede on the issue of early parliamentary elections - elections that his party might well win and that could help heal the wounds opened in the Georgian body politic since 2007?

* Is at least a part of the extra-parliamentary opposition prepared to abandon the street and accept the result of fresh elections, whatever their outcome?

* Even if there is no agreement on early elections, could a consensus nevertheless take shape around a new tranche of political and judicial reforms?

Georgia's survival may depend on the answers. There is little time left to find them.