

Quiet Elation in Batumi

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Most people seem glad to see the back of Ajaria's former ruler Aslan Abashidze.

The Ajarian capital was calm on May 6 after a night of street celebrations, but the mood was overwhelmingly one of liberation from the 13-year rule of Aslan Abashidze.

Abashidze left the country in the early hours of the morning, opting for flight rather than a fight which could have resulted in a repeat of the bloody conflicts that marred the early years of Georgia's independence.

If there was significant popular support for him, it seems to have melted away.

Natheli Ebralidze, a teacher in Batumi interviewed by telephone, told IWPR that the mood on the street of the regional capital was upbeat and that people were still stunned by the rapidity at which political change had been achieved.

"They feel relieved and free - I can't even express how they feel, as I have never seen my [fellow-]citizens free," she said. "I can see smiling faces and happy faces in the street. Young people are driving in cars with flags, and shouting."

The flags are the red-and-white banner adopted by Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's administration. The pale blue flag associated with Abashidze's regime was still hanging from some balconies on May 5 ; they have now disappeared.

The scenes of jubilation seen overnight subsided as daylight brought a semblance of normality. But Ebralidze said, "I don't know when they will calm down. They are really excited and happy - it was a really hard time living for 13 years under this dictator."

President Saakashvili was out and about, meeting the crowds who helped bring Abashidze down. Earlier he had promised elections by mid-June.

Remarkably, there was little trace of the people who helped Abashidze maintain a firm grip on power over so many years, first as speaker of the Ajarian parliament in 1991 and then as president of the autonomous republic after 1998. There was no visible political or military support on the streets.

Some of the people who ran Abashidze's propaganda machine, including his press secretary and a number of journalists, have gone. "During these years, people grew tired not only of Abashidze but also hearing so many lies from these people," said Ebralidze.

Even the hard core of Abashidze loyalists did not put up any resistance when their leader left. The Ajarian government quickly resigned and President Saakashvili created a special commission to administer the region in the interim.

Only a day earlier, Abashidze was still rallying support, organising a public demonstration which eyewitnesses said gathered only about 100 people compared with the thousands of people protesting against his rule. By the afternoon, Batumi's police force and other public-sector workers had defected and joined the demonstrators.

When the Georgian prime minister finally managed to cross into Ajaria to begin negotiations on the crisis, he was able to meet Ajarian interior minister Jemal Gogitidze and the head of Abashidze's bodyguards, David Khalvashi. They proved willing to negotiate – but about their own futures, reportedly pledging allegiance to Tbilisi and opening the road so that Zhvania could travel on to Batumi.

The strongest threat of violence was posed by Abashidze's paramilitary forces, part of the provincial interior ministry, but although these troops appeared poised to defend his regime until May 6, in the end they took no action.

Towards the end, eyewitnesses said even the paramilitaries encircling his offices began to join the crowd.

“Finally, he was left alone,” said Ebralidze.

Abashidze made no resignation speech, simply meeting his remaining supporters outside the parliament building to thank them and tell them to go home. As if in a rush, he was dressed in sports gear rather than the conservative suits he normally favours.

Some Abashidze loyalists left from the airport with him; others by road. Gogitidze remained, reportedly hospitalised with a heart attack.

The crowds celebrated all night. Strangers embraced each other and armed soldiers happily posed for snapshots.

The students who had been in the vanguard of the anti-Abashidze protests were delighted with what they had achieved. One of them, Dato, told IWPR, “I've been on my feet for two days. It's been very nice to see so many happy people. I could not have imagined that something like that would happen in Ajaria. I'm still emotional about it.”

Dato was optimistic about the future, “It's all going to change for the better.”

Nodar, a 66-year-old pensioner, was only slightly less emotional but still happy to see the back of Abashidze, “This event has had a great impact on me and brought forth many tears. I don't pity Aslan. On his orders they even beat up teachers.

“What has happened was what had to happen. Georgia has partially united and must unite in the future; that's inevitable; it's the will of the people.”

One 88-year-old pensioner, who declined to be named, dissented from the overwhelmingly majority view, saying, “I know that a nation is ungrateful, but I've never seen such a thing.... It's a pity they treated a man like Aslan in that manner.”

There was a spot of minor looting as crowds moved into the parliament building and rifled through Abashidze's office, but little other disorder. Someone took Abashidze's chair, later setting it alight at the monument to his illustrious grandfather, Memed Abashidze, a writer and politician during Georgia's brief spell of independence in 1918-21.

President Saakashvili said the authorities were taking steps to keep order, but promised that the Georgian interior ministry units which had been drafted in were only as a temporary measure.

Georgian officials have instituted a programme to disarm both the paramilitaries and Ajarian civilians to whom Abashidze's regime handed out weapons in recent months. Several hundred Kalashnikovs and some heavier weapons have been surrendered to date, with the owners promised immunity from punishment.

Although it seems highly unlikely that Abashidze's supporters could stage a counter-revolution, the pervasive sense of authority that he conveyed to his subjects over more than a decade has left many with a feeling of unease.

"He's so unpredictable that they feel free, but maybe they don't believe that he is not the ruler any more," said Ebralidze.

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