

Georgian Opposition Drives a Hard Bargain

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An opposition coalition could force President Shevardnadze to rethink his local government bill

Georgia's opposition parties have accused Eduard Shevardnadze of reneging on his election promises to introduce far-reaching local government reforms.

A draft law on regional governance was presented to parliament last week amid widespread hopes that it would mark a decisive step forward in administrative reform.

During his 2000 election campaign, Shevardnadze had pledged that city mayors and district heads would be elected by popular vote rather than appointed by the president.

However, the new bill failed to live up to expectations. It offered just one compromise -- top officials in villages and small cities would be democratically elected whilst district heads would be chosen by the president from the ranks of elected local councils. But the mayors of large cities, including Tbilisi, would continue to be presidential appointments.

Now opposition leaders are threatening to forge a coalition to block ongoing constitutional changes unless the new bill is revised to include all top local government posts.

While the opposition factions lack sufficient votes to overturn the governance law, a coalition would have enough leverage to scupper Shevardnadze's bid to re-establish the Cabinet of Ministers and appoint a prime minister.

Last week, the president announced that the job would go to Zurab Zhvania, the current parliamentary chairman, but the ruling Citizen's Union of Georgia, CUG, party is dependent on opposition votes to bring these changes into effect.

Thus two issues of primary political importance have become inextricably intertwined - and it will require careful political manoeuvring from the CUG to break the deadlock without making major concessions.

The opposition leaders argue that further democratic reforms are impossible unless the executive heads of local government are elected by the people.

Vakhtang Khmaladze, of the Industry Union of Georgia, says the bill "violates the democratic principles of division of power - the checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches that are enshrined in the Constitution."

NGO leaders have rallied to the opposition cause. On May 16, NGO representatives told the Georgian parliament that such a law would have a negative effect on democratic progress in the former Soviet republic.

But many analysts note a hidden agenda in the opposition backlash. If electoral systems are established in

the provinces, it is likely that the opposition power-base will expand exponentially.

The CUG performed badly in the November 1998 local elections with opposition parties scooping a substantial majority in a number of local councils. However, the political clout of their elected representatives was effectively neutralised by their government-appointed superiors, many of whom were CUG members.

With the rural population more likely to suffer from deteriorating economic conditions, the CUG cannot expect to perform any better in future elections. Given control of both the legislative and executive branches of local governments, the opposition parties are guaranteed far greater political leverage.

Furthermore, opposition leaders with executive experience on a local level are better positioned to secure ministerial jobs thereby posing a threat to CUG domination of the government executive.

The statements of CUG leaders on the local government bill have so far been ambiguous. Zurab Zhvania's supporters have been careful to distance themselves from the president's administration, which proposed the reforms. In the past, the CUG's reformist wing headed by Zhvania has supported local elections at all levels.

It is clear that, for Zhvania, the prime minister's job is far more important than local government concerns. And the threat posed by the opposition coalition to the president's proposed constitutional reforms could actually play a pivotal role in boosting the prime minister's power.

After announcing his intention to appoint Zhvania prime minister, Shevardnadze added another proviso which may have caused his appointee some misgivings.

The president announced that he would retain control over the so-called "power ministries" (internal affairs, security and defence) whilst continuing to oversee foreign affairs.

As a result, the relationship between Shevardnadze and Zhvania looks set to follow the Russian model -- a strong president and a scapegoat prime minister responsible for economic reforms and taxation.

However, the controversy surrounding local government reforms may provide Zhvania with a chance to sidestep the poisoned chalice and bargain for a better deal. If his ambitions are not satisfied, Zhvania can simply allow the opposition to block the constitutional changes and retain his current position of parliamentary chairman.

Alternatively, he can engineer a political compromise and be seen to strike a blow for democracy. Such a move would win the prime minister strong Western support and strengthen his bid for the presidency in 2005.

It is interesting to note that most Georgians view issues of administrative reform (both on a local and national level) as a confrontation of political heavyweights.

The decisions in crucial areas of governance depend on personality-based compromise rather than value- or ideology-driven discussion. And, while the crucial administrative and political systems are tailored to suit individual politicians rather than the needs of the population or the economy, Georgia is unlikely to see any tangible improvements in bureaucratic efficiency.

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