

Opposition Battles Bias, Indifference to Change

Author: [IWPR staff](#)

Governments of south Caucasus mostly left with a clear run despite allegations of repression.

All across the region, opposition leaders complain of unfair conditions for political competition, and experts say the governments' firm grip on power is impeding development.

But there are also signs that after the ferment of the first post-Soviet decade, the public has grown disillusioned with squabbling politicians, leaving the opposition stripped of support and ideas.

"The government says that the Azerbaijan opposition is very weak, that it has no weight in society and no support base. But in fact political parties do not have freedom of action in this country. Television, which effectively works for the government, is closed to the opposition. There is no freedom of speech, or freedom of assembly," said Isa Gambar, chairman of Musavat, the best known Azerbaijan opposition party.

Gambar was acting president of Azerbaijan after independence, and prepared the country for its first elections. He stood against the current president in 2003 but was heavily beaten in a poll criticised by international observers.

It took a major police effort to clear his supporters off the streets after the election, but since then opposition support seems to have evaporated, as political leaders realise the only chance for power is cooperation with the existing authorities and businessmen realise there is no point in backing a lost cause.

The situation is the same across much of the region, including – curiously – in Nagorny Karabakh, which has declared independence from Azerbaijan but which is seen by the world as a rogue province. Even during the war in which it broke free of Baku's control, which ended in a 1994 ceasefire, it had a vigorous opposition movement.

But now all major political groups in the Armenian-inhabited territory are lined up behind President Bako Sahakian, whose allies dominate parliament, and opposition groupings have shrivelled to a rump.

"Here everything gets killed – ideas, movements, differences, competition and, as a result, development," Gegham Baghdasarian, president of the Stepanakert press club and one of the few independent members of parliament, told IWPR.

The south Caucasus countries – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – have all been tied up in territorial disputes since the dying days of the Soviet state. Armenia and Azerbaijan clashed over Nagorny Karabakh, and still have not signed a peace deal to end the conflict.

Georgia in turn fought minority nations for control over the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, losing its hold over both in the early 1990s. Last year, Russia intervened against the Georgians and recognised the two breakaway regions as independent states, although most of the rest of the world still considers them part of Georgia.

Abkhazia has presidential elections in December, and Raul Khadzhimba, vice-president until earlier this year, is campaigning against his former boss, Sergei Bagapsh. He makes the same complaints as in other parts of the south Caucasus, and blames the government for denying him access to the media and to the state's resources.

But analysts here, as well as elsewhere, say his lack of policies works against him. The difficult position of Abkhazia – poor, legally dubious, devastated by war, dependent on Russia for more than half its budget – means whoever is in government has only very limited room for manoeuvre.

“All the political movements —from the government and the opposition – speak of the need to build a law-based democratic state, a socially-orientated market economy, the significance of preserving the Abkhaz ethnic group and language, of strengthening ties with Russia,” said Arda Inal-Ipa, the co-director of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes think-tank in Sukhum.

“A normal observer struggles to work out what is the main difference between the main political forces. A clear and comprehensible difference is in personnel, in the leaders and make-up of the teams. I still hope that the decisive factor in the elections will not be negative campaigning but ideas and programmes.”

That is a common lament across the region, since the various conflict lines mean governments have little choice in what they can do. This means opposition movements often have to rely on rhetoric – something that can easily be mocked by government allies.

In Armenia, Serzh Sargsian won election as president last year in a poll that opposition figures said was rigged. Mass protests were broken up by police, with ten deaths, and the opposition has struggled to regain the initiative since many of its leading figures have ended up behind bars. Its appeals to the people are heartfelt, but lack details.

“I think that the restoration of freedom and democracy in the country would lead to a release of the democratic potential of the people, a reduction in monopolies and privileges in the economy, honest competition in every sector. In such a situation Armenia would gain such room for manoeuvre that it could take its own decisions and be less under the control of outside forces,” said Levon Zurabian, a representative of the opposition Armenian National Congress grouping.

“The police regime does all it can to keep to a minimum the number of people at protests. Such a situation cannot last long and makes clear that the regime relies on bayonets.”

But the protests the opposition has held have come to nothing, and supporters have grown disillusioned and drifted away. The government's allies therefore find it easy to mock their opponents.

“At these protests they always repeat the same words about the bright future of the nation and the country. They say that as soon as they come to power, everything will be set right. But people do not believe these protests and actions,” said Galust Sahakian, who heads the parliamentary grouping of the Armenian president's Republican Party, with heavy sarcasm.

“The government also does not pay too much attention to these protests and actions. These are repetitive, boring and ineffective acts. Therefore control by the authorities is unnecessary.”

It is only in Georgia that the opposition movements have retained their post-Soviet vitality. Activists paralysed the capital Tbilisi for four months earlier this year, blocking the main street and lining it with tents painted to resemble prison cells.

Here, opposition leaders – who also complain of the government using the state’s resources against them and of rigged media access – uncompromisingly insisted on President Mikhail Saakashvili’s resignation throughout the protests, and rejected deals suggested by the government.

That now looks like a mistake, since the activists eventually dispersed with nothing achieved, forcing the leaders of the opposition Alliance for Georgia grouping to consider their tactics.

“These multi-month protests ended with nothing. I am not in agreement with the opinion that the authorities won. This isn’t the case. We are entering autumn with the same strength as we went into spring,” insisted David Usupashvili, leader of the Republican Party and one of the heads of the opposition Alliance for Georgia.

But, having said that, he confirmed opposition leaders were now prepared to enter into dialogue with the government, and would not rely on public pressure alone to achieve results.

“Today it would be a big mistake to confine ourselves to opposition street protests. We will challenge the authorities in any way we can: dialogue, debates, rhetoric, policy initiatives and, of course, protests,” he said.

Analysts, however – like everywhere in the Caucasus – said the opposition would be better advised to talk to the electorate and see what voters wanted in the way of policies, rather than concentrating on big, headline-grabbing, but essentially fruitless protests.

“Believe me, the people don’t much care if Saakashvili is good or bad. Their problems are much more real, like the price of petrol, or the problems of the grape harvest. The opposition should work in this direction,” said Andro Barnov, a political analyst.

“They are taking a step to nowhere,” he said.

Writers:

Tea Topuria is a freelance journalist in Tbilisi. Anaid Gogoryan is a reporter from Abkhazia’s Chegemskaya Pravda and a participant in IWPR’s Cross-Caucasus Journalism Network. Gegham Vardanian is a journalist from Internews Armenia in Yerevan. Anahit Danelian is a correspondent for Hetq in Stepanakert and a CCJN participant. Samira Ahmedbeyli is an IWPR staff member in Azerbaijan. Shahin Rzayev is IWPR’s Azerbaijan country director. Rita Karapetian is a freelance journalist.

Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
Russia

Topic: Special Report: Opposition in South
Caucasus

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/opposition-battles-bias-indifference-change>