

Georgia: Shevardnadze Ally Flexes His Muscles

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The recent dismissal of Georgia's two main financial ministers had less to do with the economy than a struggle for control of the government.

With the abrupt sacking of his two main economic ministers, President Shevardnadze has reshaped the government to his own liking and strengthened the hand of his increasingly powerful state minister Avdaniil Jorbenadze.

The reshuffle is also another blow for Shevardnadze's former close ally and Georgia's most high-profile pro-Western politician, Zurab Zhvania, in advance of local elections next month and a parliamentary poll next year.

The Georgian president took the unexpected decision to sack the ministers of finance, Zurab Noghaideli, and tax revenue, Levan Dzneladze, late on May 2 at a meeting of his state security council. He was acting on threats, which he had made in several recent cabinet meetings, to dismiss the pair if they did not manage to meet budget targets.

The move will allow Shevardnadze to unify the two ministries into one new body, and thus comply with a recommendation given to Georgia by international organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and USAID.

However, several experts were sceptical about the economic rationale for the dismissals. Roman Gotsiridze, head of the parliamentary budgetary office, said for example, "the responsibility for the budget failure should be distributed within the whole government.

"If Shevardnadze thinks he will improve the state of the country's economy by changing people round and restructuring ministries, he will achieve nothing." He argued that "Noghaideli and Dzneladze were the best at their jobs and should finish the reforms they started".

The move appears to have more to do with top-level politics. The man Shevardnadze nominated to head the new unified ministry is Mirian Gogiashvili, secretary of the anti-corruption commission and the son of an old political ally of the president.

Gogiashvili recently had a hand in the resignation of another top official, Badri Khatidze, who headed a department of the state chancellery. Khatidze was forced to step down, after Gogiashvili's commission accused him of corruption.

Many see the sackings as the latest stage in an accelerating campaign by state minister Avandil Jorbenadze to take absolute control over the country's government structures and finances. There's no prime ministerial post in Georgia - Jorbenadze is its most senior minister.

He has been waging a political war against the reformist team from the Citizens Union of Georgia, led by Zhvania, formerly Shevardnadze's right-hand man. The CUG used to be the main governing party in the country but has now split into different factions.

Following an appeal by the wing of the CUG loyal to the state minister and the president, a district court suspended registration of the party's organisational council, chaired by Zhvania, who had to register his candidates for the local election under the name of another party.

Shevardnadze himself, who is still a member of the CUG, distanced himself from the conflict, telling journalists on May 8, that he "cannot interfere" in the problems of CUG candidates' lists for the local elections, scheduled for June 2, because he is not the party chairman any more.

Another Jorbenadze target may be the mayor of Tbilisi, Vano Zodelava, who has been accused of not being able to manage the city's budget properly. This came shortly after the strong earthquake, which shook Tbilisi on April 25, when the city municipality was unable to provide sufficient aid to victims, because of lack of money.

Shevardnadze has intervened only on one occasion, when Jorbenadze openly attacked the president's economic aide Temur Basilia, accusing him of incompetence. Shevardnadze defended Basilia, declaring at a cabinet meeting that he himself would decide who would be his advisor.

The fact that Jorbenadze has been taking aim at people already in power and who have daily access to the president has prompted many observers to believe that the state minister is trying to clear the field of competitors ahead of the local and parliamentary elections. Some even think his main goal is to become Shevardnadze's successor in the presidential elections, scheduled for 2005.

"I worked under President Shevardnadze with a great pleasure, but I don't want to be a puppet in the hands of president Jorbenadze," commented finance minister Noghaideli after his resignation.

Some government insiders believe Jorbenadze is not a good political strategist "I am afraid he will fall victim to his own game. He has the green light now, but as soon as he makes a mistake once, he won't be able to cope with all his political enemies," said a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Shevardnadze has frequently sacrificed people that he used to support before."

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