

Georgia: Ajaria Tension Grows

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The opposition grows bolder in Georgia's dissident Black Sea province.

Less than two months after November's peaceful revolution in Tbilisi ended in victory for the opposition, a political confrontation is emerging in Georgia's semi-independent province of Ajaria on the Black Sea

On January 7-8, a group of five people, activists from the youth movement Kmara that had supported president-elect Mikael Saakashvili and their relatives, were arrested by the authorities of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze.

On January 7, Abashidze, who has governed Ajaria in authoritarian style since Georgia became independent, also re-imposed a state of emergency and moved against television journalists from Tbilisi reporting from his republic.

Abashidze, who has made Ajaria into a semi-independent fiefdom with close ties to Russia, had refused to accept the legitimacy of Georgia's new leaders after they forced the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze on November 23. He only agreed to hold the January 4 presidential elections in Ajaria after prolonged negotiations with acting president Nino Burjanadze, acting state minister Zurab Zhvania and visiting Western diplomats. On election day, he eventually voted minutes before polling stations closed.

But, to Abashidze's alarm, following Saakashvili's resounding victory, supporters of the Kmara movement which helped him come to power, have shifted their attention to Ajaria.

"The new deterioration of the situation in Ajaria, which is happening despite the agreement apparently reached in December, can be explained by the irreversible revolutionary process which has taken over the whole country," said political analyst Levan Berdzenishvili, who is close to the new administration in Tbilisi.

On New Year's Eve, the Ajarian capital Batumi was strewn with leaflets bearing Kmara symbols and calling on the local population to strive for "freedom from the despotism of Abashidze". Locals say that every last leaflet was removed by policemen and volunteers who were deployed throughout the town.

A series of demonstrations have ended in fights between protesters and supporters of Abashidze, who are mainly muscular young men.

On January 11, a rally was held in the village of Gonio in which around 100 people called for the state of emergency to be annulled and arrests to stop.

To rally in Ajaria is an unaccustomed act of bravery. "We are in a situation of complete oppression, absolutely everything is forbidden us," said an elderly man, among the demonstrators at Gonio. "But we want to live in a single Georgia and we want to live in freedom. We will achieve this."

About half an hour after the protest began, a group of these youths arrived on the scene and started attacking the journalists covering the event, damaging their cameras. "We had to call the head of the press office of the interior ministry of Ajaria and ask him for help and only because of that we were able to leave the village without being hurt," said Nestan Nebolishvili, a reporter with the Tbilisi television channel

Rustavi-2.

The next day, a similar incident occurred in Batumi but ended more seriously with a cameraman from the same channel David Gogitauri being savagely beaten up. He was filming the removal of the flag of the National Movement of Saakashvili – which has now been voted by the Tbilisi parliament to be Georgia’s new national flag.

“We are being told that a campaign of intimidation against the population is going on,” said Aslan Chanidze, Batumi representative of the NGO, the Association of Young Lawyers of Georgia. “Many people have been physically attacked or threatened. But we can’t confirm this information officially as practically all those who have been attacked refuse to tell us what happened.”

All this is very unusual for a republic famed for its strict order and stability. “I can only say that before the [November] revolution we didn’t come across incidents like these,” said Chanidze. Berdzenishvili, adding that “in a few months Ajaria has travelled a path which took the rest of Georgia several years”.

Ajaria’s interior minister Jemal Gogitidze told IWPR, “The criminal situation in the republic is getting worse. It is being stirred up by certain circles in both Tbilisi and Batumi. None of those detained on January 7-8 were connected to politics – they needed politics as an excuse.”

However, Georgia’s new interior minister Giorgy Baramidze condemned the arrests and told the Ajarian authorities to “stop actions like this”.

The former administration of Eduard Shevardnadze adopted a “live and let live” policy towards Ajaria, choosing not to intervene there. His successors are now hearing calls to take action.

Chanidze said that if the new authorities did not take command of the situation in Ajaria “they cannot claim to call themselves the authorities”.

The first challenge in Tbilisi to the Ajarian leadership will come on January 21 when the NGO Our Ajaria is asking the constitutional court to rule that the imposition of state of emergency in the autonomous republic contravenes the Georgian constitution, as such a step should be the prerogative of the central government.

In response, the Senate of Ajaria passed a resolution on January 14 to turn the local branch of Georgia’s counterintelligence department into the “state counterintelligence department of Ajaria”.

President-elect Saakashvili, who clashed verbally with Abashidze before the election, has so far kept silent on the subject of Ajaria.

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