

Abkhazia: Ardzinba Under Pressure

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The opposition in Abkhazia is broadening its campaign against the republic's leader.

In a change of tack, the opposition in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia is focussing its attention on winning local elections this weekend in an effort to remove President Vladislav Ardzinba

The local elections on February 21 will be the first chance in several years for the opposition to test its strength at the polls. It boycotted the last parliamentary ballot in the spring of 2002, complaining that it was not given a fair chance of challenging the government.

The opposition, spearheaded by the Amsakhara movement of veterans from the 1992-3 war in Abkhazia, have made three attempts over the last six months to force the resignation of Ardzinba, the long-time leader of Abkhazia's nationalist movement. The most recent attempt was also the most conspicuous. Protesters picketed the parliament building from January 28 to 30, but ended up failing to achieve their objective.

"President Vladislav Ardzinba is seriously ill and unable to perform his duties," said one of the protest movement leaders Merab Kishmaria, head of Amsakhara. "He must leave, and the country must choose a new leader. A delay is a fate worse than death."

Amsakhara has argued that while Georgia has inherited a new dynamic leader under Mikheil Saakashvili, it is dangerous for Abkhazia to continue under the rule of Ardzinba, who is sick with an unspecified illness and has not appeared in public for several years.

However, most people had expected that when the veterans failed to have Ardzinba removed from office last December, they would wait out the next presidential elections, which are due in October this year.

The new crisis was triggered by Ardzinba's appointment of former prime minister Gennady Gagulia - an unpopular figure for the veterans - as the head of the presidential administration.

A few days later, the presidential administration published a decree, reforming the forest and timber industry, which is the major earner of state revenue in Abkhazia. The decree forbade all forestry operations from producing timber for commercial use and restricted them to preserving and protecting forests.

The only exception was made for the Gagry Forestry and its main business, the Bzyb Timber Factory, which was thus awarded a virtual monopoly on the market. The man believed to control the factory is Pavel Ardzinba, a relative of the president.

Foresters reacted angrily to the decree and declared a strike that then grew into a mass protest. They were joined by staff of the local administration in Gulripsh district, who wanted their boss removed. The Amsakhara veterans then added their support to the strike.

The protesters gathered for two days on a tiny spot in front of the parliament building, and called for

Ardzinba's resignation. One of the demonstrators, Daur Kvarchia, said, "Over the last year or two a situation has developed where everything is more or less calm when the president is having medical treatment abroad. As soon as he comes home, everything is turned upside down. That's not normal. It's time for him to go."

Parliament responded to the rallies by holding a closed three-day session to which the press was not allowed access. The deputies who came and went refused to comment.

On the second day of the demonstration, a group of deputies, headed by parliamentary speaker Nugzar Ashuba, went to visit the president at home and told Ardzinba about the protesters' demands. The president gave his verdict, "I will not resign voluntarily, and the parliament can start working on its own law to impeach the president."

This turned out to be an effective delaying tactic. The constitution of Abkhazia does allow for the president to be impeached, but there is as yet no legal mechanism defining how this is to be done. And even if the parliament were able to start an impeachment process, it would take seven or eight months – precisely the time left before the next presidential elections.

The deputies understood this at the end of the second day of the demonstration, a member of Amtskhara, parliamentary deputy Vitaly Tarnava came out and told the protestors, "The parliament cannot, within the frameworks of the existing legislature, dismiss the president from his post." Disappointed protestors then began talking about convening a national congress in the village of Lykhny even set a date for it, February 5.

The idea of a national meeting on the historic meadow of Lykhny holds special meaning for the Abkhaz people. These congresses used to take place approximately once every ten years, normally in times of crisis, and the decisions taken there had great importance. They were a kind of national Abkhaz referendum.

The call for a meeting at Lykhny spurred the authorities into action and Abkhazia's Security Council met to discuss the crisis.

A compromise was reached. The head of the Gulripsh district administration Tamaz Gogia was dismissed, and the authorities promised to revise the presidential decree on forestry. Calls for the Lykhny meeting began to die away and it was never held. One of the leaders of Amtskhara, parliamentary deputy Valery Tarnava distanced himself from the proposal. "Amtskhara is not organising the congress, as the political council never took such a decision," he said.

The political uncertainty in Abkhazia, coinciding with the election of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia, has not helped the peace process between the two sides. The Abkhaz leadership chose not to attend United Nations-sponsored talks in Geneva on February 17-18, saying that they did not want to be party to negotiations over a draft proposal that had pre-determined Abkhazia's status as being part of Georgia.

The leader of Abkhazia's other opposition movement, Aitaira, Leonid Lakerbaia said the crisis had exposed a lack of leadership in the republic.

Lakerbaia said live on state television that the presidential election campaign had begun and someone was manipulating the demonstrators. "The Rose Revolution in Georgia was headed by Saakashvili, and he was the first one at the head of the crowd to enter the besieged parliament building and then became the president. But with us, it is unclear who is organising meetings and protests near the parliament. Where is he, the Abkhaz "Misha", who is leading events? Show him to us," said Lakerbaia.

So far, Lakerbaia is the only politician in Abkhazia who has openly stated his ambitions to run for the presidency.

Ardzinba himself is not allowed to run for another term and is any case believed to be too sick to do so, even if he wanted to. A few of the names of other contenders include the current prime minister Raul Khajimba, foreign minister Sergei Shamba, two former prime ministers Sergei Bagapsha and Anri Dzhergeniya, historian Stanislav Lakoba and the former mayor of Sukhum Nodar Khashba, who now holds a senior post in Russia's emergencies ministry.

Former deputy Tamaz Ketsba sees the long-running political crisis as a result of Ardzinba's style of leadership, which has resulted, he says in the leader being surrounded by a "scorched landscape without a single colleague able to stand up to him, even occasionally".

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