

Zhvania Defuses Political Crisis

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A symbolic victory by Georgia's united opposition points towards a lack of party discipline in the CUG

The Citizens' Union of Georgia was hard pushed to maintain its control of parliament last week in the face of a concerted attack by united opposition forces.

The opposition parties succeeded in derailing two parliamentary sessions aimed at discussing new draft laws on local governance and elections - laws which they consider to be undemocratic.

And it was only after parliamentary chairman Zurab Zhvania managed to marshal the CUG majority that a full-blown crisis was averted.

The opposition factions of the Georgian parliament forged an uneasy alliance last month in a bid to block proposed changes to the Constitution.

They believe that the new governance bill fails to deliver Eduard Shevardnadze's election promise to make local elections more democratic. By joining forces, opposition leaders hope to scupper a parallel government initiative to reintroduce the Cabinet of Ministers and the post of prime minister.

CUG leaders have been quick to dismiss the possibility of a stable coalition in the opposition ranks - but last week's actions took them by surprise.

At two consecutive parliamentary sessions on June 6 and 7, opposition factions proved that a head count of those present in the chamber had been deliberately falsified.

They then refused to take part in the registration of delegates and both sessions were cancelled due to an insufficient quorum.

Opposition leaders promptly declared their intention to push the Tbilisi parliament into crisis and force the CUG to negotiate the terms of the local governance bill. They accused the majority faction of being unable to control parliament without resorting to fraudulent means.

CUG leaders were clearly shocked by this turn of events. While the CUG boasts a comfortable majority in the Tbilisi parliament, it suffers from a lack of party discipline. In this case, the opposition was able to score symbolic victories simply because they were not enough CUG delegates present during the sessions.

The confusion and disorder within the ranks of the CUG indicates that the party gives low priority to the parliamentary arena.

The most able CUG leaders - such as justice minister Mikhail Saakashvili and Revaz Adamia, former chairman of the defence and security committee - have been awarded strategic executive posts. And Zhvania himself makes rare appearances at parliamentary sessions, allowing his deputies, Giorgi Tsereteli or Eduard Surmanidze, to take the chair.

Neither Tsereteli nor Surmanidze boast sufficient charisma or political skill to handle simple procedural matters - let alone such crises. Clearly, the CUG leadership has forgotten how to deal with a strong opposition.

The last attempt to unite the opposition forces in a common goal and trigger a political crisis came four years ago - curiously enough when an earlier local government bill was going through parliament. On this occasion, more experienced CUG leaders were able to neutralise the threat without allowing the opposition to fully realise its strategy.

The Georgian opposition still suffers from the same handicap today as it did four years ago - a lack of strong and credible leaders.

In the past, Aslan Abashidze -- leader of the Adjara Autonomous Republic and chairman of the biggest opposition faction, Revival - was seen to be playing a major role in the opposition's parliamentary manoeuvres.

But Abashidze lacked credibility amongst the population at large and the CUG was able to discredit any opposition move headed by a man who was widely perceived as a pro-Russian local chieftain.

On this occasion, however, Abashidze wisely avoided taking direct responsibility for the shenanigans in the Tbilisi parliament. Publicly, the opposition rallied behind two main "voices" - Vakhtang Khmaladze, a former member of the right-wing Republican Party, was presented as the intellectual driving force whilst Gogi Topadze, Georgia's beer magnate and head of the Industry Will Save Georgia faction, became the political figurehead.

Both of these politicians boast a reasonably clean slate. Khmaladze is widely respected in intellectual and independent circles whilst Topadze's charisma combined with his business-like approach and political naivete have won him a measure of public support.

Furthermore, Industry Will Save Georgia managed to win its parliamentary seats without forging an alliance with the Revival faction, thereby avoiding negative associations with Aslan Abashidze.

The tactics adopted by the opposition last week had two main thrusts - firstly, to achieve a better bargaining position in discussions of the draft law and, secondly, to discredit the CUG and the parliamentary chairman, Zurab Zhvania.

The opposition hoped to trounce Zhvania on his home territory -- the Tbilisi parliament -- and thus shatter the credibility of an aspiring prime minister in the eyes of both the population and the president.

Zhvania, however, proved equal to the challenge. After consulting with CUG members in two closed meetings, Zhvania personally chaired the parliamentary session on June 8.

With almost all CUG MPs in attendance, Zhvania was able to demonstrate the clear superiority of the majority party. The CUG promptly tabled an opposition bill on amendments to the tax code submitted by Industry Will Save Georgia in its first reading.

This was a symbolic act of deliberate blockage. It was well known that the CUG supported parts of the proposed bill which should have given it a high chance of being approved in the first reading with the main discussion postponed until the second reading.

Industry Will Save Georgia leaders were thus given a clear message to be more cooperative with the ruling party in the future. The move also demonstrated their inability to run their own show with such a negligible parliamentary representation.

Consequently, by the end of the week, Zhvania was able to reclaim his parliamentary laurels and strengthen his own image as a capable leader. But the opposition's short-lived rebellion points to deep-seated problems in the Georgian political landscape.

Currently, the development of a capable and constructive opposition force is severely hampered by the low level of party institutionalisation and the absence of a clear leadership within the existing factions.

This allows the CUG to keep the discussion of vital political issues within its own lobby and use tactical trade-offs to undermine any attempt by the opposition to forge a coalition.

On the one hand, this severely limits the electorate's power to influence decision-making. On the other, it allows mediocre politicians to rise within the ranks of the CUG in the greenhouse conditions of a stagnant parliament.

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