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Georgia: changing the guard

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For thirty years Eduard Shevardnadze was the sun in the solar system of Georgian politics. All other political forces orbited around him. This sun was expected to burn out at the presidential election in April 2005. All knew his power was waning but few expected this wily political operator who, as Soviet foreign minister under President Mikhail Gorbachev had played a key role in the end of the Cold War, to suddenly implode in the three weeks following the rigged parliamentary election of November 2. Now, as a new political era begins on a wave of euphoria generated by the tens of thousands who took to the streets to vent their anger at the stolen election, the question is whether the orbiting planets can chart a new course or will be dragged into a black hole.

President Eduard Shevardnadze was ousted by a troika of young 'reformers' he had brought to prominence. Two former parliamentary speakers, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze, have become state minister and acting head of state, while Mikheil Saakashvili, the figurehead of the so-called 'rose revolution', is expected to be elected president on January 4.

Thirty-six year-old Saakashvili's rise – from law student in Kiev, Strasbourg, The Hague and New York to Minister of Justice under Shevardnadze and then the most outspoken opponent of his former mentor – has been meteoric. He is often compared to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the Soviet-era dissident who was president of Georgia when it asserted its sovereignty and then independence as the Soviet Union disintegrated.

Though both similarly charismatic and prone to nationalist rhetoric, the comparison should not be taken too far. Gamsakhurdia was a messianic figure surrounded by the decay of the Soviet regime, with few enlightened allies. Saakashvili has been wooed by the west and can call on a number of capable politicians.

Second Coup

For Georgia's sake, it is imperative that the cadre of politicians and administrators being catapulted into power come to grips with the country's manifold problems and hold Saakashvili's maverick tendencies and zero-sum approach in check. Likewise, Tbilisi's increasingly influential civic organizations that contributed so much to the dramatic change will need to continue to be heard.

The presidential election has been orchestrated in haste to seize the moment and stamp electoral legitimacy on the overthrow. However, the timing leaves little room for a contested political process. With many detractors and some parties boycotting polling, which is being held during the New Year holiday period, there is a possibility that fewer than the required fifty percent of the electorate will turn out. There is also an underlying fear that the situation could descend into violence, Ironically, in 1992 when Shevardnadze returned from Moscow to power in Georgia – where he had been communist party leader between 1972 and 1985 – it was on the back of a coup that ousted Gamsakhurdia. Now, for a second time, a change of power has been effected by extra-constitutional means and greeted by western approval. Western aid is essential for the presidential election but will also be needed for the more fiercely contested parliamentary polls to follow.

On one level, revolution is too grand a term for the semi-constitutional coup that accompanied an orchestrated mass demonstration of people power. On another, root- and-branch regime change promises to bring to power a new generation, brushing aside the last remnants of the communist regime, which clung to power as part of Shevardnadze's complex patronage system.

Yet aside from the rigged November election, the challenges facing the new regime are those that Shevardnadze failed to resolve over a decade and that have pushed the country to the edge of the abyss of failed statehood. But can the troika that failed to cooperate ahead of the parliamentary election form a common front now it has power? Can the new Georgia regime haul Georgia out of the mire and create a functional democracy? Four fundamental and interlinked challenges must be addressed:

Fragmented

Wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s left a sixth of Georgia's territory de facto independent. The desire for independence has been reinforced by recent events. The integration of other regions into the state, notably Ajara and Samtskhe- Javakheti, has also been problematic. Now Ajara's autocratic leader Aslan Abashidze further threatens state coherence – he has long withheld contributions to the budget but has now closed the region's borders and talks of a boycott of both forthcoming elections. Caught unawares by the rapidity of Shevardnadze's demise, he is determined to cling to his fiefdom. Like the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Abashidze has held consultations in Moscow. This adds an extra layer of complexity for Tbilisi, and increases Georgian perceptions of meddling by Moscow.

Negotiating with Abashidze might be within the political skills of the new leaders, but none have substantial experience of the meandering peace processes with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite the potential new impetus, they will be mindful of how Shevardnadze was hostage to his failure to resolve these conflicts. Some believe the best policy is to address Georgia's economic and democratic deficit to entice the secessionists back. However, this rational approach faces implacable opposition from the Ossetians and particularly the Abkhaz. The danger is that nationalistic speculation leading to a search for scapegoats could result in militaristic adventures, undermining peace prospects.

Bedevelled by Corruption

Years of disenchantment made it possible to mobilise huge crowds to overthrow Shevardnadze. The absence of violence was a result of good fortune and a degree of sophistication both among politicians and the army. But this cannot mask the decade- long crisis of governance.

Insufficient accountability and responsiveness have eroded state legitimacy. The credibility and administration of law is fragile. Intolerance and a lack of respect for rights are pervasive, particularly regarding ethnic minorities, which make up about a quarter of the population. This does not bode well for the victory of civic over ethnic ideas of nationalism.

Neither do the strong regional tendencies that were mismanaged and contributed to the power vacuum and collapse of state functions. Patronage networks in political and economic decision-making reduce much democratic practice to a ritual. Yet the charismatic Saakashvili now has to engage with people who deeply mistrust politicians in a system where personalities, not institutions or due process, have been at the heart of political life. If the new leaders' democratic vision is to triumph, they will have to extract themselves from this

malaise, despite having participated in its creation.

The economy is a 'catastrophe', according to the new state minister, Zhvania. De-industrialisation, swathes of the population living below the poverty line, and as much as twenty percent of the population having left the country do not augur well. The United Nations Development Programme has estimated that the shadow economy accounts for some seventy percent of gross domestic product. This imposes major constraints on the government's ability to make adequate social welfare provision. This challenge will be insurmountable without international assistance. Frustrated with Shevardnadze's repeated failure to institute real reform, the international financial institutions will support the new regime – but patience will be limited.

The anticipated 'get out of jail card' – the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, running through Georgia with Caspian oil bound for the Mediterranean – will make a difference. Georgia will receive five percent of the oil transported and income from transit fees could be as much as ten percent of the budget. Even if other challenges are addressed, such as the threat this presents to Russia's current monopoly of energy supply to Georgia, the corrupt management of revenues, pipeline security and environmental and social protest at the impact of the pipeline, this will not in itself transform the economy.

Cold War Relic

Some observers still call Georgia a relic of the Cold War, with Russia and the United States vying for influence and control. Over the past decade, the US has invested more aid in Georgia per head than anywhere bar Israel. Oil and the 'war' on terrorism added to its strategic importance, with an air corridor for US planes heading towards Afghanistan. Observing these trends in its own backyard, Russia's roles have been complex. They were conditioned by a loss of empire, energy interests, strategic concerns regarding military bases and the perceived incursions of Chechen fighters from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, and Tbilisi's desire to be integrated into the Euro–Atlantic alliance. Consequently, Russia has tended to pursue vital and legitimate interests often through heavy-handed and illegitimate means.

The Russian political elite's ambivalence towards Shevardnadze – whom they blame for squandering the geopolitical assets of the Soviet superpower and opening the way for a US military presence in Georgia – has produced a sense of schadenfreude at his demise. It was noticeable, however, that during Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's high-profile mediation in the president's departure, the one person in Tbilisi, other than the protagonists, whom he consulted was the US ambassador.

Russia is well aware of the new leaders' pro-western stance. During the past few years, unencumbered by Shevardnadze's legacy in Moscow, the likes of Zhvania and Burjanadze have been engaging in a more constructive dialogue with their northern neighbour. The challenge is to escape the tendency to blame all ills on Moscow and expect salvation from Washington.

The new elite has a very limited range of options in dealing with the centrifugal forces tugging at the fabric of the state. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment the reformers can hope for is to be voted out of office in due course without the opposition resorting to violence or people power. This would indeed be a sign of democracy and relative stability in the troubled Caucasian state.