

## **Abkhazia's Political Roulette Goes On**

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Even seizing the presidential palace is not enough to bring the opposition to power.

When a huge crowd of supporters of Abkhaz opposition politician Sergei Bagapsh seized government buildings in the republic's capital Sukhum last week, they believed the disputed presidency would finally fall into their leader's hands. They were wrong.

Instead of bringing Abkhazia's election debacle to an end, the dramatic seizure of the presidential palace, the government building and the parliament proved to be just another twist in an unfinished story.

The latest escalation of the crisis began when the rival camps of Bagapsh and the pro-government candidate in the October 3 election, Raul Khajimba, called out their supporters early on Friday, November 12. About 10,000 Bagapsh loyalists gathered on Freedom Square. Some 500 Khajimba supporters demonstrated next to the presidential building.

Just a day earlier, there was an attempt to negotiate a solution to the power struggle, when outgoing president Vladislav Ardzinba had a three-hour meeting with Bagapsh and Khajimba.

Both sides have for weeks stuck to their claims of election victory. The electoral commission and supreme court have confirmed that Bagapsh won. Khajimba's call for a rerun of the vote also received backing from the supreme court – but only after his supporters stormed the building and, according to the chief justice, forced the court's hand.

Khajimba's entourage has not revealed the content of the discussions with Ardzinba. However, Daur Tarba, a parliamentary leader and a member of Bagapsh's election team, said that Ardzinba, who is gravely ill, but continues to command respect, insisted on new elections. Bagapsh reiterated his refusal, saying he had already won and that fresh elections could not be held in a calm atmosphere, given the weeks of tension. Instead, he offered Khajimba a "very high post" in any future government.

According to Tarba, Ardzinba unexpectedly gave his approval to this proposal, but added that it was up to the two candidates to sort out their problems. Khajimba – according to Tarba – warned that he would need time to persuade his supporters to abandon the idea of repeat elections.

Talks were suspended until the following day, when they took place as the rival demonstrations were under way. Bagapsh was on the podium in Freedom Square when his mobile phone rang, and he soon left for the Galereya café, where he met again with Khajimba. Half an hour later, he was back at the square: Khajimba wanted a short delay. At 3 pm, the two rivals met again, but for no more than 10 minutes.

"A compromise with the government was not reached," Bagapsh told supporters. "We will pursue dialogue, we will act within the limits of the law."

But his words were drowned out by a huge chant, "Enough talks! Enough waiting! Let's decide this today!"

With that, the crowd broke into two columns which moved off in the direction of the presidential palace.

Within ten minutes, the crowd had arrived, and the opposition demonstrators moved away from the building to a lawn opposite. As punch-ups broke out in the entrance to the building, the prime minister, Nodar Khashba, and Khajimba himself, left through a back door.

Bagapsh's supporters finally broke through and entered the presidential palace. Guards fired into the air. Ricochet bullets lightly injured two opposition members and fatally wounded a 78-year-old woman, Tamara Shakryl - a famous academic and human rights campaigner who was a supporter of Khajimba. She died in hospital three hours later.

Adding to the tension, special forces soldiers positioned nearby raised their rifles, and only an order from first deputy prime minister Astamur Tarba to "put weapons away" defused the situation. The government complex was now fully in opposition hands.

Inside, Bagapsh activists found some liquor for a brief, impromptu celebration before their leaders asked them to leave and place all the offices under guard. Before leaving, someone managed to use chewing gum to stick a paper sign on a door reading "Prime Minister [Alexandr] Ankvab", in reference to a leading member of the opposition alliance.

At about 5 pm, Bagapsh came to the building - but, to everyone's surprise, he was accompanied by Khajimba. After a half-hour meeting in the prime minister's office, Khajimba emerged looking despondent and left.

Bagapsh was conciliatory.

"We are one people and we will make a common front against all our enemies. We are not planning to pursue anyone. Enough shake-ups. Raul Khajimba is my younger friend, he is my younger brother, and we will work together," he said, to applause from his supporters.

Bagapsh then called on everyone to return home. Within minutes, the square outside was empty but for a few dozen armed Bagapsh guards.

Control over the government buildings was handed back to police, while Bagapsh supporters held the area around them.

On Monday, November 15, more than half the government staff turned up, including vice president Valery Arshba. However, prime minister Khashba, did not appear in protest at the continued presence of armed supporters of Bagapsh.

The Russian government, which had thrown its support behind Khajimba's candidacy, said it was alarmed, and threatened intervention to protect Moscow's "interests."

The storming of the government building was "an attempt at forcefully seizing power by the supporters of one presidential candidate," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko. "Such illegal, forceful actions worry Moscow" and threaten instability "in Abkhazia and across the region as a whole", he said.

Yakovenko warned that if the crisis continued, "the Russian side will be forced to take the necessary

measures to protect its interests”.

There were also tough words from Ardzinba and prime minister Nodar Khashba, who said what had happened was “an armed coup”.

One of Bagapsh’s closest allies, Leonid Lakerbaia, who is leader of the Aitaira movement, denied that there had been a coup, since no one had seized power. “This did not happen and must not happen,” he said. “Sergei Bagapsh was elected president, as confirmed decisions by the electoral commission and supreme court. He will take up his duties after the inauguration on December 6.”

The end point in this long-running struggle may now be that inauguration, when Bagapsh is likely to declare himself the lawful president - whether Khajimba agrees or not.

Khajimba, whom supporters describe as being depressed, is still believed to be able to count on the presidential guard and a special forces unit for support.

His opponent appears to have won over most of the police force. Earlier this month, 250 interior ministry members declared their support. The defence ministry has declared neutrality.

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